

## Polyamory and the Media

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Polyamory is a form of relationship in which, where possible, valid and worthwhile, longer-term intimate and sexual relationships are maintained with multiple partners simultaneously and ethically; arrangements that occur with the knowledge and consent of all involved (Haritaworn et al 2006: 515). This is now a reasonably well demarcated definition across both the academic literature and popular books on the subject.

The best way to imagine polyamory is to view it as a phenomenon at the intersection of group marriage, loving multiple people and being open to the possibilities of what more than one simultaneous romantic relationship may hold.

There is still inadequate empirical data on the percentage of non-monogamous, and within that polyamorous, people in Western societies, but there are some early indications to their prevalence with some studies citing up to 15-28% of married couples having "and understanding that allows nonmonogamy under some circumstances" with percentages even higher among cohabiting couples, lesbian and gay male couples (Blumstein and Schwartz cited in Weitzman 2006).[1](#)

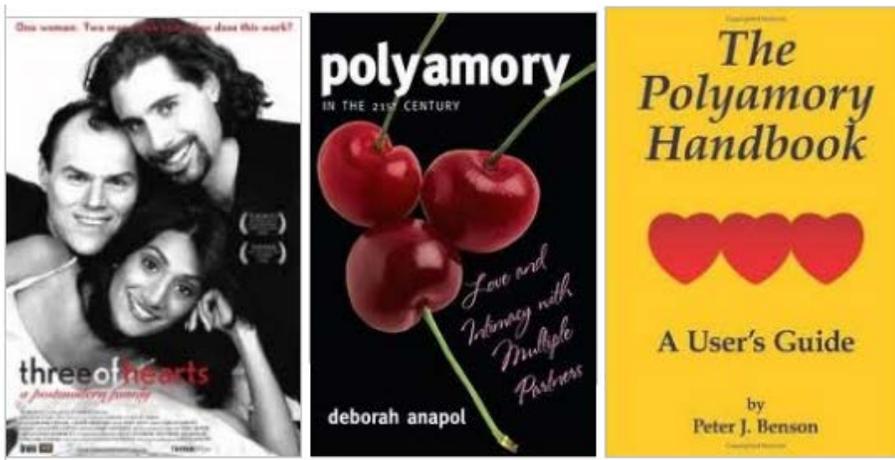
There are two strong ways of defining polyamory: one as demarcation from other modes of relating and the other in terms of its own strength and values. If we go down the demarcation pathway we can see that polyamory is different from other forms of non-monogamy. It is less couple and event focused than swinging and more transparent, intentional and complex than open relationships. It is much more ethical and morally self-consistent than cheating (non-consensual non-monogamy), even though cheating itself is arguably a very large part of the practice and mythology of monogamy.[2](#)

The other way of demarcating polyamory is by asserting its own characteristics that practitioners lay down as guiding principles for their living: non-exclusivity in both love and sex, autonomy of persons, transparency and honesty in dealing with each other, valuing intimacy, caring, equality, and communication as the ultimate tool for helping to put into practice all these principles. The '12 pillars of polyamory' also include authenticity, choice, transparency, trust, gender equality, honesty, open communication, being non-possessive, consensual, accepting of self-determination, being sex positive and understanding, and embracing compersion (Haslam 2008), the joy of witnessing our loved ones' joy with others.[3](#)

These two different definitions show that polyamory is a special liminal space within alternative forms of sexuality and is at the crossroads of several progressive social movements (Haritaworn et al 2006: 57) and in fact is building on each: feminism, gay and lesbian rights, bisexual movement and BDSM. 'Polyamory has arisen from the confluence of a number of sexually emancipatory discourses' (Haritaworn et al 2006: 518) and would probably not be possible without these precedents. Assertion-style definition shows that polyamory needs to be understood on its own terms and studied empirically from within and cannot be fully captured by positioning it in relation to other ways of forming relationships. This becomes especially important when we look at its representation later where polyamory is mistakenly derived from monogamy and cheating. Polyamory is both liminal (peripheral/relational) and self-defining which brings up a special challenge for both mainstream culture and polyamory: should it be extrapolated from monogamy and presented in a way that is comprehensible for the background culture, risking misunderstanding but perhaps gaining gradual acceptance; or should it be described as a self-enclosing relationship phenomenon achieving better self-definition but risking lack of exposure and chance for wider acceptance?

Widespread acceptance may not depend on scholarly interest, but it does show the maturing of polyamory as a research topic. Its academic literature is slowly gathering pace since the early 1990s. In 1995 a book called 'Breaking the Barriers to Desire — New Approaches to Multiple Relationships' (Lano and Parry (eds) 1995) appeared and was one of the first collections of essays on non-monogamy. At this point writers were still grappling with the early issues of a minority movement: self-definition, consistent vocabulary and coming to a more elaborate self-understanding that resists pathologization. In 2006 editors of a special issue of the *Sexualities* journal remarked that only a few years before there was little in the way of comprehensive academic studies and the literature up to that point comprised histories, memoirs and advice books (Haritaworn et al 2006: 517). In 2010 a comprehensive academic collection was published (Barker and Langdridge 2010) that showcased the burgeoning literature on non-monogamies: historical and popular culture perspectives, types of non-monogamy, intersection with race, class and disability, literature on parenting and families and psychotherapy. Currently there are numerous studies underway from a variety of disciplines probing more deeply into polyamory (Anita Wagner 2008a) and there is a special organisation for the academic study and dissemination of research results on alternative sexualities, including polyamory (CARAS 2011).

The polyamory movement itself is growing steadily. The Australian polyamory community has regular social and community meetings in at least three capital cities and a number of regional centres. They are represented in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and regularly volunteer for media appearances. Internationally poly communities are active in the US, Canada and Europe, with smaller communities in South Africa and Japan. In the US there are dozens of regional, state and national organisations that hold annual retreats and community festivals.[4](#) Internationally there are polyamorous symbols and a burgeoning specialist vocabulary.[5](#)



The popular literature comprises a dozen or so non-fiction books, most of them are in the advice or memoir category, and there is anecdotal evidence of polyamory related fiction.

Polyamorists have appeared on many talk shows on television in a number of countries, recently in Germany (MacRobert 2011a) and Australia (SBS 2011). There are many other developments that are a manifestation of polyamorists reaching out through various media to portray themselves: poly-flavoured reality tv, theatre plays, community produced web series and documentaries, weekly podcasts, long-standing reputable blogs, online community hubs, quality fora etc. There is even a media training organisation specifically for polyamorists to help them get their message out.<sup>6</sup>

Together all these organisations, groups and programs are developing an emancipatory discourse on multiple loving, on life beyond compulsory monogamy and heterosexuality, on how to nurture complex non-traditional relationships that defy existing norms, and on forming poly families and bringing up children in a non-traditional context.

Polyamorists do not live a monolithic lifestyle; they represent an amazing diversity of sexualities and ways of living. However there are a number of basic patterns of relationship they exhibit: Vs (two people pivoting on one without having a direct romantic relationship between them), triads (three people together), nodes/clusters and tribes. Bisexuality and BDSM are very common and there are 'open' and 'closed' clusters or families, with the latter called polyfidelity. Many community leaders are female which defies expectations that polyamory is a male-centred culture. Larger polyamorous communities often have access to alternative therapists and psychologists who specialise in polyamorous clients.

Interest in polyamory from outside the community has also been steadily growing. The amount of direct media attention across all segments is now considerable, therefore a complete exhaustive study would be improbable. In my research I have delved into newspaper and magazine articles from Australia, The United States of America, Canada and the UK. I have also sampled radio and television, and included articles that were responding to representations, in effect capturing the 'reverberations' of polyamory related issues in the media. In some cases the line is blurred between representation and response when the blogosphere lights up around a particular incidence. In such cases I have collected all the responses relating to the original articles. It was helpful that most articles were published after 2006 and therefore can be traced online with ease.

### **Polyamory as titillating infidelity: monogamous anxieties**

The vast majority of mainstream articles that mention polyamory are actually focussed on infidelity/cheating and consider polyamory both an extension of the idea of 'getting some on the side' and a frightening scenario to which the solution is monogamy.

I want to start the discussion on media representations of polyamory with the 'middle option', where polyamory is both titillating and unacceptable, because this representation betrays some deep cultural anxieties about monogamy itself and shows why polyamory is still not presented and accepted as a mainstream option.

Titillating representations of polyamory can most commonly be found in the tabloid media. Titillating articles rarely display a deeper interest in polyamory or other forms of ethical non-monogamy or misunderstand their rationale and inner logic. These articles tend to open with the supposedly tantalising idea of cheating as an option mimicking ethical non-monogamy, and almost inevitably end with a firm conclusion in which monogamy is the potential solution to any relationship problem or deeper questioning about sexuality and relationships.

These articles are not particularly interested in representing polyamory on its own terms because they are preoccupied with the monogamy/cheating dynamic instead. As such they have a lot more to say about the anxieties of the monogamous mainstream than about ethical forms of non-monogamy. Monogamy and cheating are portrayed in the mainstream media as logical opposites, in which one is good and the other is bad. Staying inside this black-and-white world leaves little room for comprehending ethical non-monogamy as it simply does not fit into the traditional mono-centric assumptions that

operate underneath the narrative.

Pepper Mint (2004) beautifully explains how the power dynamics of cheating play out in mainstream culture. He argues that rampant scorn of cheating is the everyday tool for reinforcing monogamy and that cheating and monogamy are interdependent as each position in this system provides for scripted opportunities for personal power. What is at operation in this system is the tools for cultural conformity that attempt to both bring cheaters back into monogamy and portray polyamory (and bisexuality) as unacceptable options on the grounds of their commonalities with cheating.

Titillating articles tend to imply that polyamory and cheating are bedfellows: they are both logical opposites to monogamy, both provide titillating alternatives for 'philanderers', and both are problematic and need to find resolution in returning to the cultural norm. But this is a false duality as monogamy needs cheating in order to reinforce its cultural dominance and to provide a predictable counterpoint that can be demonized in the service of conformity. Polyamory, on the other hand, is neither a scripted extension of monogamy, nor the counterpoint that reinforces the duality: it is an alternative system of having multiple consensual relationships based on three-person structures that are not modelled on cheating. The very logic of titillating articles rests on the notion that all ambiguous behaviour can be relegated to a negative category, that all behaviour that is not monogamy is automatically cheating (Pepper Mint 2004: 9). Polyamory is in fact a radical break with the assumptions of the monogamous framework and this is why mainstream articles need to either misunderstand it or make it synonymous with cheating, so it can be relegated to the unacceptable category.

Titillating articles tend to portray polyamory as something more salacious, forbidden or desirable than it actually is in order to present the reader with voyeurism. Mistaken assumptions about polyamory are common: that polyamory is depraved and always involves promiscuity, or that polyamorous people lack self-esteem or are sex addicts. Sometimes polyamory is described as a valid minority 'taste' that nevertheless cannot be widely recommended. There are also assumptions about human relations, emotions and desire: that jealousy is a serious impediment to the viability of ethical non-monogamy, that there is only a certain amount of romantic love to go around (this is sometimes called the starvation economy of love) and that sexual desire is a destructive force in people's lives unless it is strictly controlled and channelled in prescribed ways. Polyamory is not fully acceptable for several reasons: on moral and ethical grounds, in terms of the transgressive nature of the practice and because it supposedly brings up unmanageable issues. Yet, it seems irresistible to engage with the idea of 'expanding on fidelity'.

The interesting dynamic with the titillating articles is that polyamory is only really titillating if a large enough percentage of monogamous people reading the articles are fascinated by the idea of non-monogamy. There are lots of different studies that show varying degrees of cheating and infidelity in monogamous couples. Considering the devilish difficulties in defining, let alone empirically measuring such behaviour, it is not surprising that the figures vary wildly, however they are generally still indicative: depending on the study, the incidence of infidelity stands at 25-70% of long-term self-defined monogamous heterosexual couples (Frank and DeLamater 2010: 11-12) and there are probably more who toy with the idea at some point. These people, and their suspecting or anxious partners are the most likely readers for this kind of mainstream article.

There is a growing private investigation business where spouses hire detectives to stalk their partners and find evidence of cheating or lack thereof. This last development is especially a good indicator of the underlying tensions within monogamous relationships and the obvious interest in infidelity issues is seized on by mainstream media eager to attract attention based on monogamous anxieties. The constant preoccupation with cheating and cheaters in the popular media is a strong sign that monogamy is being threatened by its own anxieties, which, in turn, are used to reinforce its dominance. The unacceptance of polyamory and its branding as a practice synonymous with cheating continues to reinforce the standard norms of exclusivity and fidelity to one partner.

### **Polyamory as unacceptable**

Some of these titillating articles will clearly aim to demonstrate how polyamory is not an acceptable or desirable choice, but they usually sustain a level of interest or preoccupation with alternatives to monogamy, even if they conflate polyamory with cheating. These articles are clearly beaten in their pursuit of painting polyamory as unacceptable by outright conservative articles that go several steps further as they attempt to demonise polyamory.



Many of these are so furious in their opposition that they fail to conceptually separate out different forms of non-monogamy (Muehlenberg 2008). For some, polyamory is not only unacceptable but a threat to the moral social order of families. Bill Muehlenberg, a conservative commentator, evokes the scary image of polyamory as the morally bankrupt option that masquerades as progress:

And there seems to be endless conferences, meetings and support groups out there devoted to this growing movement. There are even entire TV series devoted to this, such as the US-made *Big Love*, which our own SBS in Australia is happy to run prime time on Saturday nights. Sadly, this is not merely the stuff of hormonally-charged fruitcakes.

There are plenty of "serious" academic, educational, political and legal groups pushing this stuff as well.

All of this may have been unthinkable just a few short decades ago, but the times they are a changin'. But the interesting thing about all this is how it is simply the logical extension of both the sexual revolution, and the attempt to redefine marriage and family out of existence.

Polyamory is simply the next step along the slippery slope that began around about the 1960s. When the institutions of marriage and family were attacked by the sexual libertines and social engineers back then, they knew that the best way to destroy them was to radically redefine them. The idea was that any and all sexual relationships were as good as another (Muehlenberg 2008: 2).

The famous slippery slope argument is thus evoked. Muehlenberg asserts that the demise of monogamy started with cohabitation, followed by gay rights and now polyamory. All of these developments are clearly unacceptable as they all involve some degree of promiscuity or sexual relations outside the confines of monogamous heterosexual marriages and therefore threaten the institution of marriage. Polyamorous ideals of love, consent and respect are labelled as parts of a radical rhetoric that aims to destroy the family. Finally he says "[t]he answer to all these weird and wild sexual combinations and permutations is to return to the age-old understanding of what real marriage is all about. Until then, the slope will only get more slippery" (ibid.).

International articles present similar hostility. Stanley Kurtz (2005) from the conservative Hudson Institute is able to differentiate between polyamory and polygamy but argues that they are effectively one and the same. Kurtz cautions that the combined efforts of polyamory and polygamy are riding on the wave of same-sex marriage and the growing acceptance of bisexuality in order to push for the legal acceptance of group marriage. Again, polyamory is depicted as the ultimate challenge to 'traditional families':

[T]he culture of marriage will be battered for years by the debate. Just as we're now continually reminded that not all married couples have children, we'll someday be endlessly told that not all marriages are monogamous (nor all monogamists married). For a second time, the fuzziness and imperfection found in every real-world social institution will be contorted into a rationale for reforming marriage out of existence (Kurtz 2005: 15).

The conservative fear is that polyamorists will be successful at pushing for multi-partner marriage and that this will effectively abolish the institution of marriage, which assumes that granting rights to others who want different configurations of marriage will somehow decrease the validity and value of 2-person heterosexual traditional marriages.

William Duncan (2010) in *The American Spectator* also cautions about Canadian developments towards advancing multi-person marriages. Duncan maintains there is no evidence that polyamory is not harmful to children, yet he also asserts that

any future social scientific study into this matter would most likely be flawed and therefore should be ignored. His view is that polyamory is even more harmful than polygamy because the latter may at least be orderly while the former is sheer chaos, and both of them 'promote infidelity' and therefore will undoubtedly harm children.

Patrick Fagan (2010) in a Touchstone article (a Christian magazine) articulates the same concerns and provides further judgments based on moral assumptions. According to Fagan polyamorists seek freedom from all constraints in order to live a promiscuous life, they are anti-religious, they obey no moral order or ethical standard, subscribe to relativism, follow an irresponsible hedonistic path in which children are ignored, are disorderly, chaotic and inscrutable, they hold nothing sacred and sacrifice all traditional morals on the altar of pleasure. They are also 'polymorphously perverse', their lifestyle caves in to aggressive destructive male desires (sexual or otherwise), they confuse gender roles, and foster a sterile culture (Fagan 2010).

There are many more such publications that tend to come from a religious conservative angle and describe polyamory as clearly unacceptable on the grounds of morality and potential harm to traditional marriages and children. This hostile discourse views polyamory as threatening to the very social fabric of life and paints a picture in which polyamory inevitably leads to unacceptable outcomes for everyone. This conservative, mostly Christian, discourse shows deep cultural anxieties around multi-partnering and sees any deviation from the traditional marriage as morally flawed. It clearly rejects polyamory as having any merit or legitimacy on the basis of a moralistic argument that appeals to conservative notions of what 'true human nature' supposed to represent.

### Positive representations

There are many positive representations of polyamory in the media, especially in the last 4-5 years. One sign of an unwavering interest is that the Australian polyamory community receives numerous invitations each year to participate in programs and articles, and this interest has been sustained for several years now.

Positive representations could be divided into several types: articles that polyamory community members write themselves (Cobalt 2011, Croydon 2011), ones that are written about them as features in various newspapers and magazines (Bennett 2009, Brown 2008, Miller 2010, Smithies and MacDougall 2009), and thoroughly researched articles that do not directly involve polyamorous laypeople in the making of their stories and provide in-depth analysis such as New Scientist (Newitz 2006), Wired (Lynn 2008), and The New York Times (Oppenheimer 2011, Williams 2008).



Thanks to these positive representations, polyamory is better understood than ever. Many newspapers and magazines in English speaking liberal democracies have shown a genuine interest in presenting polyamory in its complexity by delving in to explore a topic that can be difficult, and presenting polyamorists in ways they themselves can accept. Most of these media outlets are non-tabloid in nature and their articles on polyamory share some basic characteristics: they tend to explore polyamory in depth, they make a concerted effort at understanding its intricacies such as not conflating it with cheating or polygamy, and generally present polyamory in an acceptable light. These positive representations, however, are not necessarily devoid of critical investigation and questions from a monogamous point of view are addressed in a robust way. There is a considerable amount of healthy debate which adds to a more balanced and nuanced representation.

A case in point is Emma Jane (2010) who in The Australian described the harmonious lives of a female-male-female triad who are awaiting the birth of their baby, have received disapproval and confusion from friends and community and do their best to carry on with their lives as best they can. They aren't held up as perfect examples of an alternative family, but as an honest non-traditional arrangement in which they tackle problems as they arise. Jane is both sympathetic and represents the triad's situation in a positive light:

Given the ubiquity of cheating spouses (there are now commercial websites devoted to facilitating marital infidelity), it seems grossly hypocritical to judge those who are open and ethical about having more than one lover.

But Mari, Sara and David endure way more than their fair share of rude and weird reactions. Their jog-as-a-family neighbours won't wave back to them and Sara's mum thinks she is some kind of insatiable, nymphomaniac adulteress.

"But dammit, we're not freaks!" Sara says. "We're not hurting anyone. And we have three earners, three minds to think through situations and now three people to care for a baby."

And as they count down the days until the birth of little Kate next month, they are convinced that any stigma their daughter faces in the community will be well and truly countered by the 50 per cent increase in the usual loving parenthood quotient she will have at home. (Emma Jane 2010: 2-3)

Polyamory is not represented as a mainstream choice here, in fact it is displayed as a marginal alternative to monogamy, yet the overall representation is both shaded and complex, allowing for the self-described polyamorous story to emerge. Jane avoids direct comparisons with monogamy and steers clear of cultural conformity by allowing her triad to introduce themselves on their terms instead of collapsing their story back into monogamy. Articles such as Jane's are as close to a mainstream acceptance of polyamory as media representations get in the new millennium.

Some North American representations, especially in the Boston Globe, Newsweek and The New York Times, tend to be particularly detailed, complex and favourable. Instead of heterosexual monogamous anxieties lurking behind negative assumptions about non-monogamy, here we find a more ready approach to confront difficult questions about marriage and families, fidelity and desires, romantic ideals and their feasibility and desirability, and humanity's changing self-understanding in relation to sex and relationships. The explicit assumption is that such an evolving self-understanding will inevitably involve changing cultural assumptions about monogamy and a deliberate opening, at least for some, towards new types of non-monogamy.

But what matters is that neither monogamy nor polygamy is humankind's sole natural state. "One size never fits all, and it isn't just dividing between men and women and gay and straight," she said. "Monogamy is not natural, nonmonogamy is not natural. Variation is what's natural." [...]

Judith Stacey, a New York University sociologist who researched gay men's romantic arrangements for her book "Unhitched," [says] "I believe monogamy is actually crucial for some couples and totally irrelevant for others." That does not mean that nonmonogamous couples are free to do as they please. Creating nonmonogamy that strengthens rather than corrodes a marriage is surely as much work as monogamy. Couples should make vows and honor them. Not all good relationships require monogamy, but they all require what she calls integrity" (Oppenheimer 2011: 6)

These positive representations of polyamory are attempting to shift public discussions from compulsory monogamy to a more open-ended view that includes the possibility of new forms of consensual non-monogamy that manage to integrate commitment and sexual freedom. From these representations new narratives are born on how relationships can be negotiated beyond the bounds of traditional pair-bonding.

### **Is poly the new gay? Legal challenges and future dilemmas**

Kirkman (2010), Melloy (2010) and others have drawn parallels between the gay and lesbian movement and that of polyamory. There are certainly notable similarities as well as differences. Both are important to note as each could become either a hindrance or an advantage in the fight for legal rights. The gay and lesbian movement has been fighting for decades against discrimination and continues to lobby for legal equality, with notable advances that vary greatly between liberal democracies. Part of this continued fight is the same-sex marriage debate that may or may not become extended to eventually include polyamory and a potential push towards the recognition of multi-partner unions.

Firstly, there are definitely some similarities. Gays and lesbians have experienced oppression, stigma and discrimination and polyamorous people are going through these experiences themselves. Considering that potentially a large percentage (33-54%) of polyamorous people are also gay, lesbian or bisexual (Page 2004 cited in Weitzman 2006), the overlaps are even more considerable.

The arguments against GLBT people and polyamorists have common elements: both are often opposed on the basis of morality, both are regularly defined as unnatural 'lifestyles' standing against the traditional social order, and both have been accused of being detrimental to children and families (and in both cases the counter-arguments have been made and empirical evidence has been collected to the contrary). Compulsory heterosexual monogamy clashes with both positions establishing parallels between the gay and lesbian movements and polyamory based on oppression and exclusion from the mainstream.

The eventual fight to abolish discrimination towards polyamorists may also be similar. There is no legal protection against discrimination on the basis of a polyamorous life in Australia or elsewhere, however there is ample evidence of a growing movement against legal discrimination and towards recognition which involve a variety of strategies.

There are legal investigations aiming to include polyamory under sexual preferences in order to provide a basis for a legal fight against discrimination (Tweedy 2010). Recently there was a landmark constitutional case in Canada that significantly raised the profile of polyamory. In this case anti-polygamy laws were challenged by the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association representing five polyamorous families in order to avert potential criminalisation of polyamorists (MacRobert

2011b). The original law was aimed against religious Mormon polygyny (one husband, two or more wives) and child abuse in such sects in British Columbia. Although this fight is specifically against the criminalisation of polyamorists, not the extension of marriage rights yet, it is considered to be the most high profile legal action by polyamorists anywhere in the world, in a country where same-sex marriage rights have already been won. In California a polyamorous quad (four people in group marriage) has taken a different route; they have signed legal documents to testify that they are all legal spouses and have taken up one family name. They are hoping to set a legal and moral precedent (Antonowicz 2011). There are news of many more undocumented cases circulating amongst community members about polyamorists, in Australia and abroad, who have lost jobs and rental accommodation, faced child custody battles and discrimination at work or withstood shame and ostracism not unlike those in the gay movement before them.

However the differences between the gay and lesbian movement and the polyamory one are also considerable. Polyamory is not currently a sexual orientation in law, it resists neat categorisation and defies appropriation by the mainstream culture because it challenges not one but several deeply held social conventions: sexual and romantic exclusivity, two people forming a couple, and the general norms and assumptions that govern two-person relationships. Polyamory is more than shared sexual adventures beyond the existing couple's boundaries (swinging) and is different from having the same gendered partner (gay/lesbian). The former does not explicitly challenge the two-person definition of coupledness, while the latter formally aims to stay within those same bounds but with a same-sex partner. Polyamory, however, creates completely unique norms and narratives that defy accommodation and are deeply challenging to the couple-centric paradigm that underpins all other recognised relationship forms.

Gay and lesbian culture too has unacceptable elements that defy appropriation, yet after more than forty years of struggle being gay or lesbian has become much more acceptable and gay culture has a two-person narrative that neatly fits mainstream understanding of relationships. The white picket fence narrative of monogamy, respectable occupations and desire for raising children, maps onto compulsory monogamy. Many gay and lesbian couples do not fit this narrative and resent the assumptions of cultural conformity, yet it is this version of a monogamous gay life that is on the verge of acceptance through same-sex marriage. Polyamorists, on the other hand, face a much more difficult battle to find a version of their narrative that can be offered up to the mainstream as a symbolic representation of its compatibility with wider societal values. The most likely candidate for acceptance might be the polyfidelitous triad in which three people are sexually and romantically exclusive with each other. Polyfidelity may be able to acquire the same status as the gay and lesbian white picket fence family, by simply boosting the number of individuals in a family from two to three in relation to a traditional couple. However, other forms of polyamory, and more radical forms of gay and lesbian life, may always defy 'mainstreaming' and never become fully acceptable. They may face the same battles and dilemmas in the long run.

Anita Wagner, a well known polyamory community organiser, writer and blogger from the USA, puts it this way during a New York Pride Rally:

"The mainstreaming of polyamory is well under way, and as community organizers and advocates it is our duty to be prepared to continue to effectively participate in the ongoing public dialogue about alternatives to monogamy in a way that debunks misconceptions and helps mainstreamers understand that they do indeed have options as to how they arrange their intimate relationships. This means that we must present ourselves and our message in a way that helps them relate to us. This means becoming comfortable with putting a less radical face on polyamory so as not to distract the listener from the message. (Wagner, 2008b)"

'Mainstreaming' poses a great dilemma for both gay and lesbian couples and to polyamorists: should they fight for acceptance at the expense of being accepted only on the basis of a more culturally conformist outlook, or should they resist appropriation at such an unacceptable price to both identity and practice and risk further discrimination and invisibility? Polyamory, by its very nature, is perhaps too nebulous, complex and diverse to be accommodated and accepted fully on its own terms and will remain on the outside culturally, sharing a space with those in the GLBT community who resist or can never aspire to be in the mainstream. Polyamory may continue to frustrate categorisation, control, containment and even comprehension, and as such it may never achieve a wider acceptance. In an alternative scenario polyamorists will find a way legally and culturally to break through on the edges and attain the visibility and acceptance they seek. However, they will have to contend with the dilemma that mainstream acceptance may ultimately pose and decide if the price is worth paying.

## Conclusions

As the polyamory movement continues to develop, so too, does its media representation. Conservative views of complete rejection betray deep anxieties about the future of relationships and condemn polyamory on moralistic grounds. Titillating representations are only able to superficially grapple with the complexities of polyamory. They continue to retreat into the false duality of the cheating/monogamy system in their attempt at understanding polyamory's challenge to the cultural conformity of monogamy. Positive representations show the possibility of understanding polyamory on its own terms without fear for other relationship forms. Finally the gay and lesbian movement and polyamory share the source of their oppression but experience discrimination on a different basis. Both face the dilemmas that 'mainstreaming' may pose and have to negotiate the terms of their potential acceptance.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Weitzman 2006, pages 141-2: "Page (2004) found that 33% of her bisexual sample of 217 participants were involved in a polyamorous relationship, and 54% considered this type of relationship ideal. West (1996) reported that 20% of her lesbian respondents were polyamorous, while Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that 28% of the lesbian couples in their sample were. Blumstein and Schwartz found that 65% of the gay male couples in their study were polyamorous, and that 15-28% of their heterosexual couples had "an understanding that allows nonmonogamy under some circumstances" (p.312)".

<sup>2</sup> Pepper Mint (2004) shows how cheating and monogamy are not polar opposites but actually the two sides of the same monogamy coin. Cheating is not only commonplace and expected but is punished and thereby it is also a spectacle that reinforces the norms of monogamy. In this regard monogamy and cheating are a false dichotomy. A more meaningful distinction would be between monogamy and types of ethical consensual non-monogamy such as polyamory.

[3](#) Compersion and frubble both signify the same meaning: the joy experienced when witnessing our loved ones' pleasure and joy with someone else or with each other, a pleasure that speaks of altruism and is sometimes called the 'opposite of jealousy'. Compersion is a wonderful example of how polyamorists are inventing a new vocabulary to describe their own unique experience.

[4](#) World Polyamory Association 2011.

[5](#) These include the previously mention 'compersion' and 'frubble', also 'metamour' which comes from 'meta' and 'amour' referring to a person's partner's partner(s) with whom the original person is not in direct romantic relationship.

[6](#) The Polyamory Media Association is a non-profit organisation bringing together media and public speaking professionals who freely train polyamorists in talking to the media, helps them get their message across and helps them become more media savvy.

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