

The privilege of perversities: race, class and education among polyamorists and kinksters

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This article focuses on kinksters – people involved in ‘kinky’ or ‘perverted’ sexual acts and relationships frequently involving bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and/or sadism/masochism (also referred to as sadomasochism), and polyamorists – people who engage in openly conducted, multiple partner, romantic and/or sexual relationships. Being accused of being a pervert can have detrimental consequences, and although everyone involved in ‘perverted’ sex risks social censure, people unprotected by social advantages are more vulnerable to the discriminatory impacts of this sexual stigma than are those shielded by racial and/or class privileges. Our objectives in this article are multi-fold, and we document the affiliation between polyamory and bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and/or sadism/masochism; demonstrate through a meta-analysis of extant literature the ways in which research on alternative sexual communities has often (unwittingly) reinforced and (re)constituted a homogeneous image of these non-conformist subcultures; support and augment this analysis with our own empirical data; and provide recommendations to improve research methods. By highlighting the race and class privileges that operate throughout these processes, we aim to foster dialogue about the ways in which we as sexuality researchers can mitigate this privilege and its potential impact on our collective research. In so doing, we first explain polyamorous and kinky people and their relationships and review relevant literatures. Second, we detail the aggregated results of 36 studies of polys and kinksters and discuss the factors that shape these two communities. These factors operate at the social and methodological levels, yielding samples that are overwhelmingly white, with relatively high socio-economic status. Third, we examine the ways in which researchers build samples and collect data, and suggest strategies to increase sample diversity. We conclude with an examination of the implications of these findings for the varied sexual and relational identities that comprise kinky and poly subcultures.

Keywords: polyamory; kink; demographic; race; class; sexuality

Introduction

Queer (Seidman, 1996; Warner, 1999). Faggot (Savage, 2005). Dyke (Jay, 1995). Cunt (Muscio & Dodson, 2002). Slut (Easton & Liszt, 1997). Whore (Sprinkle, 1998). Academicians, popular press writers and communities of sexual non-conformists have been redefining labels that once held the power to strike fear in the hearts of sexual minorities and women interested in sex (who may not be a numerical minority but are perceived

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as a social minority), transforming them into positive terms that embrace identities that celebrate distinct sexual subcultures (Meeks, 2001). Though not as far into its own rehabilitation, some people embrace the term *pervert* and are shifting it from an insult to a celebrated identity. Perverts are (among other things) people who exist outside the sexual norms of conventional society and as such could encompass all of the identities listed above.

This article focuses on *kinksters* – people involved in ‘kinky’ or ‘perverted’ sexual acts and relationships frequently involving bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and/or sadism/masochism (BDSM, also referred to as sadomasochism), and *polyamorists* – people who engage in openly conducted, multiple partner, romantic and/or sexual relationships. Popular usage among polyamorists and kinksters indicates that people who identify themselves as kinky are more likely to accept and celebrate the pervert moniker, and polyamorists who do not identify themselves as kinky appear less likely to think of themselves as perverts. Conventional society, however, generally classifies as perverts people who have multiple and concurrent romantic and/or sexual relationships, engage in group sex and/or openly espouse non-monogamy. Polyamorists are thus defined as perverts by the popular imagination, even if they themselves do not identify as such.¹

Being accused of being a pervert can have detrimental consequences such as alienation from family and friends (Barker, 2005a; Califia, 2000), harassment (Wright, 2006), loss of a job or custody of a child (Dalton, 2001; Hequembourg, 2007; Klein & Moser, 2006), physical attack (Keres, 1994), public excoriation and incarceration (Attias, 2004; White, 2006). Although everyone involved in ‘perverted’ sex risks social censure, people unprotected by social advantages are more vulnerable to the discriminatory impacts of this sexual stigma than are those shielded by racial and/or class privileges. This insulation provides greater social latitude to engage in and redefine sexual or relational ‘deviance’ than that available to those burdened by racism, poverty, inadequate education, limited job prospects and other forms of discrimination (Collins, 1996, 2005; Sanday, 2007; Steinbugler, 2005). Given the difficulty of simply surviving, members of disadvantaged populations might well be reluctant to invest scarce resources in relational forms that can threaten conventional family structures and have the potential to increase surveillance from authorities, be they mothers-in-law, employers or child protective services.

Scholars are increasingly emphasising the intersections of sexuality with other elements of social stratification (Collins, 1996, 2005; Schippers, 2000; Sharma & Nath, 2005). Disability, (trans)gender, sexual orientation, age – these elements and more – influence the ways in which people choose to, or are able to, express their sexual selves. In this article, we focus on race, education and class for three reasons. First, as white, middle-class sexuality researchers, we have attempted to address the implications of the overwhelmingly white populations who participated in our research. Second, race, education and class stand out as important constants in the field, indicating their significance for analysis. Finally, researchers have identified demographic characteristics, and especially race, as important factors impacting sexuality and specifically salient to research on polyamory and BDSM (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Langdridge & Barker, 2007). For instance, Willey (2006) and Noël (2006) examined poly discourse and highlighted the ways in which whiteness and class privilege are central to polyamory and those claims that seek to ‘naturalise’ the practice of polyamory. As Willey noted, many feminist poly activists justify polyamory on the grounds that monogamy is unnatural and patriarchal because it works to quell our uncontainable sexual ‘drives’ while being deeply implicated in female subjugation. Yet, this same ‘liberationist’ rhetoric has historically been used to marginalise

and stigmatise the poor and the people of colour for *their* 'uncontrollable' urges and *their* inability to conform to the monogamous, nuclear family (white) ideal. Noel and Willey also found troubling the depoliticising and atomising strain within poly discourse that typically focuses on individual experience and agency over and against institutional and coalitional challenges to the status quo, thus leaving unaddressed the intersections between poly practice and race, dis/ability, class and so on. Noël's (2006, p. 604) content analysis of 12 key texts on polyamory illuminated how polyamorists 'offer a short-sighted, isolationist alternative that serves to further solidify privileges for a few rather than realize an improved reality for many'. It is the manner in which these intersecting identities inform research and shape the interpretations of findings that we are most interested in exploring in this article.

At the same time that researchers are acknowledging the importance of race and class when it comes to understanding sexuality and desire, race remains an (un)marked and notable absence within the literature in terms of both researchers who are conducting intersectional analyses of sexuality studies and the continued overall omission of race from the literature. For their anthology, *Safe, sane and consensual*, Langdridge and Barker (2007, p. 6) attempted to solicit submissions with an intersectional lens that addressed the imbrications of race/ethnicity vis-à-vis the BDSM community, with an understanding that 'without the writers with the necessary knowledge [i.e. race and the racial politics within sexual minority communities] we will continue to fail to address these important issues here and elsewhere'. Despite this attempt, no such submissions – save one, whose author was unable to submit the final chapter – actually appear in the volume. Another collection edited by Moser and Kleinplatz (2006b), *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*, composed of 16 essays on the BDSM subculture, but nowhere does race register in this collection, and the word 'race' does not even appear in the index.

This topic is influenced by our own experiences and social locations as (white, female) researchers of sexual minority communities. It is our strong belief that in studying only those who are most accessible and visible within poly and BDSM subcultures – those overwhelmingly white and middle class – we fail as researchers to understand alternative mappings of non-monogamous desire and BDSM practices. In other words, we fail to capture how even non-normative and sexually subversive communities depend on their own operations of white privilege and white ways of being. For instance, how might working-class individuals and/or people of colour 'do' polyamory or BDSM differently? Our objectives here are multi-fold, and we document the affiliation between polyamory and BDSM; demonstrate through a meta-analysis of extant literature the ways in which research on alternative sexual communities has often (unwittingly) reinforced and (re)constituted a homogenous image of these non-conformist subcultures; support and augment this analysis with our own empirical data; and provide recommendations to improve research methods. By highlighting the race and class privileges that operate throughout these processes, we aim to foster dialogue about the ways in which we as sexuality researchers can mitigate this privilege and its potential impact on our collective research. In so doing, we first explain polyamorous and kinky people and their relationships and review relevant literatures. Second, we detail the aggregated results of 36 studies of polys and kinksters and discuss the factors that shape these two communities. These factors operate at the social and methodological levels, yielding samples that are overwhelmingly white, with relatively high socio-economic status. Third, we examine the ways in which researchers build samples and collect data, and suggest strategies to increase sample diversity. We conclude with

an examination of the implications of these findings for the varied sexual and relational identities that comprise kinky and poly subcultures.

Community characteristics

Although polyamorous and kinky identities are distinct, the populations practicing them share such a variety of traits and considerable overlap in membership that they warrant joint analysis (Bauer, 2010). In this section, we detail some characteristics of the polyamorous and kinky subcultures we have researched and identify their similarities and differences.

Neither academicians nor community members have achieved consensus on precise definitions of kinkiness or polyamory. In line with other researchers (Barker, 2005a, 2005b; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Weitzman, 2006, 2007), we define polyamory as a form of association in which people openly maintain multiple romantic, sexual and/or effective relationships. Polyamorists use the term *poly* as a noun (a person who is poly engages in polyamorous relationships), an adjective (to describe something that has polyamorous qualities) and an umbrella term that includes polyfidelity or relationships based in sexual and emotional fidelity among a group larger than a dyad.

With its emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships, polyamory differs from the form of swinging based on emotional exclusivity with one partner and sexual non-monogamy with multiple partners. Polyamory is also not adultery: the poly focuses on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure differs markedly from the attempted secrecy definitional to adultery. Both men and women have access to multiple partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from those that are polygynous or polyandrous. Polyamorists routinely debate the definition of the term, the groups it includes and who is qualified to claim it as an identity.

Kinky people, relationships and communities share many characteristics with polyamorists, with a myriad of potential additional dimensions that can make kink even more complex. Kinksters are people who identify as kinky, frequently including (but not limited to) those who participate in BDSM; have multiple sexual and/or play partners; engage in role play and/or costuming as part of their sexual behaviour; have fetishes; blend gender characteristics; and/or modify their bodies in conjunction with or to augment their sexual practices. BDSM, the primary umbrella under which many of these identities are encompassed, stands for bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; and sadism and masochism, or sadomasochism. BDSM is the practice of consensual exchanges of personal power including (but not limited to) scripted 'scenes' involving some combination of corporal or psychic 'punishment', intense physical stimulation (often pain), role playing and/or fantasy and/or varied sexual interactions (Langdridge & Barker, 2007; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006a; Weinberg & Kamel, 1995). Among kinksters, definitions of who qualifies as a sexual partner and what counts as a sex act encompass far greater variety than those considered sex acts or partners among 'vanilla' (non-kinky) people. Typically, BDSM and poly communities cohere around a specific gender and sexual orientation. For instance, most public play parties are geared specifically towards gay men, lesbians or bisexual/heterosexual people. This is in part due to the origins of the BDSM subculture in the United States, which began as a gay male phenomena that later diverged to include lesbian, heterosexual and bi/pansexual communities (Ridinger, 2002). These various groups tend to self-segregate by sexual orientation and gender, although the growth of virtual and physical kink community has encouraged some amalgamation as well.

Poly and kinky research respondents emphasise negotiation, honesty, consent and personal growth as important components of successful relationships (Sheff, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2010; Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Weitzman, 2006, 2007). Similarly, many of them maintain multiple relationships with varied levels of emotional and sexual intimacy. Kinkiness appears to be a broader base for an identity than polyamory, encompassing a greater range of relationships and types of practices/identities. Many kinky people have multiple partner relationships but do not necessarily primarily identify as polyamorous – the number of people involved in their relationships is but one component among many aspects of kink identity, sexuality and relationships. For some, mostly non-kink poly people, the multiplicity of the relationships determines their status as poly. Those polys who engage in kinky sexual activities are more likely to view sexuality more broadly and numerosity as one, not necessarily the defining, element of their sexual identities. Additionally and more importantly, for the purposes of this article, the poly and kinky populations who have participated in research primarily comprise white, well-educated, middle-class professionals.

Literature review

Thus far, academic investigation of kink subcultures has focused primarily on sadomasochism, a term that has enlarged to encompass the elements of the broader BDSM category. For many years, sexologists (Ellis, 1903/1926; Krafft-Ebing, 1898/1965) and psychiatrists (Freud, 1938) pathologised sadomasochism as unhealthy, psychopathic or perverted, though later scholars have contested these classifications (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2005; Moser, 2002). Feminists have discussed sadomasochism (Chancer, 2000; Hoople, 1996), with some celebrating it as an avenue to women's sexual empowerment (Califia, 1979, 1981; Rubin, 1982, 1984; SAMOIS, 1982) and others linking it with misogyny, violence against women (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997) and self-mutilation (Jeffreys, 2003).

The burgeoning academic research on polyamory includes a gendered focus on women (Sheff, 2005b; Barker & Ritchie, 2007) and men (Sheff, 2006; Klesse, 2007), as well as a variety of relationship topics such as safer sex practices among poly lesbians (Munson, 1999), bisexuality and cheating (Mint & Robbins, 2004), therapy (Weitzman, 2006) and issues facing bisexual polyamorous relationships (Rust, 2003). Another section of poly research focuses on families and their interactions with schools (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006, 2010a, 2010b), foster care (Riggs, 2010), family systems theory (Bettinger, 2005) and parenting strategies (Sheff, 2010). Three volumes, a special issue of the journal *Sexualities* (2006), a special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (1999) and a book edited by Barke and Langdrige (2010) *Understanding non-monogamies*, focus explicitly on polyamory. We discuss the demographic data of applicable studies in greater detail later in this article.

Methods

The data for this article come from three sources: our own original research; others' studies of kinksters and polyamorists; and communication with other researchers online. In this section, we discuss our data sources, detail our methods and explain the limitations of this meta-analysis.

Original research

Sheff's longitudinal study of polyamorists has thus far produced two waves of data collected through participant observation, content analysis, Internet research and in-depth interviews. The first portion of the study (*Gender, family, and sexuality: Exploring polyamorous communities* 1996–2003) provided the base of 40 in-depth interviews with adults who identified as poly, and extensive participant observation data collected at a wide variety of poly events including co-ed and women's support groups, potlucks, community meetings and two national conferences. The second wave of data collection (*Polyamorous families study* 2007–present) focuses on polyamorous families with children and includes 15 previous respondents² and has expanded the sample to incorporate an additional 41 people, for a current total sample of 81 across both studies. Race is the most homogeneous demographic characteristic, with 89% of the sample identifying as white. Socio-economic status is high among these respondents, with 74% in professional jobs. Fully 88% report some college education, with 67% attaining bachelor's degrees and 21% completing graduate degrees.

Sheff also conducted a study of intersecting sexual identities (*Overlapping identities study* 2005) examining the overlap between polyamorists, swingers, people with fetishes and those who practice BDSM. Of the 64 respondents (31 men, 27 women and 6 others),³ 31 were involved in BDSM, 19 in polyamory and 6 in swinging. The majority of respondents (58 or 90%) identified as white, with two African Americans, one Filipina, two people of multiracial heritage and one who identified himself simply as 'other' also participating. Respondents were also highly educated, with all but three respondents (95%) having completed or currently enrolled in an undergraduate degree, and 48 (75%) of them completing at least some graduate school. All of the 26 respondents who reported fetishes were also involved in BDSM, and the two groups are so intricately involved that distinguishing between them did not provide any useful analysis. Swingers, however, stood out as socially distinct – if racially, economically and educationally similar to the other respondents. They neither identified themselves strongly with the other groups, nor were they identified as integral to a joint identity the way polys and kinksters identified each other. Although there are certainly intersections between polys and swingers (and to a lesser extent kinksters and swingers), these focus groups indicated a much stronger affiliation between polyamorists and kinksters than between either group and swingers.

In her ethnographic research on Canadian lesbian/queer bathhouses (*Bathhouse culture study* 2004), Hammers also found a largely white and well-educated population. Approximately 80% of the 33 interview respondents identified as white, with over half attaining either undergraduate or graduate degrees. Although highly educated, most of these women were only marginally middle class (Hammers, 2008). Hammers' current project, which explores the US lesbian/queer BDSM community (2007 to present), has found this population, like the bathhouse subculture, to be a relatively homogenous one. As with the bathhouse study, data for this BDSM project come from in-depth interviews with lesbian/queer BDSM practitioners/attendees and participant observation data derived from attendance at a variety of public lesbian/queer/women-only BDSM events in the United States. A total of 40 in-depth interviews with BDSM practitioners and self-identified kinksters have been conducted thus far. Of these, 36 individuals identify as white. Approximately 76% reported some university education, with 70% having attained a bachelor's degree.

Thus, a major interweaving theme that binds our studies and informs our views on race in the research setting, and the inadequate attention paid to race when it comes to alternative

sexual subcultures, comes through at this juncture. We find that these alternative sex publics – which encompass such things as community meetings, national conferences, bathhouse events and public BDSM play parties – are predominantly white. It is this whiteness, we believe, that sexuality scholars must address.

Others' studies of kinksters and polyamorists

To find pertinent studies, we searched in Google Scholar, as well as Sociological Abstracts and Sociological Collection in the Galileo search engine, using the search terms *BDSM*, *sadomasochism*, *kink*, *SM* and *polyamor*. To be eligible for inclusion, studies had to focus on polyamory and/or kinkiness and contain at least some demographic data relevant to the target populations. Both the communities involved in and the literature on kink and BDSM share a core identity built on sadomasochism, so we include them in a single category. Polyamory is one form of non-monogamy, but other forms of non-monogamy (polygyny, infidelity) are so diverse as to lack a similar common foundation. The intersection between swinging and polyamory is complex, ambiguous and common enough to gain its own moniker of 'swolly'⁴ and clearly warrants further investigation, although space constraints prohibit its inclusion in this analysis.

Communication with researchers online

Once we had amassed a list of polyamory and kink studies, we posted our bibliography to PolyResearchers, an online discussion group composed of academicians, journalists, researchers and clinicians dedicated to the discussion of research on polyamory.⁵ We asked the membership to review the list to inform us if we had missed any studies. No members were able to identify any missing studies.

The PolyResearchers' list similarly granted us access to many of the researchers whose work we reviewed, allowing us to attain additional data that were not included in the published pieces. If a published piece did not include demographic data but did include an email address for correspondence, we would contact the investigator(s) and request the additional data. All 12 of the researchers we contacted for more information regarding their studies responded to us with the requested data.

Limitations of this study

As with all secondary data analyses, our investigation is limited by the data we were able to locate. We rejected articles that did not pertain to kinkiness or polyamory or did not include demographic information. Although this analysis is limited to the degree that we were unable to locate every single article relevant to our topics, the large number of articles reviewed (203) and then selected (36) or rejected (167) minimises this limitation. The more important limitation is the possibility that the studies we were unable to locate may share common characteristics that are missing from the identified studies. The scholars with whom we had the most contact are those who are already publishing in this field, potentially missing scholars who are not publishing in social science journals or engaging in online discussion with the US/European/Australian contingent whose work is already represented in these data. The studies vary in sample size and method, so the data they produce are not necessarily equivalent. Definitions of polyamory and kink (when offered) vary tremendously. There are more studies of kinksters than of polyamorists, and both the identity category of sadomasochist/kinkster and the study of that subculture predate

academic focus on or public identification with polyamory. There is less information on perceived class than on race and education. The samples of people of colour from our own research are too small to provide a more detailed exploration of their experiences in poly and kink communities.

Results of studies of kinksters and polyamorists

The composite results from these 36 studies (20 of kinksters, 14 of polys and 2 of both) indicate a largely homogeneous universe populated with highly educated, white, middle- and upper-middle-class professionals, confirming numerous researchers' conclusions (Sheff, 2005a, 2005b; Sandnabba, Santtila, Alison, & Nordling, 2002; Spengler, 1977). These studies employed a variety of methods: six used surveys or e-interviews conducted entirely online; four 'offline' studies reported relying heavily on the Internet to recruit their samples and for some supplementary data collection; 12 used interviews; one combined interviews and a questionnaire; and 14 used questionnaires distributed in person or through magazines, at organisation/club meetings or at events. Twenty-one of the studies were conducted in the United States, five in Western Europe, two in Australia and one in China. There are three unpublished masters' theses and four unpublished dissertations. Sample sizes range from a low of six (Matthews, 2006; Mosher, Levitt, & Manley, 2006) to a high of 6997 (Brame, 2000) and span over time from Spengler's trailblazing 1977 study of male sadomasochists in Western Germany to Barker and Langdridge's (2010) volume that includes original research on polyamory. The per cent of people of colour in the sample varies from a low of zero in four studies (Barker & Ritchie, 2007; Cook, 2005; Matthews, 2006; Mosher et al., 2006) to a high of 48 in Tomassilli, Golub, Bimbi, and Parsons's (2009) study of lesbians and bisexual women in New York City (Tables 1 and 2).

Unique cases

Some studies contribute to multiple areas or provide qualitative data unsuitable for tables. Taormino's (2008) study of 126 people in 'open relationships' includes data on polys and kinksters, with 62% identifying as polyamorous or polyfidelitous and 51% identifying as kinky. Of the entire sample of 126 people, 82% identified as white and 77% as middle class or above. As previously discussed, Sheff's *Overlapping identities study* of polyamorists, swingers, kinksters and those with fetishes yielded similar results.

In the sole randomly selected sample of which we are aware, Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, and Smith (2008) surveyed a representative sample of 19,307 residents of Australia aged 16–59 years old and found that 1.8% of the sexually active respondents (2.2% of men and 1.3% of women) reported being involved in BDSM in the last year. Results also indicate that people involved in BDSM are more likely to have been 'non-exclusive in a regular relationship (i.e. had sex with someone else besides their regular partner)' (Richters et al., 2008, p. 1663) in the last 12 months than are people with no involvement in BDSM, confirming the association between non-monogamy and BDSM. The study measured ethnicity through country of birth and language spoken at home, and only 1.3% of respondents spoke anything but English in their homes. Although respondents who engaged in BDSM also had higher levels of education, Richters (personal communication, 2009) cautioned that:

Table 1. Studies of polyamorists.

Author(s) and location of study	Sample size	% Respondents of colour	% College	% Graduate school	% Middle class or higher
Barker (2005b), online ^a	30	6 ^b	c	c	c
Barker and Ritchie (2007), England ^a	8	0	c	c	87
Cook (2005) ^a	14	0	c	c	100
Ho (2006), Hong Kong	8	0 or 100, all ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong	50 college or above	10 PhD	'May be considered middle-class, but [that is] . . . complex' pp. 550-40
Keener (2004)	10	30	50 some college, 20 bachelors degree	10	c
Kirsten (1996)	142	15	96 some college	47 some graduate school	c
Klesse (2007), England	44	'Vast majority' White	c	c	'Vast majority' pg. 156
Ley (2006), online	102	c	74 some college, 27 Bachelors	31	71-83 ^d
Loving More Survey 2001 - Pallotta-Chiarolli (2006) and Weber (2002)	1010	2	25 some college, 70 completed at least undergrad	c	At least 75
Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a, 2010b) ^b , Australia	36	12	c	c	Over 90
Walston (2001)	430	16	64	22	c
Weitzman (2006, 2007) online	2169	14	c	c	c
Wolf (2003) ^a	229	6	27	40	c
Sheff (2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2010)	81 interview, 500 participant observation	10	67	21	97

Notes: Unless otherwise noted, the studies were conducted in the United States.

^a Researchers provided the authors with data not included in their original publications.

^b Respondents were asked to provide whatever information they deemed germane, and one identified as Chinese and British in one case and British of Indian parents in another.

^c Other respondents may have also been persons of colour, but none so self-identified.

^d These data were not collected or not available.

^e Conservative lower range based on income less than \$26,000 and upper range based on income, occupation, gender, age, number of children and education.

Table 2. Studies of kinksters.

Author(s) and location of study	Sample size	% Respondents of colour	% College	% Graduate school	% Middle class or higher
Bauer (2008), Western Europe and the United States ^a	54	3	50	b	64
Brame (2000), online ^a	6997	b	73 some college completed	20 completed	84
Breslow, Evans, and Langley (1985)	182	b	30 (male) and 35 (female) some college, 31 (male) and 20 (female) completed	22 (male) and 8 (female)	b
Connolly (2006)	132	7	58	17	67
Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser (2006)	146	6	b	b	b
Levitt, Moser, and Jamison (1994)	34 non-prostitute women	b	47 some college, 41 at least undergraduate degree	b	b
Matthews (2006)	6 women (queer/dyke/Lesbian)	0	33	66	100
Moser and Levitt (1987)	225	5	70 some college completed	b	b
Moser et al. (1993)	362	b	60	25	Majority 'affluent' pp. 59
Mosher et al. (2006)	6	0	b	b	b
Newmahr (2006, 2008) ^a	18	'relatively few but representative of the scene'	b	b	b
Sandhabba et al. (1999) Finland ^a	164 men	b	58	b	Majority had 'comparatively high' incomes'
Sandhabba et al. (2002) Finland ^a	184	b	'Highly educated (over a third had a university degree)' pg. 42	b	'Higher income level than the population in general' pp. 42

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Author(s) and location of study	Sample size	% Respondents of colour	% College	% Graduate school	% Middle class or higher
Sisson and Moser (2005)	31 women professional dominatrices 245 men	26	96 some college, 35 completed	7	b
Spengler (1977), West Germany		b	15 some college, 25 completed	b	54
Tomassilli et al. (2009) ^a	347 lesbians and bisexual women	48	63 at least an undergraduate or graduate degree	b	b
Weinberg et al. (1995)	262	11	69 at least an undergraduate or graduate degree	b	81
Yost (2006), online	212	11	30 some college, 22 completed	23	68
Hammers (2010)	40	10	6 some college, 70 completed	12	60

Notes: Unless otherwise noted, the studies were conducted in the United States.

^aResearchers provided the authors with data not included in their original publications.

^bThese data were not collected or not available.

My impression is that we cannot be certain whether the apparent high education levels and social class of BDSM people as anecdotally reported is an artefact of self-selection for study. It may be real, which would not be surprising given that BDSM is often highly verbal and symbolic. Nonetheless, our analysis clearly showed that demographic and psychological variables were swamped by the strong differences in sexual interest and breadth of experience/repertoire.

Although this most representative sample finds virtually the same racial, ethnic, class and educational characteristics of the other studies with less-randomly selected samples, the authors note that these select demographic characteristics are overshadowed by the sample's sexual characteristics.

Reasons for these results

Although it is quite unlikely that these samples are representative of the actual range of kink and poly people, they are certainly representative of the range of people involved in mainstream poly and kink communities. In addition to the possible selection effects that we discuss later in this article, there are several potential explanations for this consistency. As mentioned earlier, one plausible rationale is that poly and kinky people hold the same kind of racist views as do others of their social ilk. Living in the United States, Australia and/or Western Europe would make it virtually impossible for polys and kinksters to escape the pervasive racism and classism endemic in those societies and the accompanying white privilege (or lack thereof) that inflects their lives. In our experiences, poly and kink communities tend to eschew open racism and often support such liberal ideals as equality and celebration of diversity. White privilege, however, generally remains as invisible in these groups as is in more conventional society, thus becoming the dominant racial paradigm. In his study of 'dyke + BDSM spaces', Bauer (2008, p. 247) asserted that, rather than active racism, white privilege constructs a social environment in which:

Gender and sexuality (and to a lesser extent age and class) are highly visible and consciously negotiated . . . while racialization of the white majority remains invisible and unexplored and functions as a nontransgressable . . . cultural taboo when it comes to interracial imaginary.

Although not generally ostensibly racist, these poly and kinky respondents live in worlds shaped by white privilege and its effects on their interactions, community networks and relational experiences. Thus, this privilege will in turn have an impact on the racial composition of public sexual spaces – in Bauer's case, BDSM public play parties.

Internet recruitment

Because the Internet serves as a primary tool for sexuality researchers to both engage and recruit target populations (Waskul, 2004), it is no surprise that numerous respondents in these kink and poly studies identify the Internet as a crucial element of their access to sexual non-conformist communities (Sheff, 2005a; Weber, 2002; Weitzman, 2006). The web has profoundly reshaped sexual minorities' communities, identities, networks and communications, and nine of the researchers cited in this article avail themselves of this expanded opportunity by examining poly and kink populations that would have previously been extremely difficult to find, or may in fact not exist, without the Internet. Although it is reasonable to recognise the Internet as an important site of community evolution, it is

not sensible to rely so heavily on a single resource that will definitionally provide a limited sample.

Although the Internet has expanded sexual opportunity (for some) and created a virtual world wherein sexual minorities can find affirmation and community (Weinrich, 1997), this technological tool also reproduces (and possibly strengthens) pre-existing inequalities. Initial research indicated that the majority of Internet users were male, overwhelmingly white, middle class and well educated (Warf & Grimes, 1997), with an average income that was twice that of the national average (Kantor & Neubarth, 1996). Current research identifies lingering disparities in computer ownership (Ono & Zavodny, 2003) and use (Chakraborty & Bosman, 2005), which continue to disadvantage people of colour (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). Internet use and its impacts are complex, however, and measuring access alone is insufficient – researchers must also account for a variety of factors that shape the ways in which people use the Internet (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner, & Schmitt, 2001; Roderick, 2008). Thus, depending on one's race and class location, the Internet can both enhance and hinder sexual opportunity and sense of belonging for members of unconventional sexual cultures, often reproducing predominately white and relatively affluent alternative sexual communities.

Protections afforded by privileges

Although they do not completely insulate people from the risks associated with deviance, race and class privileges can provide buffers to mitigate the myriad potential negative outcomes related to sexual and relational non-conformity. Like other sexual minorities, kinky and poly people have lost jobs, child custody and families' and friends' esteem. Indeed, Pallotta-Chiarolli (2006, p. 51) found that two indigenous Australian children in her study of poly families

... kept to themselves in order to discourage any intimacy with other children that could lead to discovery and a further reason to harass them, as they were already experiencing ongoing racist harassment. They had also been warned by their parents not to let white teachers know or else they'd be taken away from their family, a theme that was all too real for this family whose own childhoods had been mostly spent in mission homes after being removed from their families as part of Australia's racist and assimilationist policies.

Their family's experiences with racism sensitised them to the need to remain concealed to avoid further racialised persecution.

As groups comprised mainly white people with relatively high socio-economic statuses, mainstream polyamorists' and kinksters' privileges can buffer them from some of the negative impacts people risk when they eschew conventionally sanctioned roles. Respondents' levels of education and occupations indicate that they are generally skilled professionals with careers endowed with greater job security than low-skill, low-paying jobs, where employees are far more easily replaced and often subject to greater surveillance and less autonomy. Courts have repeatedly demonstrated their endorsement of conventional heterosexual families over those with sexual and/or gender non-conforming members (Klein & Moser, 2006; Polikoff, 1993). The intersections of these varied privileges bestow middle-class people with greater freedom to engage in behaviours and relationships that risk social approbation. Coupled with a relative lack of public awareness of polyamory and kinky relationships, these privileges allow some to pass as sexually or relationally conventional when they wish to do so, thus avoiding the consequences that can accompany detection.

People in disadvantaged positions are often subject to levels of surveillance that make non-conformity riskier than it would be for others with greater resources. 'Perversity' then becomes another luxury more readily available to those who are already members of dominant groups.

Deterrents to participation

There are a number of factors that can combine to dissuade people of colour and those of lower socio-economic status from participating in mainstream poly and kink communities. These include expense, discomfort with being a numerical minority, the potential for discrimination, communities of colours' negative assessments of sexual minorities and issues of identity.

Expense

Scarce funds can deter people with low incomes from participating in some kink and poly community events. Fetish wear, admission to public sex environments such as 'dungeons' and 'toys' such as floggers can be expensive, selecting-out entire categories of people with little discretionary income. This is quite problematic, because 11 of the research samples to which we refer were drawn at least in part from those attending public 'play parties' and thus reflect only a portion of the population that is readily accessible – people with internet access and the privacy to use it, who are involved in groups or organisations and/or willing and able to afford to 'play' in public. It can be difficult to be a sexual minority in general, and to be one of the very few people of colour or with low socio-economic status in a group composed primarily of educated white people with professional jobs dressed in expensive fetish wear could exacerbate barriers that inhibit the assumption of poly or kinky identities.

Tokenism, potential discrimination and community rejection of sexual minorities

In her study of polyamorists in the Western United States, Sheff's respondents of colour cited a number of barriers to participation in poly community events. Yansa, a 29-year-old kink- and poly-identified African American health-care provider, reported acute discomfort when attending a poly pool party in the San Francisco Bay Area. She observed that:

I was not sure if they wanted me there. Like I felt like maybe I had walked in on somebody else's thing and I wasn't invited . . . [there were] 75, 80 naked people in this huge pool and I walked in and everybody just turned and looked . . . and I realized I am the only Black person here. I was the only person in a swimming suit so that could have been another issue, too, like maybe she's lost her way, what is she doing here?

Yansa's discomfort at being the sole Black person at the party was compounded by her unawareness of the community (un)dress code. Although the setting was 'clothing optional' in that people were neither compelled to nor barred from wearing clothing, the norm was universal nudity while in the swimming pool and various stages of undress to full clothing on the pool deck.

Though Yansa's initial discomfort eased as she socialised at that and other parties, she remained uneasy about the increased potential risks she faced for sexual non-conformity. She reported already feeling vulnerable at work because of her race and fearing that being a known polyamorist would mean termination. She described her employers as

... executives who went to Wharton and Harvard and were Republicans and assholes ... very, very closed minded. And I got the impression that they were already not comfortable with me being a person of color. To throw in the other stuff that I did may confirm their stereotypes about Black people or they may have just thought she's the weirdest shit on the planet, I don't trust her ... We don't want her on this job anymore, someone may find her out.

Yansa noted several reasons other African Americans had discussed with her for their lack of desire to attend poly or kink community events or identify as polyamorous or kinky. 'I've heard from Black folk that they think it's a nasty white person thing to do. And they throw out the whole scenario of slavery you know they raped us and they took our women and impregnated them ... that any respectable educated cultured Black person in their right mind wouldn't even think about doing something so disgusting'. She similarly reported that:

I've had Black people in the community tell me that they don't want to feel like the token Black ... the novelty like the fat girl or the Asian girl. I don't want to feel like people are attracted to me and wanting to play with me or date me because they're trying to figure out something. Like I'm some Anthropological experiment or something.

It was not only their fear of objectification and denunciation of past abuses and negative stereotypes that deterred Yansa's compatriots of colour from joining the local poly community, but their active rejection of poly or kinky subcultures as white, foreign and potentially corrupt.

Victor, a poly-identified 36-year-old African American therapist, artist and college instructor, was more optimistic. He noted that the poly community in which he socialised was 'monochromatic', though he was not sure if that was because of 'issues of either privilege or even cultural interest'. The whiteness of the setting did not bother him, in part because he had grown up in mostly white neighbourhoods and was thus 'acclimated' to white people, and in part because he felt that, 'People who are interested in really relating with people and good whole truth telling are going to tend to be less racist ... I've actually felt a lot of acceptance'. Victor pointed out that his socio-economic status gave him access to a lifestyle that others did not have the freedom to enjoy. 'It's sort of privilege related ... if you're not worrying about certain things, then you have the privilege or the space to explore alternatives. ... the freedom to explore polyamory sort of comes from a freedom either financially or just psychologically not having to [struggle to] survive in other ways'. Even so, when thinking about mainstream African American communities' possible reactions to polyamory, he noted that, 'I can imagine being in a room of Black people and them going that sounds like crazy white folks, that's some crazy shit'.

Identity

People of colour, already labouring under stigma and racism, might be more reluctant to assume a potentially disadvantageous identity than white or ethnic majority people. Laksha, a 26-year-old African American graduate student and participant in Sheff's *Overlapping identities study* who identifies as bisexual, poly and 'mostly vanilla', asserts that:

I think African Americans are much less likely to go into a BDSM setting and think, ok, these are my people, this is my family, and take on that label. It is similar to feminism, in that many African American women have feminist principles and take feminist action and even

participate in what some would consider feminist activism, but do not identify with the label. White people can more readily walk into the room and identify with the people, see them as their tribe, because race does not stand out to them, so kink can become their organizing identity. But it is not that easy for African Americans, race always stands out to us in a situation like that.

The disadvantage of a stigmatised identity, coupled with the added weight of racial strain that white or ethnic majorities do not experience, as well as feelings of discomfort or lack of belonging in the setting, can contribute to people of colour's reluctance to identify with kink and poly subcultures.

That many who might appear to be poly or kinky by others' definitions do not self-identify as such has important implications for the construction of identities. Although Victor asserted that mainstream African Americans would reject an organised poly identity, he hypothesised that there were '... communities of color where there are multipartner relationships going on I don't know whether they would call it poly or not. Probably not... I think that populations tend to self select'. Undoubtedly, there are people who openly maintain non-monogamous relationships or enjoy being spanked during sex, behaviours characteristic of (respectively) poly and kinky relationships, but nonetheless do not identify with those communities.

Equally certain is the existence of people who identify as poly or kinky but do not attend meetings or join groups. Again, it could be that those who feel marginalised or different from the more 'visible' members of the poly and kink community will remain outside the very organisations that purportedly represent their ilk. It is also possible that people of colour involved in unconventional sexual practices are just as active but more clandestine and maintain their own, more exclusive, list-serves, events and private sexual venues. Precisely how these more underground sexual networks and private play parties might differ from the more visible sexual subcultures requires additional research.

Finally, the (almost all white) researchers' race could deter people of colour from participating in research on kink and polyamory. Hammers' (2008) attempts to interview women of colour who chose to participate in lesbian/queer bathhouse culture certainly testify to this issue and the power that inheres within the researcher-interviewee relationship. This power differential is particularly salient when the focus is on sex and non-normative sexual practices. Many of the women of colour Hammers approached for her bathhouse study refused to speak to her precisely because she is white. Those people of colour who chose to participate in the study often linked the lack of participation by other people of colour to the perceived potential predation and appropriation of participants' experiences by the researcher. Only a few women of colour agreed to talk to Hammers about their experiences, several of whom expressed concern about other women of colour discovering their decision to do so.

Research strategies

In this section, we review the strategies that scholars have employed thus far and make recommendations to begin to address these research issues.

Past strategies

Researchers examining kinky and poly populations have dealt with issues of class and race in a variety of ways. Measuring race and class is quite complex even in a single

society, and when the research is international it becomes very difficult to establish common meanings indeed. Ho (2006, p. 550) characterised class as difficult to quantify: 'The participants in this study came from diverse social locations, even though many of them would be considered middle-class, but what constitutes "middle-class" in Hong Kong is a complex question'. Class status does not necessarily translate directly from income in a single nation, much less internationally: some have middle-class status with little disposable income, and others have money to spend but are not considered middle class. Although education and class can be strongly correlated, some poly or kinky people are highly educated but 'underemployed' or work in comparatively low-paid fields of counselling and academia and thus have less disposable income than their level of education might suggest.

Alternately, Bauer (2008, p. 238) questioned the stereotype of:

BDSM people being overwhelmingly highly educated and of middle- to upperclass . . . [because] my sample is rather diverse in this regard. However, some interviewees put forth the idea that high-quality BDSM is only for those whom they perceive to be highly educated, 'intelligent' or 'classy' individuals, thus endorsing potentially excluding class-based criteria for membership in the community.

Bauer's (2008, p. 238) respondents report that the majority of the play parties they attend were populated primarily by white people and that 'the race thing is partly class stuff and it's partly because most of the play parties that I've been to have been organized by white people'.

Like class, measuring race presents a myriad of complexities, and researchers took a variety of approaches to this task. Of the reviewed studies, eight ignored the category of race altogether, rendering it virtually irrelevant in its invisibility (e.g. Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999, 2002). The fact that race was left unproblematised indicates that the populations were most likely white, as researchers and respondents alike would most likely have emphasised it as more highly salient had the samples included greater numbers of people of colour – a point to which we return. Others (14) collected data on race but refrained from addressing racial issues in their analysis. This lack of discussion indicates that many of these researchers were oblivious to, or actively chose to ignore, the impacts race can have on the construction of sexual identities. Still other researchers have attempted to oversample people of colour (e.g. Sheff, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; see also Connolly, 2006; Klesse, 2007, p. 157). Sheff endeavoured to recruit as many respondents of colour as possible, interviewed all three people of colour in the Midwestern poly community and travelled to the California Bay Area with the explicit intent of increasing sample diversity. Even so, she found the demographic characteristics of the numerous mainstream poly communities in the Bay Area to closely mirror the Midwestern sample.

In an online open-ended questionnaire, Barker (2005b) asked respondents to provide whatever information about themselves they viewed as pertinent, providing an interesting snapshot of the relative importance of race and class to the respondents. None of the respondents identified class as important, though three mentioned working in the Information Technology industry, four listed masters' degrees and two additional respondents referred to attending a university but did not specify their degrees. Of those who indicated their racial, ethnic or national heritage, 12 identified as European or British, three specifically as white, one as British of Indian descent and one as mixed race Chinese and British. Six of the respondents identified themselves as American (*sic*) or by a region of the United States but did not address their races directly. It is most likely that those who

identify as citizens of a nation or denizens of a region are of the dominant racial, ethnic or social group; A striking difference, minority status or distinguishing characteristic that requires a modifier – *Chinese* British, *African* American – is most likely to stand out to respondents because it will impact their daily lives in a palpable manner. Majority social members labour under no such daily experience and are thus far less likely to see their race as salient. They are simply members of British or US society, unmodified by specific status. Conversely, Barker's respondents emphasised sexuality (especially bisexuality) far more so than race, thus casting it as more germane to their social identities. Such a blasé attitude towards race signals membership in the dominant category, with the comfort evidencing privilege. Similarly, in their study of 184 Finnish sadomasochists, Sandnabba et al. (2002) did not collect data on race or ethnicity. Finland is largely homogeneous (Statistics Finland, 2009), with very little racial or ethnic diversity, so it is sensible to assume that race or ethnicity would have little to no impact on respondents' experiences of sadomasochism.

Some researchers (E. Cook, personal communication, 2007; L. Wolf, personal communication, 2008) did not collect data on race because they perceived it as unrelated to their topic of study. Others intentionally avoided collecting data on race. G. Brame (personal communication, 2007) reported that:

I did not set out or want to study what role if any race plays in SM. In part that is because, for economic and socio-political reasons, minorities are under-represented in the Scene. BDSM communities cut across all socio-economic, political lines; but while I suspect just as many minorities engage in kinky sex, IMX they do not tend to join sexual communities in number, the way mainstream white people do, so the population is very heavily skewed towards white. So we could measure the data and speculate about why their numbers are so low, but as data I think it asks far more questions than it answers. The whole issue of minorities in the SM/BDSM worlds really and truly deserves its own study. It's a vastly complicated issue.

L. Wolf (personal communication, 2008) echoed Brame's concerns about the complexity of racial issues in international research and pointed out that, 'Racial categories are not readily translatable in international research; they are just not meaningful because there is no continuity or agreed upon definitions'.

The studies we review represent six different countries, and whereas most of them were conducted in the 'West', one was completed in Hong Kong (Ho, 2006). Ho's study underlines the complexity of defining race, especially at an international level. As ethnic Chinese living in Hong Kong, Ho's respondents are either 0% people of colour or 100% people of colour, depending on the perspective used to judge. In their own social context, they are members of the social majority, and thus would not appropriately be considered people of colour (0%) in a numerical minority sense because the point of reference is the same racial and ethnic group. They would also evade the stigma, social pressures and disadvantage attached to being a 'minority' not only numerically, but with the attendant deprivation of social privileges. In the larger discussion in literature, however, Ho's respondents could be classified as 100% people of colour, because they are all Chinese. In that construction, they are people of colour in relationship to the external white measure, rather than their internal measure of majority status.

This begs the question 'People of color from whose perspective?' The term *people of colour* implies some neutral colourless other to which they are compared – the white perspective that underlies both mainstream poly and kink communities, as well as the research that seeks to understand them. M. Pallotta-Chiarolli (personal communication, 2008) highlighted this linguistic issue and clarified that:

In Australia, the respectful term is 'indigenous Australians.' Indigenous Australians find the term 'people of color' offensive, as it doesn't differentiate between their experiences of colonialism, genocide, etc. and the experiences of Africans and others who are migrants and refugees.

Although in the United Kingdom some scholars use Black and Minority Ethnicities to describe these populations, *people of colour* remains the standard language in the United States. We use it here not only because it is the standard scholarly rhetoric of our academic peers, but more importantly because it is the language our respondents use. Even so, the terminology is difficult and we acknowledge the problematic nature of the term. These issues are not idiosyncratic to research on polys and kinksters: the entire field of Sociology (and many others) is grappling with meanings of race and global social interactions.

Recommended strategies

There are a number of strategies that scholars can use to deal with these research issues. First and most obviously, we must attend to them. Measuring class and race/ethnicity should be a standard research practice, on par with measuring gender. Despite the methodological and terminological difficulties when it comes to delimiting and defining race – particularly when the research is international in scope – it is nonetheless the case that 'race does not exist independently of sexuality' (Barnard, 1999, p. 200). More specifically, it is only possible to study sexuality qua sexuality when race is omitted or glossed over. Ross (2007, p. 167), in his critique of queer theory and the 'founders' of queer thought – such as Foucault and Sedgwick – wherein Foucault's notion of 'the homosexual body' rests on an Anglo-Saxon racial identification, argued that 'the scientists are able to foreground *sexual* deviance rather than *racial* deviation' because of the 'assumed racial sameness of the Anglo-Saxon sexologist and his [assumed] Anglo-Saxon sexual subject'. Sexual value systems and the meanings attached to particular sex acts and arrangements stem from Western, white heteropatriarchal standards of sex/gender normativity. Race is never not related to one's topic of study: race confounds the study of sexuality precisely because of its continued neglect.

Learning to deal with the complexities of measuring race is key to the success of inclusive research and requires a broader discussion of race, nationally and internationally. Scholars can use journals, conferences and online forums to discuss methodological issues and establish greater international communication. On an individual methodological level, researchers can ask respondents to self-identify racially and/or ethnically. When reporting their results, scholars should explain their terms and respondents' social locations to give readers the information necessary to understand respondents' racial and ethnic identities in the context of their own cultures.

Second, scholars studying this area must continue to oversample people of colour. This becomes complex, as who is 'of colour' is difficult to define. One strategy researchers can use is to approach people who appear to be of colour or are somehow a minority in the setting and request an interview, and ask the respondents (as with all other respondents) how they identify racially or ethnically. This process must be accomplished with sensitivity to avoid the mistakes of previous researchers who, in the process of getting to 'know and understand' certain groups, have been guilty of fetishizing 'the other' (Probyn, 1993).

Third, researchers in this area must shift their recruitment strategies to include a far broader range of options rather than relying so heavily on the Internet and homogeneous snowball samples (often coordinated through email or other Internet interactions as well).

Although these sampling and recruitment methods remain useful, such complete dependence on them produces skewed and monochromatic samples. Instead, researchers could post flyers in coffee shops, laundromats, sex shops, libraries and on street posts and/or advertise in newspapers and local magazines that circulate among the general population and others that cater to target populations. Another approach would be to specifically target groups/facilities/businesses catering to people of colour and take care to place recruitment materials in places frequented by people of colour. For those examining practices and not identity, using more neutral language such as 'non-monogamous' or 'multi-partner', rather than the more specific 'polyamory', could significantly broaden samples. Once they have been able to establish initial contacts, researchers can use the popular method of snowball sampling to explore polys and kinksters of colours' social networks.

Fourth, increasing the number of researchers of colour examining these groups could significantly boost participation among kinksters and polyamorists of colour. Methodological literature indicates that disadvantaged groups such as people of colour (Collins, 1996), lesbians (England, 1994) and women (Gilbert, 1994) may be more open to participate in research conducted by those perceived as members of their own underprivileged group. The preponderance of white researchers studying this area could deter respondents of colour from participating in research. To increase the number and diversity of researchers studying unconventional sexualities, established scholars must actively support graduate students and colleagues who wish to study non-normative sexualities.

Fifth, it is important to understand the reasons why individuals do *not* identify with particular alternative sexual communities, despite participating in behaviours characteristic of those communities. Such an understanding will facilitate a broader examination of the full range of people having kinky sex or multiple partners and the ways in which people select the components of their identities. Furthermore, these studies can illuminate privileges that facilitate or hinder peoples' associations with particular identities, and the interlocking web of characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, ability, orientation, and experience that shape individuals' sexualities in idiosyncratic ways.

Sixth, researchers should study behaviour, as well as identity. Studies that include only people who identify as kinky or poly will miss these potential respondents whose behaviours may match the target population but whose self-identification precludes their participation in the study. This creates a double bind, because researchers must clearly define their sample populations to conduct a coherent analysis. On the one hand, relying on self-identification as a selection criteria has a long tradition in sexualities research (Berenson, 2002; Chung & Katayama, 1996; Golden, 1996; Rust, 2000) in part because it has proven problematic in the past when researchers assigned identities to behaviours and in part because it can be difficult to build a sample when investigating sexual minorities, and seeking people who self-identify and are willing to participate in research is one of the primary ways in which sexuality scholars have been able to conduct their research. On the other hand, relying on self-identification eliminates the category of persons who engage in the behaviour but do not classify it as an organising principle for self-identification, thus missing large sections of the population of practitioners (Savin-Williams, 2005; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010).

Most importantly, researchers must move beyond simple 'bean counting' to an examination of how race impacts the ways in which people 'do' sexuality. How does being Black and queer impact sexuality? Asian and gay affect sexual practices? Latina and poly shape identity formations? Native American and kinky affect participation in public organisations? To date, too many studies neglect to address these issues because they begin from

a white frame, often fail to problematise race and thus assume a homogenous sample, all despite (potentially) statistically accounting for race.

Conclusion

Finally, we must consider that, on some level, there might not be anything to be *done* about the dearth of people of colour in samples of sexual minorities. It is possible that polys and kinksters of colour are less interested in being studied and potentially less desirous of engaging in public sexual interactions or becoming a member of a group founded on sexual status that might then provide contact with researchers – in effect self-selecting to abstain from community and research involvement. Clearly, attempting to recruit people of colour into research samples will provide a far richer analysis of kinky and poly relationships, groups and communities. But is the virtual absence of people of colour in these samples so passive – so completely based on exclusion? We think not. In fact, to assume that the ‘we’ (the almost exclusively white researchers who study alternative sexual communities) can control what ‘they’ (people of colour who have unconventional sex lives) do is the ultimate act of hubris. Maybe ‘they’ *elect* not to participate.

This dynamic is obviously far more complex than simple omission or self-selection. It calls into question the meanings of alternative sexualities and those who found their identities upon them. Who is authorised to determine the particular characteristics associated with any specific identity, much less function as the arbiter of those with legitimate claims to assume that identity? How people construct their identities is, to varying degrees, up to them: identity is *inherently* self-defined. To deny that choosing to or refraining from claiming a specific sexual identity is a self-directed, socially constructed, moment is to deny people of colour sexual subjectivity. The consistency of the samples is clearly related to the racial and socio-economic homogeneity of the sample population and the research methods used to collect the data, as well as the wishes, desires, intentions and identities of the people who elect to participate.

Too frequently white researchers approach their studies from a white frame of reference and thus (usually unintentionally) exclude consideration of people of colour from the original research design. This initial exclusion then telescopes through the research project to shape the questions researchers ask and the populations they query. Research on poly and kinky populations remains impoverished to the degree that people of colour, as well as other social and numerical minorities such as people with disabilities and the aged, are absent from the analyses. There must be more sexuality research, particularly research that is mindful of privilege and intersections of oppression. A sophisticated analysis requires looking beyond the percentage of people of colour within study samples and moving towards a more holistic account of race and specifically the experiences of poly, kinksters and other sexual minorities of colour.

Notes

1. The authors do not claim the right to define others’ identities, but rather use the term *pervert* to describe polyamorists both because conventional society views them as such and for theoretical coherency.
2. Because the initial study was not designed to be a longitudinal research project and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) required that I destroy all identifying information, I was only able to locate those members of my original sample who retained enough contact with mainstream polyamorous communities to receive the calls for participation in the follow-up study. Thus, the current data cannot account for the perspective of those who left these poly communities. The initial study was also restricted to adults, and to date my sample of children is too

small for analysis, so this discussion is similarly missing children's responses. Of the 17 previous respondents I was able to locate, 15 agreed to participate in the follow-up study. Only one of the previous respondents who consented to an interview no longer identified as polyamorous and had started seeking a monogamous relationship.

3. On the questionnaire, there was a line adjacent to the *other* category for self-identification. The responses were so varied that I aggregated them in to a single category of *other* for ease of discussion.
4. Ken Haslam coined the term *swolly* to denote the intersection between poly and swing behaviours, identities and communities.
5. PolyResearchers is an online discussion group that facilitates research into polyamory by allowing members to share resources, research findings and seek each others' advice. There are currently 144 members from a broad array of academic fields (Sociology, Psychology, Physics, Religious Studies, Women's Studies, Anthropology) and non-academics such as journalists, authors, sex-therapists, clergy, social workers, lawyers and physicians. <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PolyResearchers/>

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