

Part V

Extending Non-Monogamies

17 Strategies in Polyamorous Parenting

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I get the same question, in some form, from the audience of virtually every presentation I give. ‘I understand that this lifestyle is something that works for some people, and that’s fine for them. But what gives them the right to choose this for their families? What about the kids?’ It can be framed as a hostile accusation, or compassionate curiosity. Reporters, students, colleagues, and friends: all of them display concern for the well-being of children in polyamorous families.

There are poly families composed solely of adults, and they merit examination. Audiences, however, do not press me about the adults. When parents faced with losing custody of their children as a direct result of their engagement in polyamory contact me, they ask me about research on children in polyamorous families. In response, I have chosen to focus on poly families containing children.

In this chapter I discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages polyamorous parents identify, and strategies they employ in their attempts to mitigate the disadvantages. This chapter reviews literature on polyamorous families, describes my research methods, details some of the benefits and disadvantages that respondents identify, explains the strategies respondents employ to navigate those disadvantages, and details three primary conclusions and recommendations for future research.

Authors of popular-press books (Easton and Liszt, 1997; Taormino, 2008; West, 1996) address issues in poly parenting such as coming out to children, introducing partners, and managing poly family life. A portion of the academic literature on polyamory focuses on families. Rubin (2001) mentions polyamorous relationships in his review of studies on alternative families in which he documents a decline in the study of non-monogamous relationships. Bettinger (2005, p. 106) uses a family systems approach to detail factors that impact a ‘stable and high functioning gay male polyamorous family’ of seven people—five adults and their two teen-aged sons.

Riggs (Chapter 19, this volume) combines ‘child fundamentalism’ with a critical examination of whiteness, adult-centricity, and emotion to investigate the power structures in foster care praxis in Australia. He finds that children are ‘deployed’ to both legitimate parents and define a family

according to their relationships to adults, but disregarded as agents who actively co-create their families. Using examples from lesbian, gay and poly families, Riggs explores the different possibilities for kinship structures that need not rely upon child fundamentalism for their legitimacy.

In the most extended study of polyamorous families to date, Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) examines such diverse aspects as women married to actively bisexual men and ‘polyfamilies’ interactions with school systems (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Chapter 18, this volume). In her ongoing analysis of poly families’ interactions with schools, she details family-related statistics from the Loving More study conducted in 2000 and discusses the impacts of invisibility on children in poly families in Australia. She concludes that these families are silenced because they ‘fall between the polarities of normative heterosexual monogamous marriages and the increasing attention to same-sex families’ (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006, p. 49). In this volume (Chapter 18) Pallotta-Chiarolli details the three primary strategies her respondents employ in their interactions with schools. These strategies are to: 1) remain closeted to members of the public and occasionally their own children; 2) exist on the border between the private/open world of home and the public/closeted world of school and community; and 3) ‘pollute’ the schools with their unabashedly polyamorous families who refuse to remain invisible.

METHOD

The findings in this chapter come from an ongoing longitudinal study of polyamorous families in the United States. In the first portion of the study (1996 to 2003), I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with people who identified as polyamorous; with one sample in the Midwest, and another in the California Bay Area. In addition to the interviews, I conducted seven years of participant observation by attending a wide variety of poly events including co-ed and women’s support groups, dinner parties, community meetings, and two national conferences. This resulted in copious field notes on roughly 600 people with whom I interacted, some only once, and some repeatedly for years.

For the second round of data collection (2007–2008) I was able to re-contact 17 previous respondents, 15 of whom consented to interviews, and expand the sample to include an additional 31 people, for a total sample of 71. Across both studies, race was the most homogeneous demographic characteristic, with 89% of the sample identifying as white. Socioeconomic status was high among these respondents, with 74% in professional jobs. 88% reported some college education, with 67% attaining bachelor’s degrees and 21% completing graduate degrees.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between one and three hours and included foundational questions (demographics, entry into polyamory,

current relationship status) followed by an unstructured, respondent-guided interaction. Second-round interview foundational questions focus on families.

A modified form of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000), informed by inductive data gathering (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) and constant comparative methods (Glasner & Strauss, 1967), shaped my data analysis. This allowed me to incorporate data analysis into data collection and refine both in response to each other following a process of multiple readings of the data, coding for themes and topics at each level, and refining the analysis in response to emerging trends (Glassner & Hertz, 1999).

While the IRB prohibited me from collecting data on children in the first wave of the study, my current IRB protocol allows me to interview children over six-years-old. To date, my sample of children is too small for adequate analysis, so this chapter presents data collected from adult respondents. The first-wave data are missing (at least) two valuable perspectives: children, and people who stopped being polyamorous.

POLYAMOROUS PARENTING

Respondents have multiple broad definitions of parenting that include both biological and chosen kin, and identify a variety of benefits and disadvantages inherent in multi-partner families.

Benefits

Parents identify two primary benefits to raising children in poly families. The first is the emotional intimacy they are able to establish with their children. Second, respondents emphasize the increased resources that come with multiple-adult families, especially pooled resources and flexibility.

Emotional Intimacy with Children

Respondents emphasize honesty with their children as a foundational relational orientation and use it in a variety of discussions, ranging from their own shortcomings or mistakes to age-appropriate answers to questions about sexuality. They classify this honesty as a primary factor that fosters emotional intimacy because, as Brad (a white father of two in his mid-30s) comments, ‘the kids get to see us as real people too.’ He continues:

We make mistakes, and we cop to them. We tell them what is really happening in our lives, and they do the same with us. Of course there is a line—we don’t tell them anything about our sex lives or adult relationship details, but we tell them the most truth we can and still remain in the parental role.

Mark and Evelyn, a white couple in their late 30s with two children, similarly focus on being truthful with Martine, their 17-year-old daughter from Mark's previous marriage, and Annabelle, their six-year-old daughter of their union. Mark asserts:

We're just very straight with the kids and I just don't know any other way to be. Whatever Martine asks I always answer it completely straight. Annabelle, too, but just in a different way. Something that is easier for her to understand, whereas I give Martine the longer version.

Alexander, a 39-year-old white machinist/mechanic and father of two, similarly emphasizes honesty. He and his wife Yansa, a 29-year-old African-American health-care provider and stepmother of one, tell their thirteen-year-old daughter Chantal (from Alexander's previous marriage) the truth about everything, including sex. Alexander details Chantal's reaction to seeing a movie scene with women kissing:

My daughter goes, 'Ooooo, that's disgusting!' And . . . Yansa says, 'How can that be disgusting? Every woman you know is like that.' And you could see the gears grinding in her head and finally one of them engages and she goes, 'But you mean, you are?' And Yansa's like, 'Yes.' And then Chantal stopped for a little while and another gear engaged and it was like, 'You mean my mother?' Yansa goes, 'Yes.' And then she decided uh, yeah, it's not all that bad.

Such candor about sexuality contributes to a sex-positive environment where children feel comfortable asking questions that might seem taboo in other settings. Some parents report that they, and their children, become sources of sex-education for entire peer-groups of adolescents. Kay, a 45-year-old white woman with five children who identifies as bisexual/queer/pan-sexual, comments that:

My older kids' friends come to us a lot for, you know, since they know we have this open relationship and we're poly and I'm bisexual. I've had a lot of their friends ask me about their relationships or how to come out, or handle multiple relationships, or how to even manage some of their friendship relationships when everyone isn't getting along. Also about birth control and things like that, things that they feel like they can't talk to their own parents about.

Kay celebrates her ability to offer candid, sex-positive advice because 'these kids see me as a relationship expert'. Respondents as a whole are optimistic about their familial styles and the impact multiple-partner relating has on their children, prizing especially what they view as tremendous emotional intimacy with family, and community, members.

Shared Resources

Poly parents routinely mention the ability of multiple partners to meet a variety of familial needs as a primary benefit to polyamorous family life. From shared income to increased personal time for adults and more attention for children, having numerous adults in the family allows members to distribute tasks so that (ideally) no one person had to take the brunt of family care. Pooling financial resources frequently results in more money for everyone. Larger family units are often able to keep a parent at home because they have multiple adults doing waged work. The Wyss quad, for example, has been able to afford a full time parent for their daughter's entire childhood (11 years to date), even in the notoriously expensive California Bay Area. The quad evolved from a sextet of three female/male couples which first lost a wife in a messy divorce, and then a husband who was killed in a car accident. Remaining members stabilized as a quad and had a daughter shortly after their husband's death. Wyss family members are Patrick, a 40-year-old white woodworker and student; Kiyowara, a 40-year-old Japanese and Native American business owner; Albert, a 48-year-old white English computer programmer; Loretta, a 48-year-old white business owner; and Kethry, the 11-year-old daughter of Kiyowara and Albert. Initially Kiyowara and Patrick were monogamously married, as were Loretta and Albert.

As a computer programmer with a stable income, Albert has always been the family's primary economic support. Cycling through self-employment, professional managerial positions, and college attendance, each of the other three adults has taken primary parenting responsibility at different times. The assurance of a predictable income grants the quad the flexibility of a rotating position of full-time parenthood, enabling other adults able to be selective when looking for work, establish businesses, and pursue higher education.

The Wyss's, however, also experienced the negative side of shared income when two of their three workers lost jobs in an economic downturn, leaving Albert the sole wage earner. Albert remembers that 'It felt like a lot of pressure . . . everyone was counting on me and it made me really nervous. What if I lost my job too?' Other single-wage-earner families face similar fears, but fewer have the flexibility of multiple reserve wage earners to get jobs and simultaneously retain a full-time parent. While these larger groupings require a lot of food, large houses, and multiple cars, their pooled resources grant greater flexibility and save money on expenses like child-care and separate dwellings.

Personal Time

My and others' research (Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Easton & Liszt, 1997; Sheff, 2005, 2006) indicates that polyamorists perceive themselves to be

happier when they are getting more of their needs met, and they are able to get a wider range of needs met through multiple partners. This same dynamic appears to extend to non-sexual familial relationships as well. When the Wyss quad had Kethry, the ability to distribute parenting meant that Patrick Wyss could parent full-time and ‘retain my sanity.’ After spending all day with a rambunctious toddler who ‘did better when she stayed home, [because she had] major fits in public for a little while,’ Patrick felt harried and claustrophobic. Patrick reports that when Kiowara or Albert arrived home one or both would:

. . . take over with Kethry and I would split, go ride my bike in the foothills for an hour or two . . . It saved me, I never could have done it without it.

The ability to leave Kethry with others allowed Patrick to meet his need for time away from a demanding toddler. For the Wyss quad, this made a very challenging period in the parenting cycle much easier than it would have been with only two (or fewer) parents.

Attention for Children

Another important advantage respondents identify is the considerable attention available for their children. Many parents say that their children’s lives, experiences, and self-concepts are richer for the multiple loving adults in their families. Dylan, a 40-year-old white costume designer and mother of one, casts polyamory as beneficial for her child because:

There’s more attention for the kids . . . It takes five adults to raise a kid and one of those adults is just around to take care of mom. And let me tell you, a happy mom is a good mom. If mom gets enough sleep then everyone is in much better shape.

Having multiple adults in the household benefits both children and adults, Dylan observes, because happy and well-rested parents provide better care for children. Not only do children get more attention from a wider variety of adults, but adults who are able to support each other (ideally) parent more effectively.

Some respondents connect this increased attention with a feeling of community. Emmanuella, a 46-year-old Chicana web designer and mother of three, identifies the sense of family her children have gained from their extended polyamorous household as important to their well-being:

It gives my children a sense of community. They’ve not had reliable grandparents. They don’t have cousins or the typical biological extended family. But they have a big, happy, productive, healthy family

nonetheless, and it is a chosen family. They know each person's relationship to them the same way they would know if they were first or second cousins, aunts or uncles . . . The sense of extended community is the most important thing in respect to my children.

Emmanuella views her children as gaining both a community in lieu of their unreliable grandparents and a sense of how to construct chosen relationships that contribute to a healthy sense of intimacy.

Poly parents' assertion that multiple adults provide children with more attention and meet more of their needs than in two or fewer parent families is consistent with attachment theories on extended families which indicate that the more adults there are available to a child, the more likely the child will be to avoid drug and alcohol use (Homonoff et. al., 1994), have a sense of solidarity with families and communities (Fischer, 1984), and have positive health outcomes (Allen and Allen, 1987). Scholars ultimately agree that 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Homonoff et. al., 1994) and the multiple adults in poly families may provide that additional support.

Role Models for Children

Respondents cite a number of examples of positive role-modeling available to children in poly families. These include honesty, a willingness to meet others' needs, and careful communication and negotiation. Perhaps most importantly, parents emphasize the relationships between their children, partners, and friends as sources of personal role modeling through life example and advice. Peck, a 40-year-old white magazine editor, lived for seven years in a triad with two men: Clark, her white 40-year-old husband of 18 years, and Steven, the couple's longtime friend-turned-lover whom Peck considered her husband. Peck notes that Steven functions as a positive example for her son Will (the biological child of Peck and Clark):

Steven is another male role model in Will's life. He has his dad and that's his dad, but here is another man in his life or other men in his life and this is what they do and their acceptance of him. And so which I think is very beneficial for a young man to have those different role models and know that, Will knows that he could go to them at any time for anything if he needed something, he knew that they were available.

The availability of multiple adults not only provides a broad range of role models, it also gives children in poly families access to non-parental trusted adults with whom to discuss things the children might not wish to tell their parents.

For some families, pooling resources allows them to be financially stable, with well-attended children and happy adults. Adult-child relationships in poly families mirror adult poly relationships, with a common focus

on honesty, communication, and especially the wide variety of needs met through numerous others. These numerous advantages are offset, to varying degrees, by the disadvantages facing poly families.

Disadvantages

Parents report a variety of disadvantages, with two cited most frequently. Many mention the fact that their children sometimes become emotionally attached to the parents' partners who later exit the children's lives when the romantic relationship between the adults ends. Another common disadvantage is that the entire family might be forced to deal with the stigma of having relationally non-conformist parents.

Children Become Attached to Partners who Leave

While the presence of numerous adults attending to children in polyamorous families may provide an atmosphere of love and caring, it also sets the stage for children to become attached to adults who are related to them through the potentially tenuous bonds of a polyamorous relationship style. Numerous parents report their children's attachment to partners who eventually left the relationship, much to the children's chagrin. Dylan remembers her son's misery after the departure of one of her boyfriends, a man who had been the boy's treasured friend, and how he had asked her 'I know why you guys are breaking up, but why does he have to break up with me too?'

Mark reports that his eldest daughter Martine developed some negative attitudes towards polyamorous relationships due to partners' departures:

When she first moved in with us, she got really attached to someone I was involved with and that relationship didn't work out and then the next person I got involved with, Martine got attached to her and then that one broke up, and so she got the idea that poly is bad, I keep getting attached to people and they keep going away. And some of that comes from her background where her mother engaged in a lot of serial monogamy and really to a very large degree left the kids alone all the time, so she had a lot of abandonment issues to begin with.

While Mark attributes Martine's fears of abandonment to her mother's 'serial monogamy,' her fears surfaced in response to her father's polyamorous relationship because she kept 'getting attached to people and they keep going away.'

Divorced parents involved in shifting monogamous relationships have similar issues when people they are dating build relationships with their children and then leave, but these departures might not happen quite as often. There are no statistics on longevity of polyamorous relationships, but my initial data indicate substantial partner turn-over among some sample

members. Respondents routinely acknowledge and express regret for the emotional danger polyamory poses to their children. The respondents also point out that monogamous families are not immune from these dangers, and that their children would remain vulnerable to the pain of adult departures even in families based on sexually faithful dyads.

In developmental psychology, attachment theory addresses the bonding processes between infants and caretakers and identifies consistency of interaction as key to the successful establishment and maintenance of such bonds. Infants, children and adults create attachments with others who are sensitive and responsive to their needs, and with whom they share reciprocal (though not necessarily symmetrical) emotional bonds (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1980).

Polyamorous families provide the opportunity for multiple adults to bond with children, and for children to form attachments with multiple adults who might provide a diverse set of skills, resources, and traits. These benefits, however, might be offset by the potential disadvantage of the departure of an attachment figure, and the children's resultant separation anxiety and grief. Whether children in poly families develop secure or insecure attachments with multiple adults, attachment theory suggests that the consistency and quality of the contact between the children and their attachment figures, rather than the character of the relationships among the adults, would be a primary influence (Bowlby, 1969).

Stigma

Another disadvantage facing poly families is the stigma associated with being sexual minorities. I have found that social privileges and a comparatively low level of public awareness that allows/forces poly people to remain invisible buffers mainstream polyamorists in the US from some of the effects of stigma. Nonetheless, poly families are occasionally ostracized by family and friends, and their children share the impact of condemnation.

Others (e.g. Sullivan, 2004) have documented similar dynamics among families headed by same-sex partners and found that it is the discrimination that results from stigma that proves most damaging to these children, not the sexual orientation of the parents. Researchers from England (Golombok and Tasker, 1996), Norway (Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002), and the US (Patterson, 2006; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001) have found that children from same-sex families mirror children from heterosexual families on a variety of measures, with the primary difference that children from same-sex families have more flexible gender roles and greater willingness to consider entering a same-sex relationship, though the vast majority identify as heterosexual.

There are tremendous similarities among poly and gay families, and both must contend with the impacts of the stigma associated with being sexual minorities. While Peck's triad with Steven and Clark had never been fully

embraced by portions of their social circle, even those who had accepted the triad became increasingly intolerant when Peck intentionally became pregnant with Steven's child while married to Clark. Peck remembers that friends expressed discomfort and:

Judgments, how could you do that, it's immoral and you know, how could you do that to Clark. And that baby's gonna grow up being so confused. They thought it was worse than cheating, that you have a baby with someone else while you're married to somebody was just beyond, just unfathomable to people. And even some polyamorous people were pretty judgmental about it. . . .

Transgressing such a cherished norm as bearing solely the husband's children while married was more than some of Peck's associates would tolerate, and they rejected Peck and her family. While the triad and their children paid for their non-conformity, there were some advantages as well. It gave Peck the opportunity to have the third child she had wanted (which Clark did not wish to father), and Steven a 'second chance' at parenting now that his older children were grown.

Respondents are painfully aware that their children have or may face the onerous chore of managing the stigma of their parents' unconventional relationships, and some parents express remorse about the pain their relationships have caused their children. Dylan remembers her discomfort over the challenges her polyamorous lifestyle created for her then six-year-old son when:

. . . he started going to school and they were asking 'Who's your mommy, who's your daddy?' And he's able to identify us biologically without a problem. But for him it felt like—why are they only asking about those people? Like those are the only important people? . . . Now he knows this information about mom being poly and whatnot can actually really scare and freak people out. And having him be so young and having to manage that amount of responsibility for how adults and other kids relate to him, I can sometimes feel regret . . . And I wish that I was in a more stable trio for him so that he had this solid place to come from instead of like this multiple relating, my marriage didn't work kind of thing.

While Dylan is keenly aware of the difficulty her son faced in relation to her polyamorous lifestyle, her solution is a more stable polyamorous family, rather than a monogamous one.

Peck reports deep conflict over her role as editor of a polyamorous magazine and parent of children who wished to:

. . . be normal. The website needs some new pictures and I am the logical choice, with my kids even better for the site. But for my kids?

Definitely not! I would *never* ask them to put their pictures on the web—I am not sure if I can even put my own picture on the website. What if one of their friends' parents sees it and then it hurts my kids somehow? That would be terrible! I have to walk a fine line, decide each time to come out or not depending on the impact on my kids.

In weighing the needs of the magazine versus the needs of her family, Peck prioritized her children's perceived emotional well-being and used a picture of herself alone.

Strategies

Polyamorous parents identify a variety of strategies for dealing with these disadvantages. Mirroring the difficulties, these strategies focus on buffering the negative impacts of emotional danger and stigma.

Emotional Protection

To counter the potential for their children to be hurt when partners leave, many parents use extreme caution when introducing partners to their children. Once they have been introduced, respondents often encourage long-term partners to establish independent relationships with the children, relationships that sometimes outlast the sexual connection among the adults. Emmanuella requires her partners to establish a life-long commitment to her children prior to being considered part of the family unit:

I bring people into my life and there's a point at which I allow them the honor of being part of my family and I have great expectations from that and I expect the expectations of my children not to be dashed within that. So people are not allowed to come and go . . . I tell people if you get close to my kid, stay close to my kid. If you make a promise to my kid, it'd better be forever. So I'm very cautious about telling my children who is family and who is not. This person is mama's boyfriend and this person is family. So they know who they can trust . . . It's been going on for over a decade and it's working for all of them.

Emmanuella's caution and high expectations appear to be effective in retaining affective ties among her extended chosen family.

Respondents also cast teaching their children how to deal with the end of relationships as a valuable component of emotional protection. Rather than futile attempts avoid loved ones' departure, these parents endeavor to protect their children's emotional well-being by teaching them how to deal with loss as an inevitable feature of life. In discussing the impact of her divorce on her children, Peck comments that:

It happens in everyone's life. The kids are learning that people come and go, but they're okay. And that it does not have to be this big thing . . . there's sadness but there's also joy when people come in or come back and that it can fluctuate, when people leave it does not mean forever.

Parents fear that attempting to insulate children from the inevitable loss of relationship that routinely accompanies life would actually be a dis-service. Helping children develop the skills to manage loss or transition in many types of relationships, these parents hope, will provide more effective protection.

Stigma Management

Stigma threatens poly families from a variety of sources, among them: adults' and children's peers; legal, medical, and educational institutions; and the parents of the children's friends. Respondent's strategies for stigma management include extreme discretion when coming out and allowing children to guide their own social lives. Here I focus on honesty, their primary strategy.

Liam, a white 32-year-old computer contractor with an infant and a toddler, explains his emphasis on honesty: 'Hiding our life would teach our kids that even close people are not what they seem, or that feeling shame for being who you are is appropriate somehow.' By demonstrating self-acceptance and trustworthiness, Liam hopes to undermine the stigma associated with polyamory and provide his children positive alternatives to negative self-concept they might develop in reaction to conventional social expectations.

Honesty also serves to reinforce the highly-prized emotional intimacy between parents and children, an intimacy that parents intend to buffer the negative impacts of stigma. Parents reason that, if they are consistently truthful, the children will trust them. Jonathan, a white father of three daughters in his mid-40s, believes that:

If I want them to deal in a forthright way with me, and everyone else in their lives, then I have got to demonstrate integrity by telling them the truth. It is an important thing, as a father, to be able to talk to them as much as they will talk to me. To let them be as much of who they are and love them for it, and show them who I am too.

Candid self-revelation serves here as the marker of integrity, and the key to emotionally intimate relationships in which everyone is allowed to be (ideally) 'as much of who they are' as possible. Rebuffing stigma, these parents offer their children an alternative view, based on a loving, authentic family with integrity. Families thus become havens of acceptance and sources

of support, providing members with intimacy and positive role-models to combat the deleterious effects of stigma.

CONCLUSION

These data indicate three primary conclusions. First, respondents' parenting styles reflect the norms and values of larger mainstream poly communities. People accustomed to building trust and intimacies through candid communication with partners retain that pattern in parenting as well. Like poly community members who identify the ability for partners to meet a wide variety of needs, parents in this study assert that poly family relationships allow both children and adults to have a wide variety of needs met.

Second, polyamorous parents sometimes emphasize positive aspects of the lifestyle for their children, downplaying negative aspects. Fearing condemnation from others who disdain their unconventional families, respondents take care to detail the ways in which their families match or exceed the emotional health, resources, and support provided by (ostensibly) monogamous families. These findings echo those of Pallotta-Chiarolli (Chapter 18, this volume), who documents the propensity for members of poly families to engage in 'panopticonic self-monitoring' in their attempts to present themselves as excruciatingly perfect, thus deflecting critiques based in a perceived dysfunction.

Finally, one of the outcomes of this type of parenting is that these parents perceive themselves as providing positive role models of how to maintain all relationships—not simply romantic, sexual, or non-monogamous relationships—in an honest, forthright, and caring manner. This idea runs counter to the warnings of those who cast unconventional families, and especially those of sexual minorities, as a threat to the stability of society (Kurtz, 2003).

Ultimately, both the sexual minorities and those who oppose them share a common goal: they wish for children to succeed and become strong, healthy, functional adults. It is the effects on the children that will reveal how poly families actually fare, and I hope to provide those results over time.