

Swingers and polyamorists: A comparative analysis of gendered power dynamics

Michelle Wolkomir 

Centenary College of Louisiana, USA

Abstract

American culture reveres monogamy, holding it up as an ideal moral standard, as a kind of Holy Grail for intimacy, and as a cornerstone for establishing normative social interactions. Monogamy, as often practiced, also prescribes and reproduces binary and hierarchical gender relations. Given these interconnections, how do people in non-monogamous relationships conceptualize gender? To explore this question, this study examines how people experience two varied forms of non-monogamy—swinging and polyamory. A comparative analysis of data from in-depth interviews with 22 swingers and 23 polyamorists illustrates how discrediting varied aspects of monogamy can alter gender power dynamics and, under certain circumstances, substantially erode gender hierarchy.

Keywords

Gender inequality, heterosexuality, monogamy, polyamory, swinging

When we first started swinging, we agreed we would play only with other women. At that time, I just couldn't handle the idea of another man with my wife. (Richard, married swinger)

It isn't hard to watch another man fucking your wife; it is hard to watch somebody fucking your wife well because there is the inevitable comparison that happens. (Walter, married swinger)

Corresponding author:

Michelle Wolkomir, Tracie Whitehurst Woods Regents Endowed Professor of Sociology, Gender Studies Director, Sociology Department, Centenary College of Louisiana, 2911 Centenary Blvd, Shreveport, LA 71134, USA.

Email: mwolkomi@centenary.edu

I'm happy when I see Rosie (his wife) really fulfilled by her relationship with Dan, and I am also deeply fulfilled by what I share with Jessica (his partner). My marriage to Rosie and both our lives are fuller and better because of these relationships... Real love isn't about possession; it's about saying I want what is best for my partners.
(Brett, married polyamorous)

The ideas represented in these data excerpts reflect both widely held sociological understandings of the mutually shaping interconnections between dominant gender ideologies and heterosexuality and potential possibilities for reconstituting these interconnections in ways that challenge normative sexual practices and traditional gendered power relations. What is most striking about the foregoing statements, from a sociological perspective, is not the varied sexual activity but rather the remarkable shift in the men's perspective of masculinity as it intersects with heterosexuality. The first statement clearly demonstrates traditional masculine ideas about sole possession of women as sexual property. It also marks the sexual "play" between two women as a kind of extension of male dominated heterosexuality in which the women's sexual activity is foreplay for "real" heterosexual sex, making it non-threatening to male dominance. The second, while it shifts away from ideas of ownership, retains the traditional gender notion of masculinity as competitive performance with other men. Here, the competitive arena is heterosexuality, and men's fears about being out performed sexually and thus emasculated become visible. The third statement, however, contains no discussion of the exertion of masculine power; Brett does not see Dan as trespasser or competitor. Instead, his focus is on cooperation and understanding, and "success" is measured in terms of partners' satisfaction. This shift marks a powerful transformation in gendered power dynamics.

An exploration of the conditions under which such transformations are possible and the processes by which they occur requires first examining how existing gendered power dynamics intersect with heterosexuality and the dominant script for intimate relationships. As we shall see, these components fit together in ways that reproduce and valorize masculine superiority and are held in place by valued cultural ideals. Our society is characterized by mononormativity, which Bauer (2010: 145) describes as "a complex power relation, which (re)produces hierarchically arranged patterns of intimate relationships and devalues, marginalizes, excludes, and 'others' those patterns of intimacy which do not correspond to the normative apparatus of the monogamous model." This monogamous model is idealized in the dominant cultural love story in which a man meets, woos, and wins a woman, and they fall forever in love. This story is rooted in the romantic love ideology which frames the "right" intimate relationship as heterosexual committed monogamy in which partners find their "one and only soulmates" who share an intense and exclusive emotional bond and sexual attraction (Ingraham, 1994, 1999; Swidler, 2001). Sex plays a special role in this framework, serving as a kind of symbolic enactment of a couple's unique merging and intertwined selves. Sex, as Jackson and Scott (2004:155) explain, "is seen as the glue that holds the special (sexual)

relationship together and, if the glue fails to bond the couple effectively, exclusively . . . the whole relationship falls apart.” As such, sexual fidelity and exclusivity are particularly key and important markers of the trust and “specialness” in these relationships (Jackson and Scott, 2004; Jamieson, 2004). Within this framework, infidelity thus signals big trouble.

This idealized form and set of actions for intimate relationships relies on and recreates hierarchical gender relations. As Schippers (2016: 39) explains, “gender inequality lies in and depends upon the social construction and institutionalization of the *relationship* between masculinity and femininity,” in which hegemonic masculinity is defined as superior to femininity. This constructed binary, hierarchical, and complementary relationship between masculinity and femininity is at the core of heterosexual monogamy. Hegemonic constructions of gender code men as sexual agents who engage in heterosexual conquests (Bordo, 1999; Connell, 1995), while women are the sexual objects who attract notice and must keep men satisfied (Bartky, 1990; Wolkomir, 2004). For men, credible masculine identities are thus forged through sexual pursuit of women, while affirmation of feminine identities for women requires being desired by men (Jackson, 2005: 30). In this way, gender and hegemonic heterosexuality are inextricably linked, each co-constructing the other. Further, as Ingraham’s (1999, 2005) critical analysis of heterosexuality reveals, the reciprocal relationship between gender and heterosexuality is veiled in culture by what she refers to as “thinking straight,” or the ways that people come to see these existing social arrangements as inevitable, naturally occurring, and desirable. As such, heterosexuality, and its attendant gendered beliefs and practices, can be seen as “compulsory” as an identity, a form of interaction and an institution (Rich, 1980). This “compulsory” nature of heterosexuality is protected and sustained, in part, by marking challenging identities and practices as deviant and inferior. Homosexuality, for instance, is constructed in many ways as an inferior, unnatural, and “polluted” position (Seidman, 2005). Gender performances that threaten male dominance are policed and sanctioned in similar ways. For example, Pascoe (2007) examines how boys learn to label actions that fall outside the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity as “fag” behavior, thereby relegating them to the feminine. Similarly, Schippers (2007: 95) shows how women who stray outside the confines of hegemonic femininity, engaging in what she terms “pariah femininities” or actions seen as “contaminating to the relationship between masculinity and femininity,” earn labels like “slut” or “bitch.” In each instance, masculine dominance is protected and reproduced and interwoven with heterosexuality. This intersection of gender hierarchy and heterosexuality is also encapsulated and valorized in the ideal form of the monogamous couple who, as Schippers explains, “mirrors and supports the discursively constructed relationship between heteromascularity and heterofemininity” (2016: 39). This relationship form is thus central to recreating and sustaining patriarchal gender ideals and practices. Deviating from this form, Schippers (2016) theorizes, has the potential to disrupt this hierarchical relationship.

To begin to explore this potential, this study examines how the practice of heterosexual non-monogamy impacts gender relations using two varied forms of multiple partner relationships—swinging and polyamory. In general, swinging refers to the practice of individuals in heterosexual committed relationships (often married) mutually consenting to engage in extramarital sex for pleasure but retaining exclusive emotional commitment within the couple (Frank, 2013: 65). Swinging includes a broad array of sexual practices, ranging from “soft swaps,” in which there may be sexual play with others but intercourse is reserved for the couple, to “hard swaps,” in which both partners can engage in sexual intercourse with a partner or partners (Bergstrand and Sinski, 2010: 7). Regardless of sexual practice, swingers generally adhere to a central dictate—that their spouse or partner is their one love. Emotional connections are thus reserved for that person and must be guarded against with other sexual partners (Bergstrand and Sinski, 2010). By contrast, polyamorists focus intensely on emotional intimacy with and commitment to all partners, believing that “it is valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person” (Haritaworn et al., 2006: 518). Like swinging, polyamory can take many forms and encompass many varied behaviors. Some polyamorous couples, for example, might live together as a single family, while others may have multiple outside partners, while still others might share a single additional partner (Sheff, 2005, 2006, 2014). What is central to all polyamorous relationships though is that partners honestly engage with one another and build close emotional connections.

Clearly, both swingers and polyamorists break the code of the monogamous couple, though to varying degrees. While swingers forego sexual fidelity, they do retain a claim to a “one and only” emotional intimacy and commitment. Polyamorists defy the code more completely and sometimes altogether. This distinction between swingers and polyamorists—keeping emotional intimacy tied to the one and only or extending it to the many—allows for a comparative analysis of how people conceptualize gender relations when the monogamous model is challenged partially or entirely. As we shall see, the negotiations that people undertake to participate in multiple partner intimacies successfully facilitates changes in how they perceive and practice gender relations, becoming more egalitarian the more fully they reject the monogamous model.

Exploring intimacies among swingers and polyamorists

The research question for this study emerged from earlier research that compared how people in mixed orientation marriages and polyamorous relationships used and revised the “blueprint” of the romantic love ideology in different ways to recreate the value of their relationships in the absence of sexual fidelity (Wolkomir, 2015). This earlier study provided access to networks of people in polyamorous communities and possibly to swingers. To locate participants, I sent a request for volunteers for an interview study to these contacts, who

forwarded my information to relevant groups, people, and websites. I received approximately 200 responses from polyamorous volunteers. Locating swingers was more difficult. I received only a few queries from swingers via these posted requests, so I used a snowball sampling technique to find interviewees (Babbie, 2010: 193–194). As a result, many of the swingers in this study are clustered in three areas (Texas/Louisiana, Colorado, and Georgia) while the polyamorous interviewees are spread throughout the USA.

Given the analytic focus of this study, I selected interviewees who identified as heterosexual (though several explained they were “curious” or “flexible”). These techniques yielded 45 volunteers, 23 polyamorists (11 men and 12 women) and 22 swingers (12 men and 10 women). When feasible, I attempted to interview both spouses or partners to capture as much of the relational dynamic as possible. As a result, I interviewed six polyamorous married couples and two cohabitating couples. Of the swingers, I interviewed six married couples. Table 1A and 1B provide a summary display of relevant demographics for both groups. Most participants were white, married (about half had children), well-educated professionals between 35 and 50 years old. The amount of time spent in non-monogamous relationships varied widely. In terms of religious affiliation, participants in both groups shared a tendency to move away from organized religion (mostly from Christian to atheist or agnostic). While this sample is designed for exploration and is not generalizable, sample demographics are similar to those in other studies of swingers (Bergstand and Sinski, 2010) and polyamorists (Scheff, 2014). It is plausible to suggest that these shared sample characteristics reflect the relative comfort people with dominant status (e.g. white, highly educated, upper middle class) experience discussing non-normative sexualities compared to those in more marginalized, and thus vulnerable, groups.

To collect data, I conducted in-depth, loosely structured interviews designed to allow participants to bring up topics, experiences, and/or feelings that were relevant to them. The interview guide included questions that focused on: relationship history, how and why participants decided to engage in multiple partner intimacies, how they negotiated these relationships, the rewards and difficulties associated with these experiences, and their perceptions about gender and love. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

Data analysis proceeded through analytic induction (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011), and interview transcripts were coded for emerging themes and processes. Initially, I analyzed the swingers and polyamorists as separate groups to identify processes and themes unique to the group, and then I merged the coding process to allow for comparison. To develop emergent themes, I wrote analytic memos (Charmaz, 1983) that focused on the various processes by which participants learned to negotiate multiple partner intimacies and the consequences of their diverse arrangements. Using these memos as a guide, I then re-examined my data to focus on how these varied patterns of intimacy influenced gendered ideas and practices.

Table 1A. Polyamorists.

Name	Age	Education	Religious affiliation	Marital status	No. of children	Years poly	No. of partners
Wade	67	Bachelor's; some grad.	Agnostic	31 yrs (2)	3	25	2
Moir	22	Bachelor's	Christian agnostic	0	0	7	1
Mark	24	Bachelor's	Christian agnostic	0	0	7	1
Brad	55	JD	Atheist	18 yrs (1)	2	5	2
Tawna	55	Associate	Jewish to pagan	18 yrs (1)	2	5	2
Samuel	26	Bachelor's	Catholic agnostic	3 yrs (1)	0	1.5	0
Sherry	21	In college	Agnostic	3 yrs (1)	0	1.5	2
Clyde	28	GED	None	1 yr (1)	0	1	1
Cora	27	Bachelor's	None	1 yr (1)	0	6	1
Carlton	60	Bachelor's	Catholic to UU	30 yrs (1)	5	10	2
Rachel	45	PhD	Jewish Atheist	19 yrs (1)	0	8	1
Melissa	24	Bachelor's	None	0	0	3	2
Brett	66	Bachelor's	Anglican Agnostic	22 yrs (1)	2	8	multiple
Rosie	62	Bachelor's	Catholic to None	22 yrs (1)	4	8	2
Laura	38	Master's	Jewish	12 yrs (1)	1	6	1
Jud	46	Master's	Fundamentalist Christian to Agnostic	7 yrs (1)	0	9	multiple
Kyle	40	Master's	Atheist	16 yrs (1)	2	3	3
Cindy	39	JD	Muslim	16 yrs (1)	2	3	2
Joshua	65	Bachelor's	Jewish	13 yrs (1)	0	8	1
Liza	51	JD	Jewish	13 yrs (1)	0	8	1
Frank	31	PhD	Jewish	0	0	6	4
Francesca	31	Master's	Muslim to atheist	0	0	4	2

*c indicates individuals in first column identify as a couple.
**m indicates individuals in first column are married to each other.

Table 1B. Swingers.

Name	Age	Education	Religious affiliation	Marital status	No. of children	Years swinging	No. of partners	
Mike	m	46	MBA	Methodist to agnostic	18 yrs (1)	0	15	1
Shanna		45	Bachelor's	Methodist to agnostic	18 yrs (1)	0	15	0
Corey		50	Associate	Southern Baptist to non-denominational Christian	Married twice, now divorced	2	11	0
Walter	m	45	Bachelor's	Lutheran to atheist	22 yrs (1)	2	14	1
Maggie		48	Bachelor's	Catholic to atheist	22 yrs (1)	2	14	multiple
Bruce	m	61	Bachelor's	Methodist to agnostic	15 yrs (2)	0	8	multiple
Gloria		55	PhD	Methodist to agnostic	15 yrs (2)	0	8	multiple
Richard	c	46	Associate	Southern Baptist to atheist	15 yrs (2) divorced	3	12	1
Chelsea		47	Master's	Catholic to atheist	15 yrs (3) divorced	4	12	multiple
Robert		59	Bachelor's	None	16 yrs (1) divorced	3	10	multiple
Keelie		60	Bachelor's	Lutheran to Wiccan	Married twice, now divorced	3	6	multiple
Shawn	m	43	Bachelor's	None	10 yrs (1)	0	8	multiple
Denise		39	Bachelor's	None	10yrs (1)	0	8	multiple
Carolyn		36	Undergrad. student	7th Day Adventist to agnostic	4 yrs (1) divorced	0	13	2
Bryant		66	Bachelor's	Catholic to None	16 yrs (2)	5	13	multiple
Sammy	m	36	Bachelor's	None	5 yrs (1)	0	4	multiple
Cleo		32	Associate	Catholic to none	5 yrs (1)	0	4	multiple
Savannah		55	HS	Baptist to none	32 yrs (1)	2	17	multiple
Ken		66	PhD	Baptist to agnostic	14 yrs (1) divorced	5	16	multiple
Martin		65	Master's	Jewish to UU	44 yrs (1)	0	29	1
Colin		69	Master's	Catholic agnostic	2 yrs (3)	2	4	3
Kim		37	HS	Catholic agnostic	6 yrs (1)	3	7	2

Swingers, swaps, and the impact of sexual play

Maggie, married for 22 years and swinging for 14 years, explained that swingers “believe in love and romance and that once in a lifetime forever partner. They just don’t think that means you can’t have sex with other people.” Maggie’s description of her experience is both traditional and radical. On one hand, she connects romantic love to a unique lasting partner, evoking traditional notions of lifetime monogamy, yet, on the other hand, she asserts the radical idea that extramarital sex is no threat to monogamy. Here, we see that swingers de-link love and sex, taking sexual exclusivity out of the romantic love script. Fidelity is no longer the marker of commitment and unique specialness of the couple; instead, exclusive emotional love serves this purpose. Forging this disconnect between love and sex has the potential to alter the relationship between heteromascularity and heterofemininity in some important ways. Yet, as we shall see, whether and how swinging impacts traditional gender power dynamics depends on how couples conceptualize and practice swinging. Couples who engage predominately or only in “soft swaps” tend to conform to (and even epitomize) the ideals and practices of patriarchal heterogender relationships, while those who participate in “hard swaps” may challenge them in important ways.

The soft swap and sex toys

Many people enter swinging as a means of adding enjoyment to their lives and initially engage in “soft swaps” that include the couple and an additional woman or foreplay with another couple followed by intercourse only between the primary couple (Bergstrand and Sinski, 2010). Study participants mostly (16) fit into these patterns, though some began as full swap couples. For many, the ideal entry into the swinging lifestyle was a threesome with another woman or a scenario where two women “played” in front of their partners/spouses as foreplay and then had intercourse with their partners. The following two interview excerpts are representative of how the couples in this study initially approached swinging:

We wanted what every swinger starting out wants—a single bisexual female—to share in our sexual experiences. Maggie was interested in exploring with women, and, like every other guy, I found that exciting and non-threatening. I couldn’t handle the idea of her with another man so that was our gateway. (Walter)

I thoroughly enjoy my marriage, but I wanted to add to my life. I was thinking about this, and Richard was looking at swinging websites and we decided to give it a try. We decided to start slowly, and we wanted to find a couple where the woman would play with me and flirt with the men. But we would only have full intercourse with each other. (Chelsea)

These data excerpts convey initial agreements that reveal both a desire for sexual exploration that is shared as a couple and a need to protect the relationship and control the feelings extramarital sex might evoke.

To do so, these couples created boundaries around what kind of sexual activity was deemed permissible, and it was the presence of and interaction with other men that had to be controlled. A wife/partner having sex with another woman or the couple sharing sex with another woman was deemed non-threatening. Sammy best described what most men in this study initially felt when they entered swinging, explaining “men and women are completely different beings with two totally different ways of loving each other. It is different and doesn’t change how she needs a man. I do not feel a threat from this.” Sammy, like other men engaging in soft swaps, did not believe sexual play with a woman could pose a threat to their marriages because men and women were in such different categories that they were not competitors—only other men could legitimately replace him. In this configuration, as Schippers (2016: 149) explains, “man is the desiring subject and women are objects of desire,” and thus can be “incorporated into the heteromascu-line erotic habitus” without disrupting it. None of the men worried about a potential emotional connection between two women lovers because that relationship was perceived only as an erotic sideline to the “real” sex and relationship. In accord with our existing cultural script for gender and sex, men only perceived other men as legitimate competitors.

The women also found this scenario non-threatening. Rather than see another woman as a potential rival, these women felt like they were working with her for, yes, their own sexual pleasure, but also to fuel their partner’s/spouse’s sexual desires. One wife described the woman who joined her and her husband for sex as “like having a living sex toy.” Others, like Carolyn, noted that “it was empowering experience altogether—I loved being with a woman and feeling all that and watching him get turned on. It was never scary or competitive because we were there together.” Shanna explained that “I felt okay about it because we were a team doing it together. We had rules that we couldn’t talk to her separately and stuff too, so that meant a lot. I also liked how turned on he got by the two of us together. It made me feel sexy.” Here, we see how the addition of another woman feels exciting, as opposed to evoking jealousy, because she is perceived as a kind of supplement (e.g. “a living sex toy”) to the couples’ experience. Thus, in these initial forays, women focused primarily on working with another woman to stimulate their male partners and found his desire rewarding. In other words, the central reward of the women’s sex play was male satisfaction and pleasure.

This kind of swinging thus depends on, endorses, and polices hegemonic gender relations and heterosexuality. The emphasis on eroticized women, often in the guise of the male fantasy of two women together or in a threesome, reveals a primary focus on heterosexual male pleasure. The women’s sexual activity was conceptualized primarily as fodder to heighten the main heterosexual encounter. Here, the men were excited at the prospect of sexual conquest, of female/female sex play as

foreplay for them, of having more women. It bolstered their sense of masculinity, while the prospect of another man would have meant jealousy and competition. Women also predominantly experienced these arrangements in traditionally feminine ways. They focused on pleasing their male partners through sexual display and felt a kind of feminine satisfaction when the men were “turned on” by their presentation—they were successfully desired. They also did not resist the sexual objectification of women or question the double standard that made it unlikely they could be with two men. In essence, these soft swaps emphasize and highlight the ways gender hierarchy and hegemonic heterosexuality are interwoven and mutually productive. Men retain their status as sexual agents while women perform as titillating objects for them. The sex that *matters* is between the heterosexual couple. In this sense, these forays into swinging depend on and starkly reveal the reciprocally productive intersection of gender power dynamics and heterosexuality.

Hard swaps and sexual regulations

While about a third of the swingers never moved beyond soft swaps, most study participants progressed into hard swaps. These hard swaps incorporated a variety of arrangements; for instance, some couples agreed to only have sex in the same room or with a shared couple, while others developed sexual activities separate from their partners. These arrangements often changed through time as participants became more comfortable with this form of swinging. Regardless of the specific arrangements a couple made, the shift to hard swaps required that they confront a new set of issues as a couple. While they retained the idea that they were engaging in swinging as a shared experience, they also had to contend with the ideas and feelings that emerged as they began to have sex with other men and women. It was the negotiations surrounding these ideas and feelings that facilitated some changes in how participants perceived the relationship between masculinity and femininity.

The two most common, powerful and intertwined feelings to emerge from initial hard swaps were jealousy and/or insecurity (de Visser and McDonald, 2007). Participants explained that jealousy arose from watching a partner flirt with or have sex with someone because, as Richard explained, “you are used to being the one who gets that attention, so it can feel like a kind of betrayal and make you angry even if you have talked it through and agreed on it.” At the same time, participants also often felt insecure, fearing that another sexual partner would prove more satisfying and thus potentially replace them in the relationship. Maggie and Walter provide representative examples of these responses to hard swaps. Maggie tells the story of seeing Walter with another woman as they began hard swap encounters as, “It was great for me to give my attention to other people and flirt and have sex, but when he did the exact same thing, it was hard. I felt a loss of control, of a kind of anxiety. I’m type A, and there was a reflection somehow on me not being enough for him.” While Walter did not find sex per se troublesome, he was similarly worried about being compared and

found wanting. He describes his concerns as “never about the sex. People are going to have sex . . . It’s not hard to watch someone fuck your wife. It’s hard to watch someone fuck your wife well because there’s the inevitable comparison that happens. Like wow, she’s having a lot of orgasms with him—more than with me. What does that mean? I felt anxious and challenged somehow.” Both responses reveal how this sexual activity sparked *gendered* anxieties; Maggie voices feminine fears that she will no longer “be enough” to keep Walter satisfied, and Walter is troubled by masculine competition and worries that he might be outdone. These traditionally gendered responses had to be rejected and new ones constructed for couples to develop positive swinging experiences.

The process of revising the gendered conceptual framework from which couples perceived their swinging activities was often arduous work. To do so, the couples in this study relied on two primary (and often linked) strategies—completely honest communication and the creation of rules to protect the couples’ love and emotional commitment. The goals of these strategies were to enable understanding and to develop trust that sex with another person would not undermine a couple’s unique emotional connection. Couples had long, difficult and repeated conversations about how it felt to see their partners with other people, what each worried about, how they felt when they were engaging in extramarital sex, and what it all meant for their marriage.

They also identified the “triggers” for this anxiety and insecurity. Sammy and Cleo provide a representative example of how couples negotiated these feelings. Sammy was anxious about other men being more sexual than he is with Cleo, and Cleo worried that other women would “get too close to” Sammy. To deal with these triggers, they established foundational rules. First, they agreed to be home by midnight if they go on a solo date (to control amount of time spent with another person to avoid the closeness Cleo worried about). Second, they agreed to discuss, as Cleo says, “the emotional boundaries on the relationship before the encounter ever takes place.” Finally, they agreed to reserve some sexual practices (like oral sex) for just them (so Sammy can feel he won’t be outdone sexually). Through these negotiations, they came to understand that, as Sammy explains, “We’re fine. We know what to expect. Sex is just sex for both of us. It’s physical and has nothing to do with emotion. Sure kissing and sex have connotations where it has to be love making, but it can also just feel good and be fun. That is what it is for us. We have fun with other people, but we always choose one another.”

Given the importance of sexual fidelity in the romantic love ideology that permeates our culture, this de-linking of love and sex is no small accomplishment. Despite couples’ agreements that marriage did not have to require sexual fidelity, the experience of extramarital sex still initially produced responses that mirrored the existing heteronormative relationship between masculinity and femininity. Men still retained a sense of the importance of masculine performance in their relationships and of competition with other men. Women too felt concerned that other women might be more sexually alluring or pleasing and thus replace them. In other words, participants retained much of the ideological framework linking gender

hierarchy and heterosexual performance and therefore felt anxieties about their actions that fell outside the prescribed script. To mitigate what they saw as potential threats, couples made foundational rules that enabled them to contain (though not eliminate) and soothe these fears. In doing so, they begin, at least to some extent, to alter the interconnections between monogamy and hegemonic heterosexual relations. By allowing men and women opportunities for multiple sexual partners, these participants learned to perceive men and women similarly as desiring sexual agents. The acceptance of extramarital sex challenged traditional ideas about women as sexual property or as sluts if they had multiple partners. These women also felt they had a right to sexual pleasure and could feel and enact their desires without shame. Wade (2017), in her study of college hookups, discusses a similar pattern. The college women she interviews describe hooking up as providing a sense of liberation and sexual agency through the adaptation of the stereotypical masculine approach to sex. They also reject notions of women as sexual property or whores. However, as Wade (2017: 242–244) points out, when these women embrace a masculine approach to sex (including the rejection of emotional expression), they valorize masculinity and recreate the feminine as inferior. In a similar way, swingers alter and yet reproduce the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity in the field of sexual relations. While the key focus was no longer primarily on male satisfaction and pleasure but on, as Sammy says, “sexual fun” for both partners, the foundational rules that allowed couples to feel comfortable with extramarital sex also functioned to reassert aspects of traditional gender relations and protect, highlight and reproduce the exclusiveness of their monogamous love connection. In this sense, these couples retained key aspects of gender hierarchy and valorized monogamous love.

Polyamorist partners and the impact of love

While swingers and polyamorists share the belief that having multiple intimate partners can enrich their lives, their notions of what that means vary dramatically. Whereas swingers de-link love and sex to preserve the unique and monogamous love connection prescribed by the romantic love ideology, polyamorists perceive that an intimate loving and sexual relationship with one person does not diminish similar relationships with others. This distinction is important because it creates the potential for varied frameworks through which participants can learn to see and enact their relationships. Unlike swingers, polyamorists do not have to “win” or be “the only” important partner (though that does not mean they do not experience jealousy and insecurity), so gendered competition can (eventually) become thought of as unnecessary and even foolish. Their frameworks for understanding and practicing multiple partner intimacies can thus develop differently and have the potential to level hierarchical gendered power dynamics substantially. This section examines the processes by which polyamorist participants developed this more egalitarian framework.

A few participants in this study (3) chose polyamory as a purely ideological position; that is, they believed monogamy was a social prescription that limited their lives and therefore refused it. Most participants, though, emerged as polyamorous because they wanted to retain important relationships. Some had been swingers who chose to move into polyamory because they developed strong emotional attachments to their sexual partners. Others fell in love with a person outside of their marriages but were still in love with their spouses, and they and their spouses/partners decided to become polyamorous. The rest of the participants jointly decided as a couple that they wanted to try polyamory as a way of enriching their lives and expanding meaningful connections. Most participants continued to identify their spouse as a “primary” partner, while about a quarter of participants did not describe their relationships as ranked in any way and believed such ranking, as one woman put it, “goes against what it means to be poly because we all just matter.”

Regardless of how participants entered polyamorous relationships, many found the practice of these relationships to be more challenging than they anticipated. Like hard swap swingers, many polyamorous participants experienced jealousy, anxiety, and fear of loss as their partners/spouses began to engage in love relationships with other people (Mint, 2010). For some participants (about 65%), these difficult emotions, like the swingers, were linked to traditional gender dynamics. For instance, Kyle, who was married for 16 years and had engaged in polyamorous relationships for three years, recalls initially feeling intensely jealous of Cindy’s (his wife) relationship and afraid she would love her partner more. He explains these initial feelings as, “For me, some of it was sexual—like is he hung like a mule and better in bed? Some of it was emotional—like is she still feeling the same way about me? I was worried I wasn’t going to measure up on either front, and she would love him more.” Kyle’s description of his anxieties surrounding Cindy’s relationship echo gendered fears about masculine performance and competition, and the sense that being out performed sexually could mean he could be demoted or replaced. Women too sometimes expressed fears that were linked to traditional notions of femininity and pleasing men. Tawna, for example, noted that her initial fears stemmed from the appearance of her husband’s partner, saying “It was hard. She is like top model gorgeous, and she is fun to be around. I was so scared I would become less important. I mean how do I beat that?” Here Tawna saw this woman as more alluring and pleasant and therefore a potential threat. These excerpts reveal how these participants, like swingers, initially felt that performing gender “wrong” or not as well as another could leave them vulnerable to rejection or demotion—emergent fears linked to the reciprocal relationship between gendered power dynamics and hegemonic heterosexuality. Thus, despite convictions that polyamorous relationships could tremendously enrich their lives, participants were also often initially fearful.

Much like swingers who engaged in hard swaps, polyamorists had to mitigate these feelings if they were to establish rewarding relationships, and they engaged in

similar processes to do so. As Sheff explains, many polyamorists learn to perceive the existence of negative emotions, such as fear of loss and jealousy, as a condition that “signals the need for some accommodations or strategies to manage the specific situation” (2014: 119). To understand their situations, polyamorous couples had continual and unrelentingly truthful discussions about how they thought and felt about their relationships. Through these discussions, each discovered and expressed their fears and anxieties about maintaining their relationships. To diminish or eradicate these anxieties, participants worked together to reconfigure the markers of specialness in their relationships (de Visser and McDonald, 2007; Jamieson, 2004). Whereas the romantic love ideology links specialness to being the “one and only,” these couples learned to discard notions of the only and signified the specialness of the primary relationship through practices that, at least initially, marked a primary partner as “the one” most important person (Jamieson, 2004: 45).

The strategies that study participants constructed to signify this specialness emerged from discussions and varied from couple to couple. These accommodations, which participants referred to frequently as “guidelines,” fell into two broad categories—those designed to prevent negative feelings and those created to mitigate them if they occurred (Wolkomir, 2015). Two of the most common kinds of practices created to impede negative feelings were the establishment of “veto power” regarding other relationships and the preservation of certain special spaces, experiences, and events for the primary couple. Veto power took varied forms in different relationships, but it fundamentally meant that either person could say no to an event, person, or kind of sexual activity that created emotional duress. For example, Joshua and Liz could veto the other’s partner if s/he felt that the partner, as Liz put it, “did not respect their marriage or time boundaries or was attempting to create fights between them.” In another kind of veto, Samuel limited the kinds of sexual activity Sherry could have with other men, while Sherry vetoed overnight stays with a partner because she “wants to be the one he falls asleep and wakes up with.”

In addition to such veto powers, couples often reserved “special” things. Some couples agreed that they would celebrate all holidays, birthdays, and special events together on the “real” day to mark them as more authentic, while they could “observe” the occasions with lovers on substitute days. Some couples reserved oral sex or other sexual practices only for one another. For instance, Brett and Rosie established what they call a “harvest ritual” in which they come home from encounters with other partners, and they, as Brett explains, “tell the story of the harvest we just shared with others, and then we have sex, reconnecting on both the physical and emotional level with one another.” These strategies functioned to prevent emotional duress and to signify the primary relationship as special and most important.

However, if some interaction occurred that left a primary partner feeling hurt, neglected, or, as Nell says, “second tier,” then couples agreed that these needs would be addressed immediately. In one representative example, Clyde tells

a story about Cora getting ready for a date. Cora is late, has to shower and has not yet prepared the salad for dinner. She asks Clyde to do so, and he agrees. On her way to the bathroom, she yells she has mint in the refrigerator. Clyde recalls feeling “stupidly hurt” because he “loves mint and she never puts it in his salad. Does that mean [he] matters less?” He tells her about this feeling after her date. The next day, Cora prepares his favorite foods for dinner. This effort to heal his feelings, Clyde explained, “showed me that she wanted me to feel happy and loved. He got mint, but I got all my favorites.” Through this act, Clara soothed Clyde’s hurt feelings and re-established his sense of importance in the relationship. This sort of guideline—the promise to pay attention to a primary partner’s needs and feelings and to rectify any difficulty—served to mitigate emergent negative feelings and resentment. Taken together, these guidelines enabled couples to mark the unique specialness of their relationship and to mitigate the traditionally gendered fears and jealousies inextricably intertwined with hegemonic heterosexual performances.

In essence, what these participants have done by establishing these rules and arrangements is to construct a space for non-monogamy within heterogender relations and to disturb, but not yet dismantle, the mutually constitutive dynamic between gender hierarchy and heterosexuality. The fears, anxieties and jealousies participants express about their relationships emerge because they still reference dominant heterogender ideologies to understand their situations. The accommodations participants make do diminish and control these emergent negative feelings, but they also do not entirely overturn the relational dynamic between heteromascularity and heterofemininity. Brett and Rosie’s “harvest ritual” and Clyde and Cora’s dinner, for example, are acts of reclamation that restore a sense of heterogender orderliness to their relationships. Brett and Rosie quite literally reassert their relationship through immediate sex after other dates, while Cora and Clyde do so with a “make up” dinner in which Clyde is served his favorite foods as a way to please him. The necessity of such reclamations—of the reassertion of primacy of best man or woman for the other—suggests continued reliance on a hegemonically heterogendered framework for relationship structure. Yet, these participants do also begin to disrupt this framework in important ways. By subverting monogamy, they loosen (and create the potential for undoing) the connections between gender hierarchy and heterosexuality. In other words, their experiences with multiple lovers create an opportunity to develop a new lens through which to view intimate relations, one that does not require gendered competition or hierarchy and allows love among many equals.

This potential comes to fruition for some participants (8 or 4 couples) as they became more experienced with having multiple relationships. They learned, in a cognitive, emotional, and sexual way, that there was no need to engage in gendered competition because love did not require a winner. Instead, they discovered they enjoyed varied facets of their relationships and that each was inherently valuable without hierarchical arrangement. This shift in perspective allowed them to transcend gendered prescriptions—at least to a large extent. The following two

interview excerpts illustrate how and why these couples felt such guidelines were no longer necessary in their relationships.

When we first had other lovers, we had all these rules because we were scared and trying to protect ourselves. You know, what if she is hotter and better in bed? What if his dick is bigger? That sort of thing. We both worried, but as we worked through those fears, we realized they were just part of the old monogamy system meant to keep us in line. Love isn't measurable as the best, and people aren't possessions. Different loves meet different needs, and they can all be wonderful. Then the rules just fell away, and we give one another the freedom to experience love and joy as we can. (Cindy)

I used to get a sense of inadequacy as a man when Sherry [his wife] went out on dates, but now I don't. That's because of my relationship with Amy [his lover]. I love Amy and we are close, but she is not competing with Sherry. They are different things, and both are important. I am a better man because I have more love. I'm not looking at myself like some macho thing anymore. I'm glad Sherry has that experience too. We know you can love more than one person, and it isn't about possession or being the best. We don't need rules; we just have to love well. (Samuel)

These excerpts reveal a critical transformation. The couples shed the notion that an idealized gender enactment enables sexual success and love. As a result, the sense of competitiveness and possessiveness inherent in traditional gender power dynamics dissipates, recreating the relational dynamic between gender and heterosexuality. As Samuel says, he is no longer a "macho thing" worried about "inadequacy" but is now a "better man" who focuses on "loving well" in all his relationships.

These data thus reveal a tremendous shift in how some polyamorist participants learned to view the intersection of gender and sexual relationships. Whereas intimate relationships were once measured in importance and fitted to a kind of controlled form built on the hierarchical arrangement of masculinity and femininity, these couples measure them in terms of meeting their partner's needs and desires in whatever form fits. In doing so, participants came to perceive traditional gender practices as an impediment because they are rooted in possession, competition, and hierarchy. Under these conditions, the relational dynamic between masculinity and femininity can be dramatically changed and leveled.

Consequences of doing non-monogamy

Our contemporary culture reveres monogamy, holding it up as an ideal moral standard, as a kind of Holy Grail for intimacy, and as a cornerstone for establishing normative social interactions for individuals, groups, and institutions (Rambukkana, 2015: 3). Schippers (2016: 4) describes this institutionalized and compulsory monogamy as "the dominance and superiority of white heteromascularity as a set of cultural expectations, a social location, and an embodied experience" that offers individuals only one legitimate form of intimate relationship if

they are to lead fulfilled lives. This cultural prescription for gender relations and intimacy establishes ideal gender enactment as inextricably intertwined with only one heteronormative relationship form. The result is the reproduction of masculine superiority.

This study analyzes the consequences of varying this cultural prescription by asking how multiple partner intimacies impact gender ideals and power dynamics. Whether participating in multiple partner intimacies sustains or challenges traditional gender power dynamics, and to what extent it does so, really depends on how people practice intimacy. Swinger (hetero)couples who simply spice up their own sexual play through soft swaps that usually revolve around a FFM triad or women engaging in sex acts for a male audience are not altering this prescription at all. Instead, as this study shows, this sort of interaction relies on, highlights, and recreates hierarchical gender relations (Schippers, 2016: 146–149). The soft swap fits neatly into traditional gender relations and poses no threat to the monogamous couple form.

Swingers who progress into hard swaps, by contrast, do create small fractures in the power dynamics of traditional gender relationships. By de-linking love and sex and enabling free choice of extramarital sexual partners, an important thread is pulled free from the tapestry of gender relations that uphold male dominance. Women move from passive sexual objects to, like men, desiring agents who are not sexual possessions. However, this sort of “equal footing” is relegated to the field of sexual relations. Their belief in monogamous love meant that they often retained traditional gender notions, which evoked negative feelings that were controlled by establishing boundaries to protect their monogamous love connection. So, while these swingers do give women sexual agency and do, as Phillips (2010: 85) argues, show that “the boundaries maintaining monogamy in a holistic sense are more fluid than perhaps previously imagined,” they do not substantially diminish the hierarchy and importance of traditional gendered performance or erode the valorized heteronormative monogamous form of relationship.

Polyamorists, however, can challenge heterosexual monogamy as the ideal form for “good” relationships. They pull more threads from the tapestry of existing gender relations, unraveling not just ideas about erotic spaces but also how men and women exist ideologically in relation to one another. As participants experience situations in their own lives that make compulsory monogamy untenable, they build new relationship forms that can challenge gendered power dynamics. In this study, the extent to which this potential is fulfilled is impacted by how completely polyamorists disregard the prescribed heterogender relationship form. Study participants who relied on guidelines to protect their status as “the one” from the threat of others being “more important” still retained a link to monogamy as valued and to vestiges of gendered competitive performance, notions of possession, and hierarchy. However, polyamorist participants who were able to discard the idea of the one (and thus the last remnants of a monogamous framework), shifted to perceiving relationships in terms of how they functioned to meet needs and how they satisfied partners’ desires—regardless of form. In these cases, the relationship

between masculinity and femininity was thus altered from binary, opposing and hierarchical toward cooperative and egalitarian.

This study provides one example of the potential of polyamory to disrupt and destabilize compulsory monogamy and heterosexuality and to flatten attendant gender and sexual hierarchies. By rethinking and reimagining intimacy, these polyamorists starkly reveal the gender inequalities that undergird and are reproduced in existing socio-sexual relations and construct more gender egalitarian forms. Rendering these varied forms of intimacy culturally intelligible on a broad scale, however, will require creating new ideological frameworks and cultural resources to allow other relationship forms to become thinkable and doable. This sort of cultural shift requires coordination and communication within a subculture if it is to be successful (Scott, 1990). Polyamorists have begun this work by developing alternative narratives to the romantic love story (Ritchie, 2010) and creating a common discourse and shared vocabulary (Ritchie and Barker, 2006) to represent their relationships more closely. In short, polyamorists have begun to construct their own “meaning constitutive traditions” that impact “the thinkability of particular acts and projects” (Gross, 2005: 295–296) by creating ideological tools, relationship templates, and alternative discourses for those whose experiences or desires push them outside traditional gender relations. In doing so, they highlight contemporary gender and sexual binaries and inequalities and the cultural pathways we might traverse to undo them.

This study, because it focuses predominately on white, middle-class heterosexuals who participated primarily in dyadic sex, is limited to an analysis of gender power relations. Studying other configurations of polyamorous relationships that incorporate varied sexual or racial identities and/or triadic sex may allow for a greater understanding of the intersectionality of gender, racial and sexual inequalities (Schippers, 2016) and of how these forms of intimacy may pose challenges to white heterosexual male dominance. Investigating how these pathways might be different or problematic for more diverse and marginalized groups than the participants in this study will provide far more sociological insight into the complexities of interlocking inequalities.

ORCID iD

Michelle Wolkomir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2913-979X>

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Michelle Wolkomir is the Tracie Whitehurst Woods Board of Regents Endowed Professor of Sociology and the Director of Gender Studies at Centenary College. Her book, *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men*, received the 2006 American Sociological Association’s book award in sexualities. Other publications focus on mixed orientation marriage, non-monogamy, gender power dynamics among various groups, and interviewing techniques for sensitive populations. She was also appointed to Shreveport’s Mayoral Human Relations Commission to work against discriminatory practices.