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## Agreements, rules and agentic fidelity in polyamorous relationships

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Drawing on data from 343 surveys and 12 interviews gathered as part of a large-scale research project on intimate relationships in the United States, this study examines agreements and rules within self-identified polyamorous relationships. Findings illustrate that polyamorists explicitly resist the master monogamous template through multiple sexual and emotional partners although commitment remains salient within such relationships. Results indicate that polyamorists do violate the rules of their relationships although ‘cheating’ is not a relevant construct for such behaviour. Although polyamory affords explicit rejection of sexual and emotional exclusivity, survey and interview data suggest that by underscoring their ability for multiple loves, there remains a continued emphasis on emotional rather than sexual intimacy. The article introduces ‘agentic fidelity’, which is a certain form of commitment among polyamorists that relies upon acute self-knowledge and choice exercised through the ability to express needs and boundaries.

**Keywords:** polyamory; fidelity; nonmonogamy; sexuality

The ‘rules’ of monogamy provide a template for individuals to engage in sexual and/or emotional relations with one another. Those engaged in open relationships and swinging challenge the ‘master monogamous template’ of exclusivity through consensually engaging with multiple sexual partners. *Polyamory* further challenges the master template by providing a context to engage in multiple sexual, emotional and/or affective partnerships – and to communicate openly about them (Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004; Noel, 2006; Sheff, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Polyamorists characterise their intimacies in plural; using language that clearly subverts the mononormative vocabulary of coupledness (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). Researching polyamory is challenging in terms of employing a research design that incorporates multiple partners and effectively analysing data without resorting to mononormative tendencies.

This study uses survey and interview data to examine poly relationship arrangements and function, rules and agreements, ideology and discourse by asking: How do polyamorous relationships negotiate love, sex and intimacy with multiple partners? Do polyamorists express loyalty and commitment with each other and what role do the ‘rules’ play in such processes? Although polyamory resists exclusivity among partners in both ideology and practice, agreements and rules challenge the notion that ‘anything goes’ in multiple relationships. In looking at the negotiation, existence, governance and breaking

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of rules in poly relationships, data show that commitment, loyalty and specialness are salient. I suggest the conduit for commitment and specialness among polyamorists is not exclusivity through love or sex, but it is rather a more individualised form of loyalty: 'agentic fidelity'. Agentic fidelity involves an acute self-knowledge that informs one's ability to articulate needs, desires and boundaries to a partner while exercising agency through personal choices in determining and demonstrating commitment aside from the socially normed tenets of sexual and emotional exclusivity.

This article suggests that polyamorists engage in agentic fidelity by exercising personal agency and emphasising a *chosen* loyalty through knowing what rules to establish, deciding when and how to follow them and effectively articulating among partners a renegotiation of the rules if they are broken. Data show that polyamory invokes a distinct ideology that enables agentic fidelity through emphasis on responsibility, honesty, overt communication and ethical behaviour. However, this ideology is problematic in terms of recognising the possibility of unethical behaviour and violating the rules, which has traditionally been described as 'cheating' in monogamous relationships. By referring to rule violations as 'breaking the rules' rather than 'cheating', polyamorists consciously subvert mononormativity not only through structuring their intimate lives but also in constructing alternative narratives for relationship struggles.

### **Commitment in polyamorous relationships**

Studies on polyamory have focused primarily on the discourse and politics of poly identities (Barker, 2005; Cook, 2005; Mint, 2004; Overall, 1998), power dynamics (Sheff, 2005) and phenomenologies of polyamorous individuals (Keener, 2004). Such literature is located within a cultural dialogue that seeks to challenge hegemonic narratives through illustrating the pervasive influences of heteronormativity and mononormativity in theory, practice and research (Josephson, 2005; Lehr, 1999; Pieper & Bauer, 2005; Rich, 1994; Warner, 1999).

Cook (2005) found that mutual appreciation, emotional closeness, communication and flexibility contribute to maintaining commitment between primaries in long-term poly relationships. As commitment is often operationalised as fidelity, exclusivity seems contrary to the tenets of polyamory. This study confirms that the concept of feeling special or maintaining a primary bond is important, which I argue operates as a different kind of fidelity between partner(s). This article proposes that fidelity *is* present in polyamorous relationships; however, it is not dictated by sexual or emotional exclusivity.

Some invoke a dyadic, primary partner design (Cook, 2005), whereas others eschew such a mononormative template for more fluid relational arrangements involving multiple primaries or no primaries (Munson & Stelboum, 1999). Polys create rules and boundaries in structuring their multiple relations (Cook, 2005; Matik, 2002; McLean, 2004; Ravenscroft, 2004; Wosick-Correa, 2006). Rule structures also exemplify the role of disclosure and overt communication styles encouraged in polyamory. Due in part to such rules, the structure, arrangement and negotiation of polyamorous relationships have been characterised as political (Jackson & Scott, 2004), progressive (Kilbride, 1994) and equalising between individuals (Cloud, 1999).

Researchers describe polyamory as advocating an ethically overt, honest approach to engaging with multiple emotional (and often sexual) partners, whereas swinging is characterised as recreational sex (Cook, 2005; Jenks, 1998). Polyamorists actively uphold their ability, capability and desire to engage with multiple emotional partners through an ideology that emphasises open, honest communication, as opposed to 'don't ask, don't tell' and 'partial disclosure' agreements that sometimes characterise other nonmonogamies.

Polyamorists also attempt to consciously resist mononormative language. For example, jealousy is replaced with 'compersion', which involves taking pleasure at seeing one's partner enjoying him or herself with another lover (Cook, 2005). Other terms such as 'total honesty', 'new relationship energy' and nondyadic language such as triads, triples and quads are also common. Communities are also integral in fostering support, access to and involvement in alternative relationship structures (Sheff, 2005; Stacey, 2005; Wilkins, 2004).

There are some differences with regard to gender and sexual orientation in terms of engaging in nonmonogamy and those who actively self-identify as polyamorous. Gay men have the highest rates of nonmonogamy (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Chambers, 2001; Ringer, 2001); however, few actually identify as polyamorous. Lesbians have the lowest rates of nonmonogamy (Macklin, 1980; Munson & Stelboun, 1999), which Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) suggest is because of women being socialised to expect some sort of emotional connection with sex; therefore nonmonogamy and casual sex are difficult to negotiate. Bisexuals have been stereotyped as the most nonmonogamous (Haerberle & Gindorf, 1998; Weinberg, Williams, & Prior, 1994), although some studies show a majority of bisexuals are engaged in long-term monogamous relationships (Coleman, 1985; Rust, 1996), whereas others indicate many bisexuals, especially women, practice nonmonogamous or self-defined polyamorous relationships (Weinberg et al., 1994; Wosick-Correa, 2006).

Access to and the use of labels such as polyamory (and even bisexuality, to a certain extent) have been correlated with race/ethnicity, class and education (Wilkins, 2004; Wosick-Correa, 2006) although recent media attention to poly living has increased the visibility, and therefore utility, of the term. Identity versus practice is a relevant issue for those who engage in multiple-partner relationships and choose to label them as open, nonmonogamous or polyamorous. Finally, although polyamory is described as responsible or ethical nonmonogamy (Anapol, 1997; Easton & Liszt, 1997), there is some debate over whether polyamorists do engage in secretive, nonconsensual behaviours that violate established rules and norms of poly relationships (Klesse, 2005). However, few admit to these violations in an attempt to distinguish polyamory from other forms of secretive (and even consensual) nonmonogamy. Because polyamorists resist the necessity of exclusivity, there is an assumption that cheating or infidelity does not or cannot occur. Such suppositions are problematic in researching agreements, relationship structures, and rule violations among polyamorists.

## **Methods**

Data were gathered over a 2-year period using multiple methods as part of a larger research project on intimate relationships in the United States. Phase I involved a 30-question survey administered primarily in-person to a total of 2218 respondents (343 self-identified polyamorists) gathered using basic random and convenience sampling techniques. The survey was also posted on an Internet list server dedicated to alternative lifestyles to capture a wide range of relationship arrangements. Phase II involved 1–3 hours of in-depth interview with 70 individuals (12 self-identified polyamorists) gathered voluntarily post-survey and through chain referral methods. Both survey and interview questions included respondents' permissiveness of and engagement in extradyadic activities, experiences and consequences of multiple partners, and relationship agreements. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions; therefore data were analysed using regression analysis, descriptives and coding. Interview responses were analysed through open and focused coding of patterns from survey data and those that emerged during the interview process.

The survey sample includes 343 self-identified polyamorists ranging between the ages of 18 and 67 years although most were between 18 and 45 years (76%), white (90%),

college-educated (88%), Pagan (35%) or not religiously affiliated (25%), and did not have children (57%) (Table 1). The sample includes 64% women and 35% men who were engaged with at least one partner at the time of the survey (Table 2). Fifty-four percent were identified as bisexual,<sup>2</sup> whereas others were identified as straight (38%) or gay/lesbian (4%).

The in-depth interview sample includes 12 self-identified polyamorists divided by five gender-sexual orientation categories: heterosexual women, heterosexual men, bisexual women, bisexual men and gay men. Most were white (92%), highly educated interviewees who ranged from 21 to 57 years (Table 3). The entire research sample includes diverse sexual orientations and relationship arrangements, which few previous studies have accomplished (Biblarz & Biblarz, 1980).

## Results and discussion

Survey and interview data indicate a pattern of creating formal agreements, establishing rules and navigating those who both follow and break them within poly relationships. However, communication, disclosure and honesty are interwoven into the overall ethos of multiple-partner relations. Furthermore, polyamorists explicitly resist sexual and emotional exclusivity while maintaining commitment through agentic fidelity within their relationship(s). I argue this is achieved through exercising choice in constructing the rules; and the overall process of creating agreements and the *existence* of rules, in addition to what they govern, are indicators of commitment.

### The polyamorous process: formulating agreements about multiple partners

Survey results indicate that almost all respondents, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, have some kind of agreement about being in a poly relationship, whether it be verbal (65%), case by case (15%), written (8%) or 'don't ask, don't tell' (1%). Several (19%) respondents described 'other' types of agreements in their open-ended comments:

My lover lives with me and my husband and my husband's lover comes over every other weekend and on the in-between weekends he goes there. When we were more actively seeking other partners (before these long-term relationships), we had both verbal agreements and written safe-sex agreements.

–Heterosexual female

Such open-ended responses exemplify a combination of agreements that were verbal, written and/or case-by-case. However, some survey responses indicated agreements that were tailored more to individuals and their relationships, like forging a 'sexual credo' or engaging in numerous discussion and in-depth check-in. Others invoked a more autonomous approach to agreements about multiple partners, which involves problematising the *existence* of an agreement, stating that it is not appropriate to put limits on one's partner as long as people are respectful and kind to one another:

Because we respect each other's autonomy and judgment, we have no formal 'agreement'; however we \*agree\* on critical issues. Even should we disagree, however, we are careful to arrange things that the choices of one person will not harm the other. For instance, we practice 'safe sex' with each other, even though we are primary to each other, so that if one person makes an error in judgment, or has an accident, it has no consequence for the other person . . . Neither of us would ever presume to tell the other who they could or could not relate to.

–Bisexual female

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for polyamorous survey respondents.

Independent variables	Percentage ( <i>N</i> = 343)
Gender	
Female	64
Male	35
Transgender	1
Sexual orientation	
Straight	38
Gay	2
Lesbian	2
Bisexual	54
Queer/other	3
Age	
Between 18 and 29	26
Between 30 and 45	50
Between 46 and 59	21
Over 60	3
Education	
High school	12
College	56
Grad school/Prof. degree	32
Race/ethnicity	
White	90
African–American/Black	1
Hispanic/Latino	1
Asian American/Pacific	<sup>a</sup>
Multiracial/ethnic	4
Other	3
Religious affiliation	
Christian	11
Jewish	3
Buddhist	2
Muslim	<sup>a</sup>
Pagan	35
Atheist	8
Other	16
No affiliation	25
Number of children	
No children	57
Two or fewer children	31
Three or more children	12
Marital/unioned status	
Yes	62
No	39
Time with primary partner	
Less than 1 year	13
1–3 years	20
3–5 years	15
5–9 years	19
10 or more years	33

<sup>a</sup>Less than 1%.

Table 2. Polyamorous survey respondents' sex of primary partner and number of current partners by sexual orientation and gender.

	Sex of primary partner				Number of current partners				
	N	Male	Female	Transgender	N	One	Two	Three	Four+
Total	343	209	126	8	343	85	148	58	52
Homosexual	13	69%	31%	a	13	7%	69%	a	23%
Female	6	15%	31%	a	6	a	46%	a	a
Male	7	54%	a	a	7	1%	23%	a	23%
Heterosexual	130	40%	59%	1%	130	25%	50%	16%	9%
Female	52	39%	a	1%	52	13%	19%	4%	4%
Male	78	a	60%	a	78	12%	31%	12%	5%
Bisexual	185	75%	22%	3%	185	23%	44%	19%	14%
Female	147	74%	3%	2%	147	17%	36%	16%	10%
Male	36	1%	19%	a	36	5%	7%	3%	4%
Transgender	2	a	1%	1%	2	a	1%	a	a
Queer/Other	15	67%	27%	1%	15	67%	27%	5%	a
Female	15	67%	27%	1%	15	67%	27%	5%	a

Notes: Those who identified as queer or other in the survey were all female.

<sup>a</sup>Indicates less than 1%.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for polyamorous in-depth interviewees.

Variables	Percentage (N=12)
Gender	
Female	50
Male	50
Sexual orientation	
Straight	33
Gay	8
Bisexual	58
Age	
Between 21 and 29	50
Between 30 and 45	42
Between 46 and 57	8
Education	
College	42
Grad school/Prof. degree	58
Race/ethnicity	
White	92
Multiracial/ethnic	8
Current number of partners <sup>a</sup>	
One	8
Two	33
Three	33
Four or more	25

<sup>a</sup>Interviewees indicated partners to be primaries, secondaries, dates, lovers and relationships.

For some, having an agreement represents control, limitation and restriction reminiscent of the master monogamous template although these individuals were in the minority. Most had an agreement of some sort, even if the agreement was to have no rules, restrictions or overt knowledge about other partners. In addition, over a third (39%) indicated at

some point their resistance to using terms like *allow*, *restrict* or *rules* through open-ended answers to particular questions. Some even wrote comments in the margins of the survey, such as ‘it is not my place to allow or put restrictions on my partner’ or:

I do not give my partners lists of allowed and prescribed behaviors. Instead, I tell my partners that I expect them to be honest with me at all times in all things. Provided that I feel my needs from the relationship are met and that they are behaving honestly and responsibly, they are able to determine for themselves what actions they engage in.

–Bisexual female

This respondent indicates there are still rules, albeit framed in terms of expectations and standards that are both emotional and behavioural. Respondents’ resistance to allowances and/or restrictions demonstrates that for many, confronting normative sexual ownership and emotional property is of ethical concern in approaching their intimate relationships. However, most still had *some* sort of agreement.

A few (4%) respondents indicated that they had no formal agreement about interactions or behaviours. This was due primarily to stages within developing or maintaining certain relationships, such as starting a new relationship where the topic has yet to come up, desiring more privacy or wishing not to know about other partners and for some, status as a secondary partner<sup>3</sup>:

As most survey respondents (96%) had some sort of actual agreement between their partner(s) concerning behaviours with others, results clearly show that polyamorous relationships are far from ‘anything goes’. Both survey and interview data detail a range of behaviours and interactions that such agreements mediate. Survey respondents were asked to indicate what types of behaviours are ‘allowed’ with others. Results show that kissing is the most acceptable interaction with other partners (over 90%), and a majority (over 80%) both allow and are allowed to hold hands, dance, use hands for stimulation, receive oral stimulation, give oral stimulation and engage in threesomes or group sexual experiences (Figure 1). Furthermore, most allow (84%) and are allowed (90%) to fall in love with others. As polyamory is predicated upon the ability and opportunity to love in multiples, restricting or being restricted from falling in love with other partner(s) essentially contradicts the fundamentals of polyamory. Nevertheless, some respondents indicated that either they were not allowed or they did not allow their partner(s) to fall in love with others. Open-ended responses indicated that this could be because of polyfidelitous relationships or ‘closed’ triads or quads that restrict emotional (and sometimes sexual) involvement with new or other partners.

Finally, data show that vaginal penetration, spending the night and anal penetration are the most restricted interactions although are still allowed in a majority (Figure 1) of cases. In consulting open-ended responses, restricting vaginal and anal penetration involved practicing safer sex, preventing pregnancy, and preserving specialness and intimacy (especially for anal sex between gay men). Responses also alluded to spending the night as a particularly intimate experience and often reserved such an interaction for a primary partner or resistance to sharing extended time with other partners.

A number of survey respondents indicated ‘other’ allowed (35%) and allowable (30%) activities in open-ended format and included a wide range of other activities that involved sexual, emotional financial, spiritual relations and BDSM<sup>4</sup>. Other allowed activities included the option to use sex toys, play boardgames, flirt, hug, exchange nonromantic kisses, snuggle, massage (non-sexual), go out to dinner or movies, cook together and as one respondent indicated, engage in ‘any epidemiologically safe activity’.

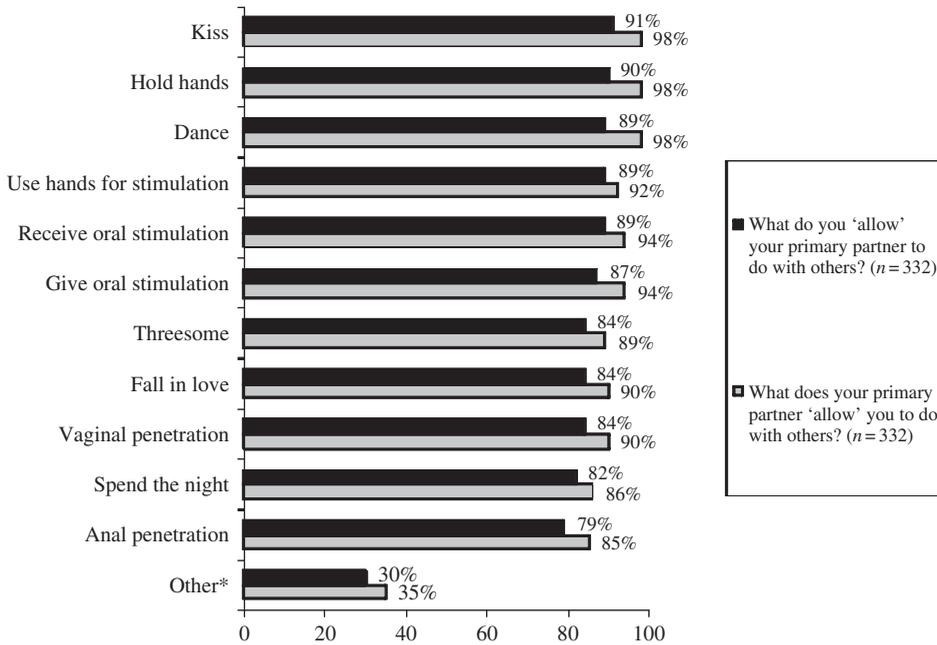


Figure 1. Percentage of polyamorous survey respondents indicating allowable/allowed activities with others.

Overall, survey data show that while neither sexual nor emotional interaction is heavily restricted, most have agreements or rules about some type of behaviour or interaction with others. Although polyamory (by definition) does not restrict multiple sexual, romantic or affective partners (see Sheff, 2006), there are other rules that exemplify such relationships are far from limitless in terms of involvements with multiple partners.

**Rules and regulations within polyamorous relationships**

Polys use agreements and rules to ensure agentic fidelity and negotiate needs and boundaries within multiple partnerships. Interviewees described rules about behaviours with other partners that restricted certain sexual and nonsexual activities based on safer sex concerns, efforts to maintain primary pair-bonds and the desire to ‘feel special’ between different partners. For example, William, a 33-year-old bisexual involved in a poly commune with four other partners stated:

We have an explicit rule that there has to be STD testing before any sexual contact with a new partner. That means no impulsive going to clubs to hook up and have sex. If something like that were to happen we would have to go without sexual contact before test results can be obtained. We have a group of people who have to be protected here; we rely on each other to protect each other.

Like interviewees, an overwhelming majority (91%) of open-ended survey responses reflected safer sex concerns with comments such as ‘safe sex is a must’ and ‘no condom, no penetration’.

In addition to safer sex rules, interviewees described rules about ‘overnight dates’ or ‘spending the night’. Incidentally, survey data show that respondents actually indicate

‘spending the night’ as one of their least allowable/allowed activities with others. Although one interviewee spoke of practical concerns such as needing to use the family car the next morning, most, like Katie, who had rules about overnights described them in terms of drawing emotional boundaries:

The main rule was whatever we did we would end up in our bed at the end of the evening. And what that ended up meaning was that at the end of the day, we would be in bed together and start telling each other what we did and we would get so turned on we would end up making love.

–Katie, 32, bisexual

Although sexual safety and overnights remained the most central rules about behaviour, interviewees were least likely to restrict various types of sexual interaction with others. A few commented on how their first multiple-partner experiences included agreements about vaginal penetration or even anal sex, but in subsequent relationships such rules seemed to dissipate. As polyamorists rarely spoke of regulating certain sexual activities, or even restricting particular behaviours, they instead described agreements about what partners should do rather than what they should not do. These rules fell into two main categories central to a polyamorous ideology: *communication* and *disclosure*.

### ***Rules about communication: enforcing sincerity and honesty***

Participants repeatedly discussed how polyamory is essentially predicated upon continual communication with all partners involved. As one interviewee joked, ‘We spend more time *communicating* about having sex and falling in love than actually having sex and falling in love!’ Although communication can include a vast array of styles and degrees, and concern a multitude of issues, many interviewees had agreements about communication in terms of logistical concerns and translating desires and boundaries.

Interviewees conferred basics such as scheduling dates, play times and coordinating family gatherings. Heather reflected on why her rule about communicating logistics is of particular importance to her:

My friend teases me because I have this planner I use for my dates with all my partners. [pulls out planner with color-coded names, locations, and lists of ‘what to pack’ scribbled on a monthly calendar] It is totally anal retentive, but it really helps me keep track! I swear people don’t realize how hard polyamory is in terms of making time for everyone. Maybe *I’m* just exceptionally busy [laughs]. But we actually have a rule about communication about scheduling issues since there are essentially five of us to deal with.

–Heather, 29, bisexual

Many discussed how communicating logistics between partners is both imperative in negotiating multiple relationships, as well as making sure individuals are getting the time they need and want with each other.

Communication also involves prioritising discussions about any agreements or rules between partners. Both Peter and Molly suggested that communication about rule contentment or dissatisfaction is an integral part of polyamory. Peter is a 23-year-old heterosexual who is a former swinger turned polyamorist. He described communication as ‘*the poly core*’ and suggests a strong sense of self helps facilitate communication:

It's really important if you're going to do any of this poly stuff that you have a really strong sense of yourself, who you are, what you want, and where your boundaries are. That's hard enough to do in any relationship, but if you're doing polyamory, it's really, really important. The key is communicating that strong sense of self, what you want, who you are, and what your boundaries are to your partner.

Molly, a 29-year-old heterosexual woman currently involved with two male partners, comments that one must be aware of his or her desires and boundaries before he or she can effectively communicate them to another partner:

Polyamory challenges me to grow. Sometimes it pushes me beyond my comfort zone . . . that way I can communicate my needs to my partners and be able to articulate exactly what I need and want . . . I can tell them why I feel like I do, what is setting me off, and we can work together to get beyond it.

Others necessitated self-awareness as a central component to effective communication. Although 'good communication' seems to be the default suggestion for making any relationship succeed, interviewees emphasised communication as *the* core component of a multiple-partner paradigm. A few long-term polyamorous interviewees even described the 'poly mantra' as being 'communicate, communicate, and then communicate more!' Most seemed to emphasise a commitment *to* communication more than actually *communicating*.

#### ***Rules about disclosure: staying overt and open***

A theme emerged about rules that encourage (or restrict) revealing interest in a potential partner, an upcoming date or details about a recent encounter. Most rules governed disclosure in varying degrees:

We don't have rules that say, oh you can't have intercourse with so-and-so or you can only have oral with me. It's like we focus more on the positive rather than the negative – agreements that focus on what we *should* be doing as opposed to what we're *not supposed* to be doing. Our only real rule is about disclosing who we want to be with, what we've done, and what we'd like to do with somebody!

–Male, heterosexual

Some referred to *full disclosure* or *total honesty* in describing their communication arrangements. This refers to discussing interactions with certain partners, negotiating rules, or relaying satisfaction and dissatisfaction with any agreements or individuals. Full disclosure and total honesty are key concepts within a polyamorous framework. They allow individuals a certain amount of agency in expressing needs, articulating desires and describing behaviours. They also provide a context for receiving similar information from one's partner(s).

Participants also discussed veto power as a component of disclosure, which is the ability to disapprove of another's potential partner. Having veto power was enough for some who felt as though the ability to 'have input' in their partner(s) engagements acknowledged commitment between individuals. Some used the rules of communication and disclosure as a forum for establishing commitment and encouraging total honesty to oneself and between partners. Instead of enacting rules for the sake of preventing behaviour and encouraging revelation, polyamorists treated honesty as more of an ethical concern inherent to the poly lifestyle.

Overall, agreements and rules reflect a responsibility to both communication and disclosure. Poly rules seem less regulatory and more participatory, encouraging an overall commitment to oneself, current partners and potential partners rather than restricting certain sexual and/or nonsexual interactions. Specifically polyamorous rules about communication and disclosure serve an additional function to preserving agentic fidelity between partners. Self-awareness is key in being able to articulate one's needs and boundaries, as well as hear those of another partner. Furthermore, through agreements and rules, polyamorists both adopt and perpetuate an ideology dichotomised against mononormativity, which empowers individuals to demonstrate loyalty to a polyamorous ideology and commitment to one's partner(s) through agentic fidelity.

Polyamorists spend considerable time communicating about relationships, agreements and rules. Results indicate, however, even in breaking the rules, polyamorists contribute another dimension that involves reframing 'cheating' in terms of both behaviour and consequence.

### **'I didn't cheat, I just broke the rules': resistance to mononormative notions of infidelity through polyamorous accounting schemas**

Establishing agreements and creating rules seemed a relatively easy part of polyamory; actually following them proved to be a different story. Although data show a fair number of respondents breach their agreements, many stressed they followed their established rules. Some stated that they have not broken the rules of their current relationship(s), nor have they broken rules in previous relationships. However, most either acknowledged or alluded to rule infractions. Some were hesitant to admit such behaviours because of embarrassment, complicated situations and also because they felt revealing such information would tarnish the 'open and allowing reputation' of polyamory. Danika is a 40-year-old bisexual woman involved with three lovers and described herself as currently 'dating poly-style', meaning she can connect with people at whatever level of intimacy feels right for her and not alienate others:

Valentino, his wife and I were actually in a triad that we recently ended, but I still do see Valentino, just not his wife. We lived together and there were some agreements between us concerning our relationship – and we had a huge emotionally draining fight and we put the agreements in place so it wouldn't be that way.

When I asked Danika to describe 'the agreements' with Valentino, she replied, 'You know what, I think I'd rather not say'. In responding to a question about breaking rules, she revealed that she began having unprotected sex with another partner, Aaron, before obtaining Valentino's permission; I proceeded to ask what implication her interaction with Aaron had concerning the agreements she established with Valentino:

[hesitating]. Yeah, this was really our most important agreement, because he and Penelope were fluid-bonded. Like I said, most of the time I'm a person of integrity. I feel really bad about it. I've never told Valentino about it, I'm not gonna tell him, and that's kind of why I didn't talk about our agreements before with you. I'm like, this will never happen with anybody ever again, I will never do this again. I've given myself a real strong admonition; I wouldn't want anybody to treat me that way and I don't want to treat anybody that way.

'Fluid-bonded' refers to partners who engage in unprotected sex and usually signifies a certain level of commitment and intimacy. Others described partners that are fluid-bonded

only after rigorous STD/STI testing and adhering to a total honesty policy. Danika's decision to have unprotected sex with Aaron carried several implications for all parties involved, both physically and emotionally, and she stressed that she continues to follow the rules and is a person of integrity and she 'made a mistake' in breaking the rules. Nevertheless, her story acknowledges that polyamorous individuals can and do sometimes break the rules of their relationship(s).

Although cheating seems to be of paramount concern with monogamy, secretive non-consensual activities do occur within poly relationships. Respondents characterise such behaviour in terms of 'breaking the rules' rather than using terms like 'infidelity' or 'cheating'. Informed of this pattern, I asked interviewees if they ever 'cheated' on their partner(s):

What a good question, because by definition it's almost a contradiction in terms. I can't say that I have cheated. Generally, I think that there are some people who 'do poly' a whole lot better than others . . . I guess to me if you have rules and then break those rules, you've cheated. But I don't like that term because, again, it's a contradiction since cheating implies [stops in mid-sentence with a blank stare] – well it's like 'pseudo-cheating'. You are 'cause you're breaking rules but you aren't because the rules are different than normal rules about monogamy.

–Molly, 29, heterosexual

Survey data show that 18% of respondents have cheated on their current partner, whereas 12% report that their primary partner cheated on them. It is important to note, again, how several survey respondents expressed discontent with the terminology used in the survey, which may have impacted the validity of the survey results. Several wrote elaborate comments about how cheating is for monogamists and others who are not 'honest and open' about their multiple partners, although polyamorous cheating rates are fairly similar to monogamous relationships.

### **'Let's reconsider . . .': rule renegotiations and reevaluations**

Interviewees discussed the consequences of rule infractions through renegotiation rather than termination of the relationship(s). Survey data show an overwhelming majority (87%) of respondents indicate renegotiation as the primary response to either engaging or finding out about a partner's engagement in activities 'not allowed' with others. Peter offers his conclusions as to why polyamorists break the rules and, instead of terminating a relationship, engage in renegotiation:

Rules in poly relationships don't have as strong of a hold over the individual like they do in, say, traditional marriage. With traditional marriage, there's this idea that it's a sacrament and you're involved in something bigger than yourself. With poly, it's very much about your wants and your partner's wants. We make rules, see how it works, get rid of the old rules, and make some new ones – and they may change again. Since the rules can and do change, I think the rules seem less concrete, which seems to have less hold over someone so rules wind up getting broken and people cheat.

At first, Peter suggested one reason polyamorists break the rules may have to do with the rules themselves not seeming so concrete because they have not been institutionalised like the rules of monogamy, and subsequently questioned his own use of the term 'cheating'. Peter, like many others, indicates part of polyamory is recognising that rules come

into existence and occasionally need to be renegotiated or reevaluated. This process may seem less concrete and therefore less detrimental if someone violates the rules. Yet, many expressed frustration and discontent with the rules, which shows that no matter how or what rules restrict, someone could have potential conflict. For example, Christina is a 33-year-old bisexual woman who has been dating a single man as a primary partner for over 5 years and a married couple for over 4 years, and expressed:

I'm frustrated because right now nobody gets an overnight date. Jenni and Marshall are in marriage counseling, not because things are going bad, but because Jenni has some communication stuff to work through. She is not feeling very secure right now so she just doesn't want him gone overnight with me. I can understand that so it doesn't bother me too much, although come to think of it, it has been going on for a while. Maybe it's time to re-evaluate the sleepover situation.

Renegotiations and reevaluations serve the purpose of recognising that individuals' needs and desires within relationships are not static. Polyamorists have a sort of understanding of this fluctuation; although most appreciated the opportunities to try and try again to make their boundaries and limitations known and addressed (through agreements, rules, or simply being able to state them), one interviewee in particular expressed his distaste for such efforts:

The thing I dislike most about poly is having to always renegotiate and check-in. It's like we're always talking about this and that and what we want to do and what she wants to do and how I'm going to meet those needs and how she can better meet mine. Sometimes I feel like we spend more time discussing our relationship than enjoying our relationship. EVERYTHING has to be processed before, during and after.

Renegotiation seems to be the rubric for handling rule infractions, conflicts and disagreements in polyamorous relationships. Reevaluation seems to be the forum for examining both individual and collective relationship goals and allows both disagreement and resolution as needed. Furthermore, communicating about one's relationship can be a way of spending time together and unifying efforts to maximise their potential. In other words, the process of establishing and renegotiating rules is a key component to agentic fidelity; commitment and loyalty to making arrangements together about the relationship(s).

### **Preserving specialness through agentic fidelity**

Many indicated that having multiple partners both sexually and/or emotionally can be, at times, rather taxing. 'Feeling special' is an articulation of pair-bonding or sharing something unique or different between individuals (Cook, 2005; Keener, 2004); results further indicate specialness remains salient for polyamorists. Data highlight that many have the need to feel special or share unique behaviours, interactions or even locations with certain partners. Christina described how lacking such specialness could be the drive behind jealousy:

I had a friend once who told me that people feel jealous because they are lacking something – like time or some other kind of specialness with someone. Jealousy to me means that you don't want the other person doing it – YOU want to be doing it instead. Or is that envy? Well, either way I feel like someone else is getting all the good stuff and I'm stuck by myself at home. I feel left out and someone else is getting the attention that I want and need.

Spending time, engaging in particular behaviours or sharing moments between certain partners become primary contexts for specialness. Both open-ended survey and interviewee responses indicate that some agreements and rules exist to preserve this form of exclusivity:

Here are our rules: 1. Don't bring home diseases—safe sex 2. If the persons we want to do something with says 'No', then 'no' means 'no'. 3. Treat everyone the way you want to be treated. 4. Outside relationships should not have a significant negative effect on the primary relationship and our family.

—Heterosexual female

One rule is not to put others needs ahead of our own, and to make time for just each other, even if it is brief, because we need to put energy into maintaining our bond.

—Bisexual male

In addition to rules about retaining specialness, rules about no sleepover dates or spending the night often referred, once again, to the notion of specialness – such activities were reserved for mostly primary or particular partners, such as secondaries.

Although some embraced specialness as a form of commitment between partners, a few resisted the notion of specialness, especially as it operates as a sort of construct inherent in monogamous relationship design. Wendell is a 57-year-old bisexual man who discussed the rule his last wife had about kissing others:

She didn't want anyone kissing me on the mouth because she wanted to be just as safe from cold germs as from any other disease. And she really strongly believed in having things that were just special between us, which I don't believe in and so she managed to structure things so that kissing would be the one thing that was, uh, special. Exclusive between us.

Wendell's account was unique in that most interviewees described sharing something special with their partners; although Wendell felt limited by the notion of specialness, most approached 'feeling special' as an integral part of having multiple partners. Whether 'specialness' may in fact be an archetype of mononormativity, poly rules indicate that it can be a form of commitment. Ensuring specialness, however, has the potential to invoke a hierarchical or prioritising quality, which for some is unproblematic, whereas others actively resist through envisioning polyamory as an equalising experience. Polyamorists use emotional rules to choose how to construct their fidelities with multiple partners, given that sexual and emotional exclusivity are no longer salient. This results in agentic fidelity; individuals decide how and what makes them feel special (but not necessarily better than) and unique between partners.

Polyamorists approach agentic fidelity in two contexts: the first is a more 'traditional' use of fidelity in terms of commitment between all partners, termed 'polyfidelity': Polyfidelity allows for multiple sexual and/or emotional partners while maintaining a certain level of exclusivity. Although this may seem contradictory, polyfidelity epitomises the notion that commitment and fidelity can occur between multiple partners:

We are in a closed triad – I guess you could call it polyfidelity – But it basically means that there are to be no encounters outside the triad. If someone does do something outside the triad, it would be considered cheating.

—Bisexual female

Although some have incorporated traditional (meaning exclusive) notions of fidelity into their multiple-partner relationships, most interviewees' experiences contextualise fidelity in terms of what polyamory *means* to them:

Polyamory means that I am committed to my partners by having total, honest communication. I can enjoy all the benefits of polyamory – to give others the gift of pleasure which you might not have otherwise. Monogamy creates this tension all the time between people's desires and what they are allowed to do or not do and I just see that as foolish. Polyamory lets people enjoy pleasure and bond with others in a way that is trustworthy because we are upfront about our boundaries and try to respect them.

–Martin, 29, heterosexual

Fidelity, therefore, is not necessarily about exclusivity but rather a form of chosen commitment to open, honest communication, disclosure when desired and determining what is considered special between different partners. I argue that specifically *agentic* fidelity involves remaining loyal to the process of establishing agreements and rules, respecting oneself and one's partners through following the rules and being self-aware on a very individual level. Thus, agentic fidelity is useful in navigating commitment within a wide range of relationship models, whether they be monogamous, nonmonogamous or polyamorous.

Although polyamorists set their own stage for trustworthiness in respecting boundaries, a polyamorous ideology has become more pervasive in assisting individuals with this process. A pattern emerged in conducting interviews: many provided a 'poly primer' that involved defining key terms and phrases such as 'new relationship energy' and 'compersion'. Several also described the history of polyamory and offered websites, blogs and reading materials. Although polyamorists seem to have a highly autonomous approach to constructing their intimate lives and maintaining commitment through agentic fidelity, they appear to do so with a polyamorous ideology.

## Conclusion

This article illustrates that polyamory challenges mononormative notions of love, sex and intimacy by explicitly resisting sexual and emotional exclusivity, and individuals engage with multiple partners through agreements, rules and renegotiations that vary in both their focus and intent. Through a framework of constructive objectives rather than restrictive limitations, polyamorists shift the focus from what partners *should not* do with others to what partners *should* do for the good of individuals and relationships involved. However, polyamorists are not immune to tensions between master templates and subversive narratives. Interviewees described their struggles with autonomy while simultaneously preserving 'feeling special' in their array of sexual, romantic and/or affective partnerships. Although some resisted the notion of specialness as a construct inherent in monogamous relationship design, most reflected efforts to 'have something different' with each of their partners, which I argue is ensured through agentic fidelity.

Establishing the rules of polyamory serve as indicators of commitment based on their existence and level of investment that partners have in both their construction and maintenance. Following the rules becomes secondary, in some ways, given the high level of rule renegotiation as a response to infractions. The role that personal agency plays in articulating agreements and following the rules, however, may be impacted by gender, sexual orientation and even primary/secondary status. Although commitment garners

traditional notions of sexual and emotional fidelity in tandem, polyamorists have successfully redefined loyalty in terms of multiple-partner exclusivity. Polyamorous notions of agentic fidelity include commitment to establishing rules, communicating boundaries and desires and devotion to renegotiation. If polyamory effectively contributes to the deinstitutionalisation of monogamy through multiple sexual *and* emotional possibilities, then the rules that characterise such relationships bear reflection of shifts in sex, love and intimacy.

Polyamory provides a unique context for examining the intricacies of not only ensuring commitment and loyalty between multiple partners but also reconciling personal sexual and emotional desires with socially sanctioned relationship templates. The concept of agentic fidelity further resonates for those social scientists, namely psychologists and sociologists, who attempt through research and theorising to unveil the complexities of the individual and society with regard to contemporary romantic, emotional and/or sexual relationships.

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### Notes

1. Polyamory entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006 as a noun defined as, 'The fact of having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more other individuals, viewed as an alternative to monogamy, esp. in regard to matters of sexual fidelity; the custom or practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the knowledge and consent of all partners concerned (OED Online, 2006)'.
2. Seventy-nine percent of bisexual respondents were women, which is a limitation of the sample and may impact the results in terms of the establishment, negotiation and content of the rules. However, research indicates few men actively self-identify as bisexual, whereas bisexuality is a more acceptable orientation among women (Weinberg et al., 1994).
3. Some relationships utilise a primary/secondary structure, wherein primary partners are dyadic and secondary partners operate more in terms of satellite relations. For others, the mere use of the terms 'primary' and 'secondary' conflict with polyamory in that multiple primaries are common or such a structure reinforces hierarchical valuation or prioritisation of partners.
4. Several researchers have explored the connection between BDSM/Kink subcultures and polyamory, suggesting both share similar values (honesty, communication, safety) (see Sheff, 2005, 2006). Both BDSM and polyamorists also play with breaking a number of standard forms of relating and social interaction.

### Notes on contributor

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