

SPIRITUAL IDENTITIES OF MULTIPLY PARTNERED PEOPLE

by

Akhila Elizabeth Ann Kolesar

A dissertation submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Clinical Psychology

Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

Palo Alto, California

June 8, 2010

I certify that I have read and approved the content and presentation of this dissertation:

Jenny Wade, Ph.D., Committee Chairperson

Date

Geri Weitzman, Ph.D., Committee Member

Date

Ryan Rominger, Ph.D., Committee Member

Date

Copyright

©

Akhila Elizabeth Ann Kolesar

2010

All Rights Reserved

Formatted according to the

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th Edition

Abstract**Spiritual Identities of Multiply Partnered People**

by

Akhila Elizabeth Ann Kolesar

Polyamory, or an open and consensual nonmonogamous way of relating, is a relationship formation that is practiced by a significant portion of the population, warranting scholarship on the subject and adherence to clinical recommendations when conducting psychotherapy. This mixed-methods study investigated the spiritual identities of multiply partnered people, tracing change over time, relationship between religious or spiritual affiliation and core values, and association between sex and spirituality. In the quantitative portion of the study, 484 online surveys were administered to gather this information and participant demographics, and then 33 follow-up interviews were conducted from among survey participants to obtain qualitative data that expanded on the quantitative results. The demographic trends of the sample reflected a population who were mostly college-educated, Caucasian, bisexual or pansexual women in their 30s, who were raised Christian (Protestant and/or Catholic) and are now pagan, and resided in the Western United States. Forty percent of the sample practiced kink/BDSM, while the majority reported sex and spirituality as being moderately connected. The sample reported a decrease in religiosity and a strong increase in liberalism since childhood. Many felt that their lifestyle was an innate, nonpossessive, bisexual orientation towards loving, while nonpagan religious and societal pressures added undue struggle and marginalization to their experience. The majority of multiply partnered people were raised in moderately conservative, Judeo-Christian households, not dissimilar from national census statistics. As this population began coming out to themselves

and to others about their nonmonogamous interests, they converted to more liberal, earth-based, and eclectic spiritual worldviews. Religions such as Wicca or paganism may be more conducive to maintaining moral pride while living a nonmonogamous lifestyle, in that they provide practitioners with a philosophical framework that normalizes nonheterosexual interests and the sacredness of sexuality. Implications for psychology, especially for psychotherapists and transpersonal psychologists, are presented and discussed.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In a nation where gender and sexual orientation are commonly constructed as binaries, relationship forms are also seen as one of two extremes: the faithful, monogamous romance or the secretive, harmful affair. This dualistic approach to categorizing human sexuality creates a large gap within which many sexual identities and experiences of loving go unnoticed and invalidated. Polyamorous relationship formations are an alternative to mainstream monogamy and binary notions of sexual relationships. This research is aimed at unearthing personal accounts of why people choose to be polyamorous and how this choice relates to their spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives of sexually relating to others.

Polyamory literally means *many loves* (Miller, 1997); it is a term used to describe nonmonogamous frameworks for sexually relating that emphasize honesty, authenticity, and responsibility (Barker, 2005; Halpern, 1999; Miller, 1997). This form of relating gained popularity and notoriety in the United States with the sexual revolution of the 1960s, but at that time the concept was judged as a reactionary movement rather than as a legitimate way of being in relationship. The term polyamory was first published in the May 1990 issue of *Green Egg* in Morning Glory Zell's article, "Bouquet of Lovers" (Zell, 1990). Zell's article provided a common word for people who engage in this style of loving, giving legitimacy to the relationship form and a way to discuss the phenomenon in social science research. Prior to this, the concept was discussed under different titles, such as *open marriage* in Nena and George O'Neill's (1972) book by the same name, and *polyfidelity* to mean group marriage as used by those involved in the Kerista Commune in the early 1970s (Winegar, 2002). Activist groups now use the term polyamory as a way to bring attention to the issues and concerns of the diverse population of people who are multiply partnered. Many divergent relationship styles are placed under the

umbrella of polyamory when the word is more commonly used. These styles include but are not limited to *open relationships*, *intimate networks*, *ranked relationships*, polyfidelity, and other forms that are discussed further in Chapter 2: Literature Review. Furthermore, others may practice polyamory without calling their relationships polyamorous, making a study of the relationship form difficult (R. Robins, 2005). For purposes of this research, polyamory will be included in a broader descriptor that includes relationships in which an individual is simultaneously partnered with multiple people and all partners are aware of and consent to the multiple involvements. A definition such as this makes an important distinction between cheating (which is void of openness or honesty), serial monogamy (in which the multiple relationships are not simultaneous), and being openly and consensually partnered with multiple people simultaneously.

The concept of polyamory challenges the traditional parameters, namely monogamy, commonly attributed to committed relationships; but this expanded notion of loving also challenges the heteronormative and patriarchal foundations of what constitutes marriage and the making of a family (Rabinow, 1994). “It explicitly allows for and encourages the change and growth that a more flexible view of commitment permits” (Halpern, 1999, p. 160). The term polyamory is used to convey a way of relating that is strictly independent of cultural assumptions of monogamy just as the term *queer* is used to challenge the often unspoken assumption of heterosexuality (Hall, 2003). Scholars and activists use the term polyamory to convey an intention of loving many, as opposed to using a term like *nonmonogamy* which simply means not loving only one (Rust, 2003). Similarly, the term *queer* is most often used in reference to a broad, self-defined identity that attempts to assign meaning without using heterosexuality as the point of reference (Hall, 2003). *Queer*, in this sense, is a category of identification inclusive of

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) sexualities as well as unconventional sexual practices that both heterosexual and LGBT people may use (Nichols, n.d.). Polyamory, therefore, is a queer sexual practice and may be included under a larger rubric of queer theory.

Sexual behaviors or practices become identities through a complicated and socially political process. First, a single behavior is made “normal,” and then other behaviors are made “deviant” in relation to the first behavior that was declared as normal (Foucault, 1976/1980; Liska, 1987; Simon, 1996). Those who declare what is normal and what is deviant categorize and thus label the behaviors as belonging to a greater organization, or in this case, identity. Certain individuals and professions are granted the privilege to exert power over what or who is labeled with the value judgment of normal versus deviant (Foucault, 1976/1980). A foundational argument of queer theory is that identities are not singular, and cannot be assigned by anyone other than the self (Butler, 1993; Hall, 2003). Although polyamory is not currently presented in the literature as a sexual orientation, those who are openly multiply partnered are considered to be sexual minorities and therefore popularly included under the umbrella identity of queer (Nichols, n.d.). Queer is a broad term of identification with a sociopolitical movement that is based on members having nonconventional sexual practices and/or relationship forms (Bell, 1999). Although an exploration of the history of this term reveals decades of derogatory usage, the term queer has been reclaimed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender political activists to denote a single, positive affiliation between sexual minorities (Hall, 2003). In this work, the term queer will be used in the same way, to reference sexual minorities as a group when specific sexual identities or sexual orientations are not the subject of focus. Sexual minorities include lesbians and gays (exclusively homosexual individuals), bisexuals (those with both homosexual and heterosexual attractions), pansexuals (those who are attracted to men, women, and

transgendered or gender variant people), and those with unconventional sexual or relational practices such as BDSM (bondage/domination/sadism/masochism) and polyamory (Nichols, n.d.). The term sexual identity will be used to reference how one conceptualizes one's sexuality, including but not limited to one's sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual preferences, preferred relationship form, and sexual community. The term sexual orientation will be used to indicate an individual's sexual attraction to others and how s/he understands this attraction as a part of personal and social life. Related but independent from sexual identity and sexual orientation is an individual's preferred relationship form, and this term will be used to denote formations such as polyamory, monogamy, nonmonogamy, and others. When specificity is needed, the term polyamorous will be used to denote being openly and consensually partnered with multiple people simultaneously.

Polyamory is theoretically described as an intentional process of making many intimate relations with the honesty, emotional commitment, and care that is often excluded in other forms of nonmonogamous relationships (Munson & Stelboum, 1999a). Strangely, though, the moral atmosphere in U.S. society is one that allows more room for the forgiveness of infidelity than for an open, honest, and emotionally committed nonmonogamy (Block, 2008). "The only widely available language that can account for nonmonogamous relationships is that of infidelity" (Ritchie & Barker, 2006), and cheating is more socially acceptable than polyamory because it fits within the framework of monogamy (Rabinow, 1994). Polyamorous individuals, therefore, are not only marginalized because of their involvement in what may be considered a sexually deviant practice by general U.S. standards, but also because the existence of polyamory challenges the idea that commitment, namely sexual exclusivity, is the foundation of the American family and the glue of romantic relationships.

Research on polyamory and other forms of multiply partnered relationships is scant when compared to the growing psychological, political, and sociological works on other sexual minorities, such as gays and lesbians (Barker, 2005; McLean, 2004; Sheff, 2005). Polyamory is a way of relating that assumes sexual freedom and responsible nonmonogamy, challenging the underlying cultural assumption that love can only ethically be enacted between two people—one male and one female. Homosexuality, bisexuality, and polyamory challenge the heteronormative culture dominant in the U.S. and are thus taboo topics that receive much criticism in both the popular sphere as well as in academia (Barker, 2005; Sheff, 2005). This social climate reinforces the invisibility of sexual minorities by creating an atmosphere that is unwelcoming to publicly identifying as a polyamorous individual. The hiding, or “closeting,” of a polyamorous identity is institutionalized through the absence of a public discourse that is inclusive of this relationship form. Furthermore, insensitivities in the medical and mental health spheres reinforce individuals’ needs for emotional safety by maintaining secrecy. Thus, polyamorous individuals hold little power in the sociopolitical discourse on sexuality, identity, and relationships (Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2005; Mint, 2004; Rust, 2003; Sheff, 2005).

A number of popular works exist that serve as introductions or “how to” books in which readers may begin an intellectual, if not physical, exploration of polyamory (e.g., Anapol, 1997; Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004; Benson, 2008; Block, 2008; Easton & Liszt, 1997; Foster, 2000; Francoeur, Cornog, & Perper, 1999; Kaldera, 2005; Lano & Parry, 1995; Lessin, 2006; Life, 2004; Matik, 2002; Mazur, 2000; Munson & Stelboum, 1999b; O’Neill & O’Neill, 1972; Ravenscroft, 2004; Taormino, 2008; West, 1996), but research on polyamorous relationships or individuals is rare. A handful of empirical studies look into this unique aspect of human sexuality while also acknowledging the inseparability of social politics from this topic (e.g., Klesse, 2005;

Mint, 2004; Sheff, 2005). The greater literature on polyamory covers multiple factors of the polyamorous identity and the practice of polyamory, but the religious and/or spiritual experiences of this population are continually overlooked. Three researchers have gathered data about the spiritual or religious identities of polyamorous people (e.g., Nearing, 2001; Walston, 2001; Weitzman, 2007), yet no studies to date have investigated how spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives inform the practices of those who are openly and consensually partnered with multiple people simultaneously.

This research is aimed at unearthing personal accounts of why people choose to be openly and consensually multiply partnered and how this choice relates to their spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives. What are the spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives of multiply partnered people? Are there significant differences between the spiritual identities, experiences, and perspectives of this population when compared demographically (i.e., by age or sexual orientation)? These questions are intended to address the current gaps in research on multiply partnered people and the practice of polyamory, furthering the psychological study of human sexuality and spirituality, especially around the issues where such practices conflict with social mores of “ethical” sexual behavior. Researchers have investigated people who identify as polyamorous as well as those who identify as cheaters (e.g., Drigotas & Barta, 2001; Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; LaSala, 2004; Orzeck & Lung, 2005; Schmitt, 2004), but multiple, detailed literature searches revealed no studies on how spiritual identities and philosophical perspectives may relate to reasons people choose to be polyamorous. This study, it is hoped, will enhance understanding of a group of people who have been marginalized based on relationship preferences, gender, and/or sexual orientation.