

Monogamy and Polyamory: Human Sexuality and Relationship Models

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Introduction

Polyamory is defined as *the state or practice of having more than one open romantic relationship at a time* (Merriam-Webster). Derived from the Greek word *poly* and the latin word *amor*, polyamory literally means “many loves”. While monogamy remains normative in the United States, the growing polyamorous community challenges hetero-monogamous normativity and its associated gender roles. The polyamorous, or poly, community allows us to view a relationship model that falls outside of the heteronormative dichotomy.

These characteristics of polyamory and the poly community make it an interesting vantage point from which to study the different forms of intimate relationships into which people enter. In this paper, I will be looking at the polyamorous community as well as the monogamous community in order to better understand, “How do individuals who identify as polyamorous view human sexuality?”

Literature Review

There has been very little research done on the polyamorous community and therefore there is scarce scholarly literature available on the subject. For this reason, I have expanded my literature review to include writings on alternative, non-normative sexual lifestyles, practices, and relationship models. I found a variety of journal articles that comment on gender roles and relationship models, as they are socially contextualized within a heteronormative culture.

Bisexuality, in particular, is often associated with polyamory. Meg Barker claims that this is because polyamory gives people the ability to challenge gender roles more than monogamous bisexuality (Barker). Christian Klesse further explores the highly bisexually-focused polyamory literature in his article *Bisexual Women, Non-Monogamy and Differentialist Anti-Promiscuity Discourses Sexualities*. He discusses reasons for the co-association of bisexuality and polyamory as well as the stigmatizing affects of being publicly bisexual and non-monogamous (Kesse).

Roger H. Rubin, in his paper *Alternative Lifestyles Revisited, or Whatever Happened to Swingers, Group Marriages, and Communes*, writes of the lack of recent scholarly discussion of the aforementioned groups. He provides us with a history of the study of alternative lifestyles and suggests that swingers, group marriages and communes have remained on the fringes of social discussion and study because they “threaten the cultural image of what marriage is supposed to be” (Rubin).

Esther Rothblum, in her article *Poly-friendships*, discusses the inconsistencies between the monogamous sexual relationship model, and the polyamorous friendship model. She notes that while sexual relationships are normatively monogamous, non-sexual friendships are culturally *allowed* to be polyamorous. To further explore this issue, Rothblum explores the definitions of “sex” and “friendship” as well as the culture surrounding sex in the U.S. and Western nations (Rothblum).

In her article *Three or More in Love: Group Marriage or Integrating Commitment and Sexual Freedom*, Annina Sartorius discusses several examples of polyamory and group marriages in the past two hundred years. She also discusses in depth Komaja (i.e. "Radiant Love"), the international spiritual and philosophical community founded in 1978 (Sartorius).

The literature on polyamory and nonmonogamy is varied, and relatively scarce. With this research project, I hope to contribute to the current polyamorous discourse by asking, "How do individuals who identify as polyamorous view human sexuality?"

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the relatively small polyamorous community, and its limited accessibility, I decided to seek respondents using the Internet. Using [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) I created a short questionnaire of fifteen questions, some multiple-choice style and some open-ended. This questionnaire was posted online at several popular websites for the polyamorous community. Over the course of approximately three weeks, over two hundred people filled out the questionnaire.

Considering time restrictions, I narrowed my sample of respondents to 28 polyamorous men and women (Group 1) and 8 non-polyamorous men and women (Group 2) currently living in the United States, between the ages of 20 and 40, who identified as caucasian. Using the responses from these groups, I

coded my demographic data as well as the short answer portion of the questionnaire.

The four sections of my data that I will explore in this paper include 1) an analysis of the demographic data, 2) an analysis of gender role comfort levels across the two groups, 3) an analysis of the set of questions in which I asked my respondents to describe, using as many adjectives as possible, the terms monogamy and polyamory, and 4) an analysis of the responses to the questions, “What about monogamy/polyamory does/does not appeal to you?”

To analyze the demographic data, I used Microsoft Excel to code for things like socioeconomic status, sex, gender, and orientation (see charts i. and ii.). While exactly half of the individuals (14/14) from Group 1 identified their sex as male, and the other half as female, only 12 of those females identified their gender as female. The other two decided to define their gender for themselves in the space that was provided in the questionnaire. All 14 males identified as such for both their sex and gender. Group 2 displayed a similar pattern, with all males identifying as such for both sex and gender, but only 5 out of 6 females doing the same.

The sexual orientations of the individuals from both Groups 1 and 2 were similar as well. About 50% of the respondents from each group identified as heterosexual and about 40% identified as bisexual.

For both Groups, I coded the responses to the question, “Do you feel comfortable with the gender roles ascribed to your biological sex?” I used a scale of 1 to 3, 1 being most comfortable, 3 being least comfortable (see charts

iii. and iv.). The polyamorous sample was much more evenly distributed across the different comfort levels, while the monogamous sample tended to fit either into the 1 or 3 category. Within the polyamorous sample, most individuals were neither very comfortable nor very uncomfortable with their assigned gender roles, they fell more to the middle. The opposite was true with the monogamous sample, with most people either being very comfortable or very uncomfortable with their gender roles.

In order to analyze the adjective portion of my questionnaire, I organized all of the responses, relative to their respective questions, in alphabetical order. I looked for patterns of the types of adjectives used and found that almost 40% of all the adjectives fell into one of two categories: *normative* and *confining*. Normative adjectives are those that associate monogamy or polyamory either as the norm, or in opposition with the norm. Some adjectives that fell into this category include: traditional, usual, accepted, and common. Confining adjectives are those that describe monogamy or polyamory either as being limiting or freeing, often closely associated with space or lack thereof. Among them include the adjectives: closed, open, restrictive, oppressive, and liberating. Both polyamorous and non-polyamorous individuals used normative terms to describe monogamy as normative, and polyamory as non-normative. Additionally, all individuals also used confining terms to describe monogamy as confining, and polyamory as non-confining.

A third category of *pleasure* adjectives was attributable to the responses of polyamorous individuals describing polyamory. This category alone made up

one quarter of the responses to this question and included words such as: exciting, fun, fulfilling, and energizing. Pleasure words were not present in any other group of responses.

My final analysis was to look at the appealing or unappealing aspects of monogamy and polyamory from the viewpoint of the polyamorous community (see graphs v. and vi.). For this analysis, I used a representative portion of polyamorous respondents' answers. I coded the data looking for themes and found four aspects of either monogamy or polyamory that people found appealing, or unappealing: *normativity*, *fulfillment of needs*, *limitations*, *complexity*. The concept of normativity was viewed as an appealing aspect to monogamy. The idea of fulfillment of needs was viewed as a negative aspect of monogamy and a positive aspect of polyamory. Limitations, the most common complaint, was viewed as a negative aspect of monogamy on one hand, while the reduced limitations within polyamorous relationships were viewed as a benefit. Finally, complexity was viewed as a negative aspect of polyamory.

Results

The data above brings us back to the question, "How do individuals who identify as polyamorous view human sexuality?" From the sample used, it seems that polyamorous individuals view human sexuality in many of the same ways as monogamous individuals. Both polyamorous and monogamous individuals criticized the two relationship models, and their responses were very similar.

Regarding gender role comfort levels, group one varied much more in their responses and over a third of them were neither very comfortable nor very uncomfortable. Group two's responses fell into the two outer categories, with 50% of the respondents claiming complete comfort with their assigned gender roles.

The results of the adjective analysis provide insight into some of the differences between the two groups. First of all, Group 2 had a higher frequency of confining adjectives when describing monogamy than did Group 1. This tells us that those individuals who are participating in monogamous relationships consider monogamous relationships to be more confining than those individuals not participating in the monogamous relationship model. This suggests that polyamorous individuals may not be polyamorous because of the limiting nature of monogamous relationships, but for other reasons. Monogamous individuals, as you might suppose, were much more satisfied by monogamy than were polyamorous individuals, although both groups had criticisms as well.

For both groups, monogamy was described with a higher frequency of normative terms, than was polyamory with non-normative terms. While monogamy is emphasized as a very normative, traditional model, polyamory is not as frequently identified as a radically unusual or nontraditional model. There is much less emphasis put on normativity when describing polyamory.

Another interesting trend was the use of pleasure adjectives, by polyamorous individuals, to describe polyamory. Pleasure adjectives made up 25% of the responses to this question, more than any other type of adjective in

this study. This data can be interpreted in several ways. It could be that polyamory is a more satisfying relationship model than monogamy, or these results may be a mere reflection of the polyamorous community's opinion of polyamory in relation to monogamy. It could also be interpreted that polyamorous individuals are pleasure-seeking, more so than monogamous individuals and that they seek relationship models to suit this need.

My final analysis of the appealing or unappealing aspects of monogamy and polyamory from the viewpoint of the polyamorous community (Group 1) provided further insight into the views of human sexuality of the poly community. The polyamorous community viewed normativity as the biggest benefit to monogamy. This suggests that while polyamorous individuals are participating in a non-normative relationship model, they are in no way immune to the pressures of our society. The biggest negative aspect of monogamy, according to the poly community, is its limitations. The polyamorous respondents to this study often spoke of love as limitless and their frustration with having to only share their love with one person, when participating in a monogamous relationship. Polyamorous individuals may view love differently than much of the monogamous community, and this may explain their incompatibility with the monogamous relationship model.

On the other end, Group 1 identified the benefits of polyamory as a providing a more extensive fulfillment of needs and having fewer limitations. The idea that no one person should have to fulfill all the needs of another person was prevalent in the responses of Group 1. In this sense, the concept of fulfillment of

needs goes hand-in-hand with the concept of limitations. By creating fewer limitations within their relationships, polyamorous people enable more of their needs to be fulfilled by their partner/s (see graphs iii and iv).

Group 1 did not claim polyamory to be superior to monogamy in any way, and identified complexity as an unappealing aspect of polyamory. Additionally, the difficulty of maintaining multiple relationships simultaneously was a concern of many of the respondents.

Conclusion

While this research project was limited in many ways (time, sample size, etc.) it has provided us with some interesting data that could prove useful in the study of several different topics. In addition to being useful polyamorous data, the responses collected during this study would also be useful for studying monogamy. The ways that monogamous individuals view polyamory and visa versa gives us insight into both relationship models and the factors that influence their participants. The differences in responses for males and females would be useful when studying gender and its construction. Females who identified their sex as such, often labeled their gender differently, while all males identified as such for both sex and gender. The high percentage of bisexual-identifying individuals and this groups responses can contribute to the current literature on the association between polyamory and bisexuality.

This research project has supplied us with an extensive data set that could be useful to other researchers in several fields. Although the project has not

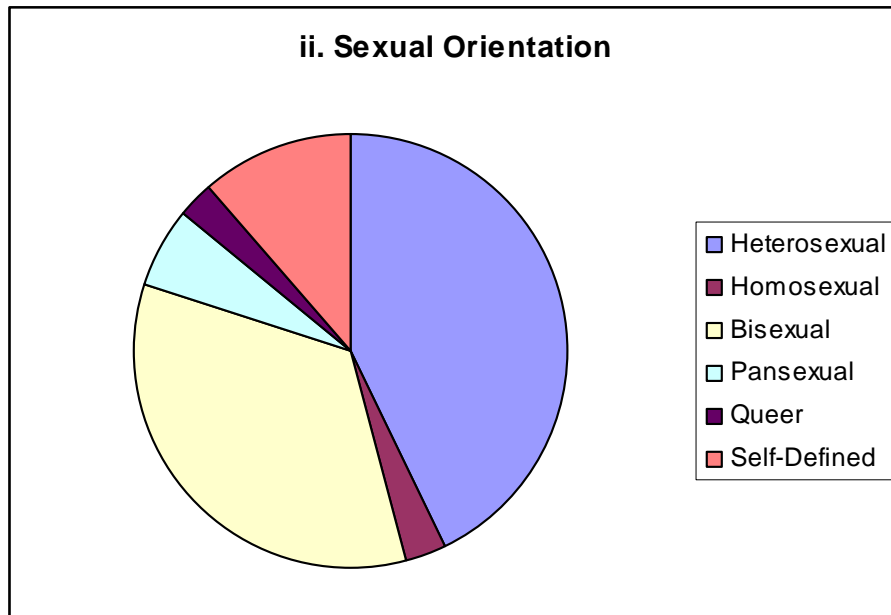
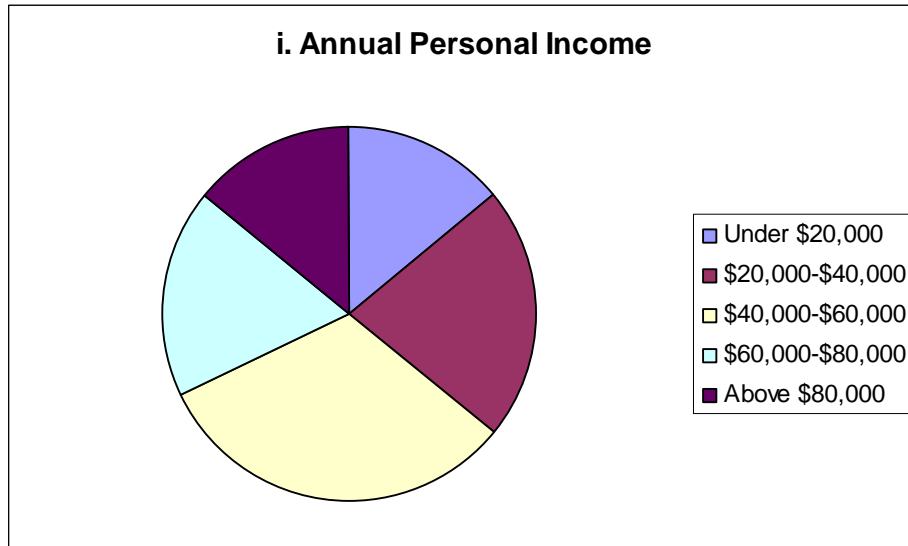
necessarily been groundbreaking, it adds to the existing literature on polyamory, and has created an extensive data set that may be analyzed and interpreted more fully, or in different ways, in the future.

Bibliography

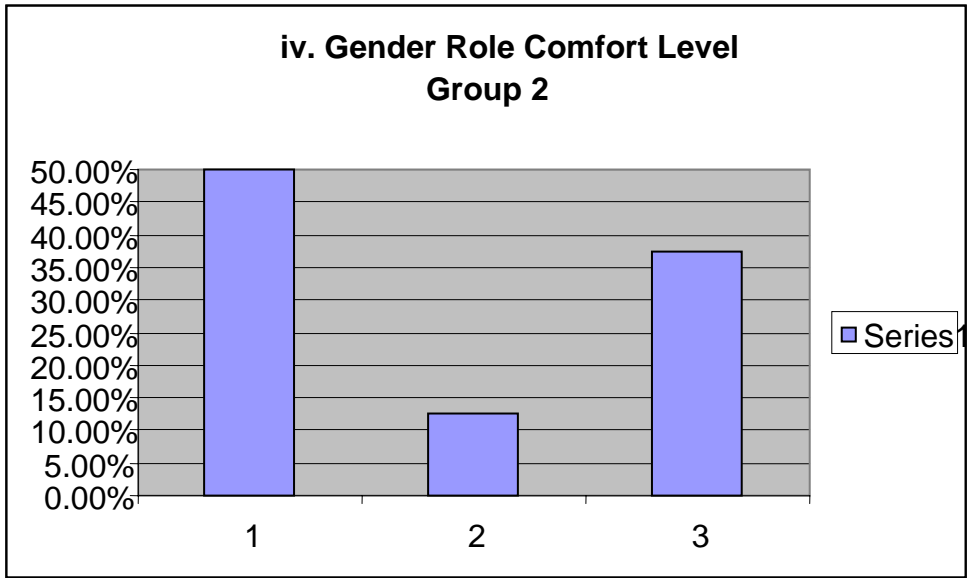
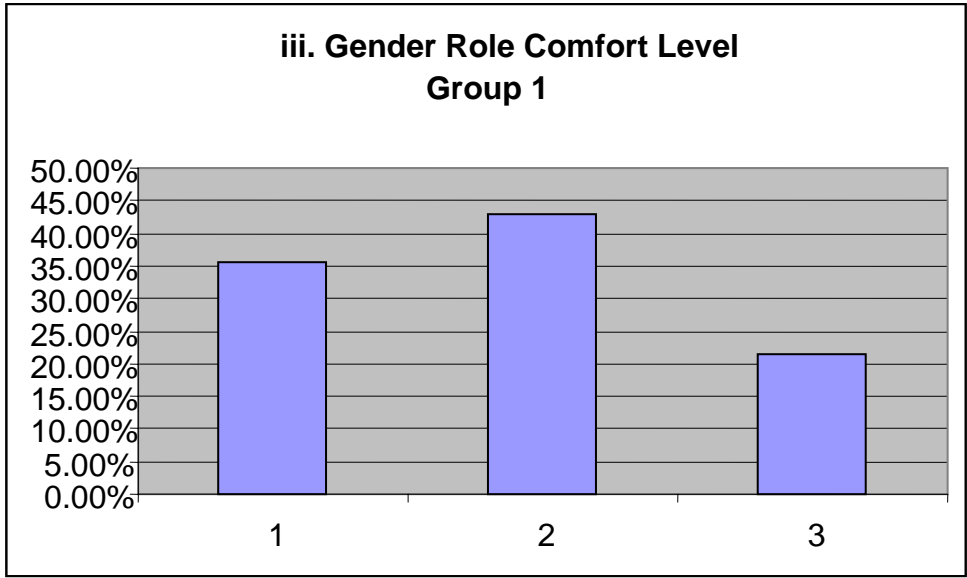
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Appendix

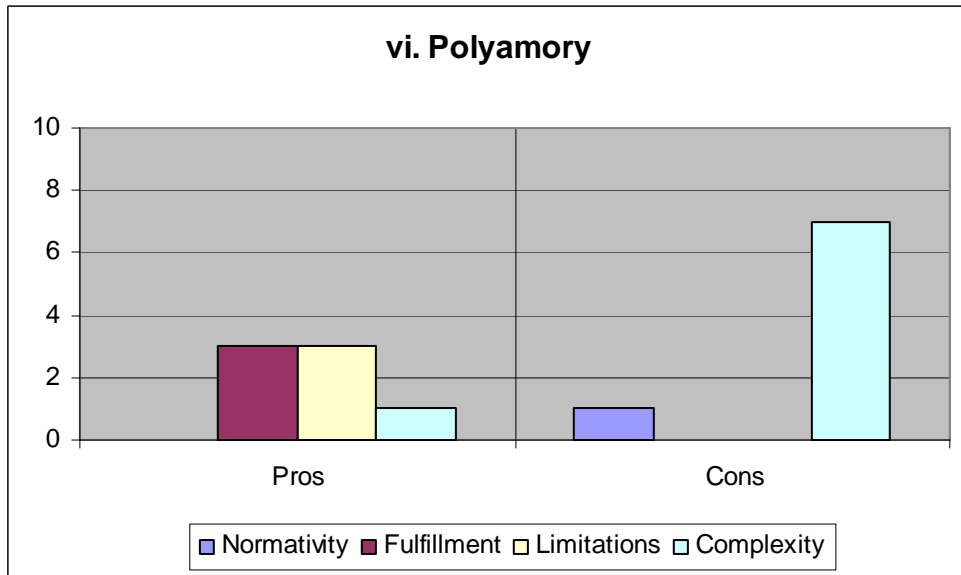
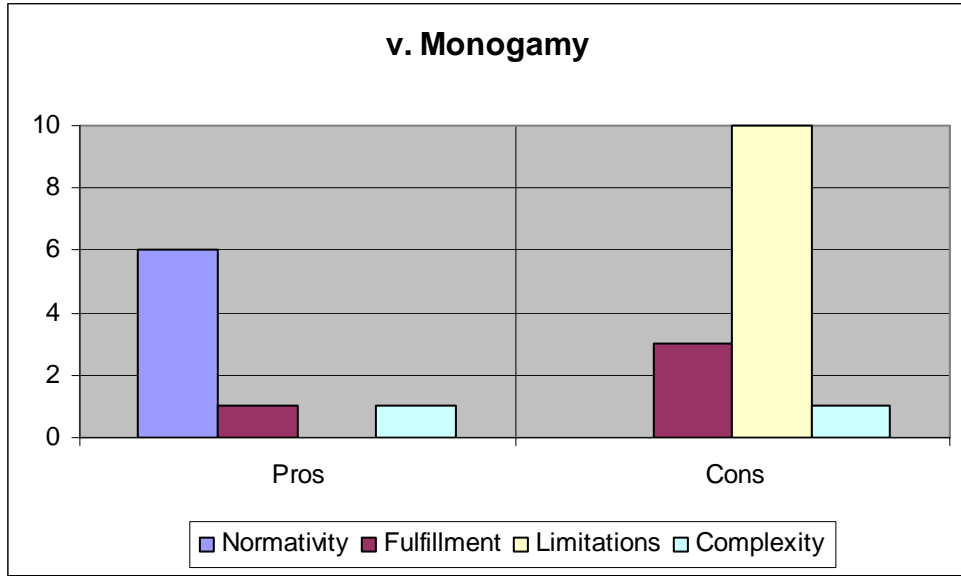
The following charts reflect the demographics of the 28 polyamorous-identifying individuals:



A comparison of Gender Role Comfort Levels from Group 1 and Group 2:



The following graphs reflect the opinions of the polyamorous sample regarding the pros and cons of Monogamy (v.) and Polyamory (vi.):



Coding

Age	Number	##
State	2 letter code	XX
API	Under \$20,000	1
	\$20,000-\$40,000	2
	\$40,000-\$60,000	3
	\$60,000-\$80,000	4
	Above \$80,000	5
Sex	Male	1
	Female	2
Gender	Male	1
	Female	2
Orientation	Heterosexual	1
	Homosexual	2
	Bisexual	3
	Pansexual	4
	Queer	5
	Other	6
Gender Roles	Completely comfortable	1
		2
	Completely uncomfortable	3
Appeals	Normativity	1
	Fulfillment of needs	2
	Limitations	3
	Complexity	4