Resilience in Polyamorous Families

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Families are taking ever more varied forms, due in part to peoples' longer lifespans, their ability to direct procreation with birth control and assisted reproduction, and increasing professional choices for women. This chapter focuses on one of these diverse family types: families with people in consensual multiple-partner relationships, or polyamory. Using the psychological theory of resilience, this chapter analyses polyamorous families as an adaptive response to shifting social, economic, and relational circumstances, thus widening the scope of research in family studies.

Like the families of other sexual minorities in the US and elsewhere, polyamorous families are often 'guilty until proven innocent' when interacting with officials from legal, educational, and child protection services. Given the level of stigma under which sexual and gender minority families labour, it would make sense for readers to interpret my use of resilience theory as a defensive posture taken against imminent attack. In fact, the data and the characteristics of polyamorous families led me to resilience theory, which is primarily a psychological theory and not one with which I had been familiar prior to researching polyamorous families. It was while reading others' research on stigmatized families that I came across the family resilience model, and was struck by how perfectly the emphases on communication and flexibility matched poly emphases on honesty and negotiation.

The purpose of this chapter is to apply family resilience theories to an understanding of polyamorous families and demonstrate the utility of these family forms for society. I first define and explain polyamory, and I review literature relevant to polyamorous families, resilience, and chosen kinship. Next, I detail my research methods and then describe the characteristics of poly families. Then I discuss three important findings regarding approaches that poly families use, specifically:

  i) communication
 ii) flexibility to forge resilient relationships
iii) the ways in which polyaffectivity allows respondents to sustain resilient long-term relationships even as they change their form and shape across time.

The chapter concludes with a discussion on the promise of polyaffectivity to sustain relationships beyond a sexual connection, as well as some policy and counselling recommendations. In so doing, I apply the family resilience model to polyamorous families to demonstrate how poly families offer examples of resilience.

Polyamory defined

Polyamory is a form of relationship in which people openly court multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners. There is an emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships with polyamory: this differs from *swinging*, which tends to be more focused on recreational sex with no emotional 'strings'. Polyamory also differs from *adultery* or *cheating*, with the poly focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to multiple partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygynous ones in which only men are allowed multiple (female) partners. It is also not *polygamy*, or multiple partner marriage, because not all polyamorists are married, and in fact groups are legally prohibited from marrying in the United States, where this research was conducted. *Polyaffective* relationships are those in which people establish relationships with chosen kin connected by emotional intimacy but not sexuality, either because they have never been sexually engaged or because the sexual portion of the relationship has waned, but they still remain emotionally intimate.

Literature review

In this section, I discuss literature pertinent to polyamorous families, family resilience, and chosen kinship. Collectively, these bodies of literature outline

the ideas upon which I build my arguments and provide a wide range of ways in which to envision families.

Polyamorous families

A series of research projects in the 1970s examined non-monogamous relationships such as swinging,[1] mate-swapping[2] and open marriage,[3] and focused almost exclusively on extra-dyadic, heterosexual relationships. Research on sexually non-exclusive relationships dwindled in the 1980s, as the sexual revolution collided with the spread of the AIDS epidemic and a backlash of political conservatism.[4] It was during this period of social and political turmoil that polyamory emerged as an identity and familial form.

While polyamorists have written about their relationships and experiences with families,[5] outside of my own research,[6] few academics have studied polyamorous families. Rubin[7] briefly mentions polyamory in his review of family studies in which he documents a decline in the study of non-monogamous relationships. Bettinger[8] utilizes a family systems approach to detail factors that impact a 'stable and high functioning gay male polyamorous family' of seven people – five adults and their two teenaged sons. Using examples from lesbian, gay, and poly families, Riggs[9] explores various possibilities for kinship structures that value children's definitions of and contributions to their families, rather than relying solely on the adults' views of the relationships. Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz[10] study polyamorous relationships among women and their actively bisexual husbands, and Pallotta-Chiarolli addresses the interactions of 'poly families' with school systems, detailing the costs of invisibility[11] and the strategies these families employ to manage their interactions with school personnel and bureaucracies.[12]

My 15-year study of polyamorous families with children has produced a number of interesting findings. 'Strategies in Polyamorous Parenting'[13] details advantages and disadvantages that polyamorous parents identify, as well as the specific strategies they develop to protect their children from emotional harm. 'Polyamorous Families, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Slippery Slope'[14] explains the similarities and differences between lesbigay and poly families and makes arguments for expanding marriage equality, recognizing a wider range of extra-legal relationships and allowing children

to have more than two legal parents. Although *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), the recent Supreme Court ruling in the United States legally recognizing same-sex marriage, has changed things for same-sex *couples*, it has not yet impacted groups larger than two. The potential that this decision will encourage litigation against multiple-partner marriage is high, and pundits on both sides have already begun their posturing.[15] Multiple-partner marriages – almost always in the form of one man with multiple wives – are quite common across cultures and historical epochs, and contemporarily common among some religious subcultures around the world today. In none of these cases have the societies also legitimated marriage with animals or other non-human objects (with the exception of marrying a God/dess), which undermines the inevitability that some assign to the 'slippery slope from same-sex marriage to incest and bestiality'.[16] However, the extension of multiple-partner marriages to polyamory (where women can have several husbands and/or wives) requires more thinking from lawmakers and is yet to arrive.

In 'Polyamory and Divorce',[17] I explain the various ways poly people are affected by and use divorce, from becoming polyamorous as an alternative to getting a divorce, to getting divorced but remaining lovers, or divorcing from an adulterous affair and then becoming polyamorous. 'Not Necessarily Broken: Redefining Success when Polyamorous Relationships End'[18] examines the ways in which polyamorists conceive of the ends of their relationships, and how some of them retain *polyaffective* connections even when the sexual component of a relationship ends. In 'Children in Polyamorous Families: A First Empirical Look' my co-author and I[19] provide a detailed rebuttal to legal decisions which erroneously assumed that polygynous and polyamorous families have the same impact on children. *The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families*[20] details the cumulative findings of my longitudinal study and explains how children feel about their families, manage interactions with peers and teachers, and what they think of their parents' relationships. In 'Polyamorous Parenting'[21] I explain the some of the legal and social issues that poly parents face, and the strategies respondents used to face them. Finally, *Stories from the Polycule: Real Life in Polyamorous Families* is an edited collection of people's writings about daily life in polyamorous families.[22]

Family resilience

Two competing sociological discourses have evolved to explain the significant transformation underway in familial structures and norms. These have considerable psychological implications. Theorists who postulate the 'family decline' model argue that society is in a state of decay and lament the loss of 'the' heterosexual, monogamous, legally married, two-parent family focused on procreation and providing children with a stable home environment maintained by a full-time mother.[23] Proponents of the 'family resilience' model assert that families reshape themselves in response to shifting social conditions.[24] Resilience scholars contend that the singular familial form so highly esteemed in the family decline model was never as idyllic as it has been made to appear in retrospect, and refer to the significant body of feminist scholarship that critiques the conventional patriarchal family form as heterosexist and oppressive, demanding women's sexual servitude and exploiting their unpaid labour.[25]

As other institutions have taken on the economic, political and educational functions previously filled by families, marital partners' expectations have shifted from instrumental to emotional fulfilment.[26] We no longer expect our spouse to be a workmate for the harvest, but we do expect to be happy with a 'love-match' which translates to a best friend, passionate lover, effective co-parent and companion in personal growth. Our expectations of marriage have risen to include happiness, yet at the same time we are continuously branching out from one idealized form of family to explore other relational possibilities. Instead of marriage as the only legitimate choice, now numerous options – cohabitation with a lover, single parenthood, living alone or with roommates – provide an array of increasingly socially acceptable alternatives. As Coontz states:

> Marriage has become more joyful, more loving, and more satisfying for more couples than ever before in history. At the same time it has become optional and more brittle. These two strands of change cannot be disentangled.[27]

Studies of family resilience usually emphasize a strengths-based perspective, examining the ways in which families deal with crises and develop adaptive behaviours.[28] Resilience researchers seek to identify risks and protective

mechanisms that help people through adversity, as well as tracking the strategies these families use as they attempt to balance risks with capabilities.[29] Resilient families are in a constant process of creation and recreation as they adapt to changing circumstances. Describing the psychological flexibility and resource involved, Olsson et al. state:

> Thinking of resilience as a process necessitates consideration of interaction between a range of risk and protective processes of varying degrees of impact, and a risk situation at varying points in development.[30]

Researchers[31] have identified a number of protective processes that shield families in crises. Two important protective processes are family cohesiveness, or the 'balance between family separateness and connectedness', and the degree of flexibility, or the 'balance between change and stability'.[32] Most germane to the discussion of poly families are positive communication skills and the cohesion of family network connections while weathering crises, which stand out as key elements of family resilience.[33] Some polyamorous families can express resilience in much the same way that well-functioning monogamous families are similarly able to communicate effectively and change in response to shifting circumstances.

In her discussion of same-sex families that exhibit resilience by redefining family as a process tolerant of differences, Oswald finds that:

> The ability to re-imagine family promotes resilience . . . The positive inclusion of more members means that there are more sources of social, emotional, and material support for all involved.[34]

Like same-sex families, poly families are in fact a direct response to the unattainability or undesirability of the (dyadic, monogamous, heterosexual) male-provider marriage for many people. Resilience provides at least one psychological axis by which to assess the positive relational and social benefits of polyamory.

Chosen kinship

Chosen kinship, or the construction of families including those who are neither legally nor biologically related, is an important area of 'alternative'

family scholarship which also deepens our understanding of polyamory as a necessary and helpful social function. It contrasts with *biolegal kinship* that unites family members through consanguine (biological) or legal connections.

In a groundbreaking examination of the manners in which people in same-sex (gay) relationships construct family groups, Weston[35] found that friends, former lovers and partners became more reliable and supportive family members for gay people than were their biolegal families of origin. Families of choice are kinship networks formed by a malleable web of relationships constructed through careful, self-conscious and reflexive negotiation processes.[36] While some members may be related through biolegal ties, the term emphasizes those who have no officially recognized familial relationship, but consider each other to be family members nonetheless.[37]

Like poly families, some lesbigays retain connection with their previous lovers after breaking up, consciously constructing relationships in which they can remain family members even if they do not remain lovers. Weston's[38] respondents report an emphasis on 'making a transition from lover to friend while remaining within the bounds of gay families'. This continued contact often translates to sibling-like relationships in which former lovers come to 'relate to . . . new lovers as if *they* were the in-law'.[39]

Taken as a whole, these literatures indicate that family is an elastic concept that can expand to include a variety of configurations. The research certainly validates the use of the term 'family' to be attached to 'polyamory' as a lifestyle, as we shall see below.

Method

The data in this section derives from a larger project based on three waves of data collected in the United States through participant observation, content analysis of websites and print media, and in-depth interviews. In the first part of the study (1996–2003), I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with adults who identified as poly, with one sample in the Midwest, and another in the California Bay Area. During this phase I attended a wide variety of poly events, including co-ed and women's support groups, community dinner parties, community meetings, and two national conferences. For the second round of data collection (2007–2009) I located 17 previous respondents, 15 of whom consented to interviews, and expanded the sample to include

an additional 31 people. The third wave of data collection focused on interviews with 22 children and included adults as they were relevant to children's lives for a total sample of 131 interview respondents and 500 participants observed. Race was the most homogeneous demographic characteristic, with 89% of the sample identifying as white. Socioeconomic status was high among these respondents, with 74% in professional jobs. A full 88% reported some college education, with 67% attaining bachelor's degrees and 21% completing graduate degrees.

Defining polyamorous families is challenging, not only because social scientists and members of the public disagree on the definition of families, but also because poly community members dispute the definition of polyamory. Some emphasize the emotional intimacy within negotiated agreements, and others find the freedom and lack of formalized rules or institutionalization as key to their definition of poly. For this portion of the study, I included people who self-identified as polyamorous and who identified as members of poly families.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted from one and a half to two hours. They followed a pattern in which respondents answered an initial series of questions regarding demographic characteristics, entrée into polyamory and current relationships. In the second round of interviews I asked more pointed questions about parenting, relationships with partners and biolegal kin, definitions of family, and interactions with institutions (i.e. children's schools). The third round of data collection focused on children's experiences with parents, peers, and schools. Participants selected their own pseudonyms.

I utilized a modified form of grounded theory to analyse the data,[40] a method that has proven particularly useful in other family studies.[41] Employing inductive data gathering methods[42] and constant comparative methods,[43] I analysed the interview data and my field notes using a process that included:

  i) reading transcripts and generating initial coding categories;
 ii) identifying and relating similar ideas and the relationships between and among categories;
iii) adjusting these analytical categories to fit emergent theoretical concepts;

iv) collecting additional data to verify and/or challenge the validity of those concepts;

v) probing these data for the boundaries and variations of common themes.[44]

The data in this chapter come from all three waves of data collection. Because the initial study was not designed to be a longitudinal research project and the IRB required that I destroy all identifying information, I was only able to locate those members of my original sample who retained enough contact with mainstream polyamorous communities to receive the calls for participation in the follow-up study. Thus, the current data do not include the perspectives of those who may have stopped participating in these poly communities.

Characteristics of polyamorous families

Mirroring the demographics of most identified polyamorous communities,[45] the majority of these families are composed of white, middle-class, well-educated, liberal adults. Worldwide, polyamory is most common in Australia, Canada, the United States and Western Europe – areas where women have access to paid work and are able to own property. Women's financial and political freedoms appear to be crucial for the development of a polyamorous – as opposed to polygynous – community.

In the United States, where this research was conducted, almost all of the poly men are heterosexual and nearly all of the women are bisexual. There are far fewer bisexual men than women and almost no gay men or lesbians involved in these mainstream US polyamorous communities. The apparent dearth of bisexual men might be due in large part to the homophobia implicit in the desire for a bisexual woman, or 'Hot Bi Babe', that so often pervades community rhetoric, expectations, and interactions – a desire from which men are often implicitly and sometimes explicitly excluded.[46] Munson and Stelboum's[47] edited volume on lesbian polyfidelity indicates the existence of a lesbian polyamorous community, but these women are not evident in mainstream polyamorous communities, and I have not yet been able to gain access to their ranks for interviews.

Lesbians may be reluctant to frequent mainstream poly community

events for a number of reasons, including the dearth of bisexual or lesbian women available to date and the high levels of competition to gain their attention, as well as the unwanted sexual advances the lesbians might get from men in poly community settings. The practice of multiple-partner relating is so common among gay men as to constitute non-monogamy as a regular feature of gay community, thus negating the need for an additional identity and separate community organized around a polyamorous sexual identity. This factor, combined with (usually quite subtle, though occasionally overt) homophobia, has led to a virtual absence of gay men in mainstream polyamorous communities in the US, although many gay men could be participating in relationships that appear polyamorous to external observers (in that they are negotiated, non-monogamous and emotionally intimate).

The most common form of poly family I have identified is an open couple with children (two people in a long-term relationship who often live together and have additional sexual relationships) and their attendant constellation of kin, both biolegal and chosen.[48] Open couple families appear to identify as family for longer periods than do larger groupings, which are rarer and experience greater membership fluidity. Some have children from previous relationships, others have children from their expanded familial unions (chosen kinships), and still others remain childfree/less and identify themselves as members of poly families composed of adults.

Issues facing poly families, such as custody of children, coming out to biolegal family members and managing the impacts of parents' relationships on their children, closely mirror those confronting families of other sexual minorities. For example, some poly families report difficulties finding terms by which to label co-parents, a challenge that also faces people in same-sex families who are raising children.[49] Many of these issues stem from the lack of familial role models upon which sexual minorities can pattern their families, and by which conventional society can understand these diverse relationships.

Findings

My findings indicate that polyamorous families and those headed by same-sex partners share significant similarities, primary among them being

the creation of families of choice. In this section, I detail my findings regarding relations with communication and flexibility, concluding with the outcomes of resilience that allow relationships to last over time.

Communication

Polyamorists use communication to negotiate relationship boundaries, discuss feelings, and resolve conflicts. Communication and honesty are such important aspects of polyamorous life that it is difficult to overemphasize them. Together, they are the most popular coping mechanisms that assist polyamorists in dealing with the potential difficulties in their complex relationship style. Polyamorists routinely face the possibility of jealousy, hurt feelings, and miscommunication among many partners. While monogomists experience these same difficulties in their own relationships, the increased number of people in polyamorous relationships multiplies the opportunities for miscommunication significantly. Polys have developed a number of techniques to deal with these potential pitfalls. One such mechanism was *radical honesty*, a practice of being completely honest in all situations, even when it was not 'nice' or convenient. Many long-term polys practised and even sought training in non-violent communication (NVC) techniques, such as listening compassionately to the other person while they are speaking instead of preparing mental notes for a rebuttal, subverting the desire to argue by calmly repeating what the other person said back to them to make sure everyone shares the same understanding, and speaking in '*I* statements'.

   Poly community members also value persistence and the ability to tolerate conflict, in large part because the humane practice of those traits contributes to effective communication. *'I'm willing to work through things, so I'll just talk things to death and work through 'em,'* comments Morgan, a white 37-year-old accountant and mother of two, who felt her relationship with her husband, Carl, had improved since they became polyamorous, primarily because:

> *'It really opened up communication between us. Because we've been together for nine years and that was my biggest complaint about him was* (sic) *you don't talk to me . . . And it really opened up communication between us. So it created pain, but it really just helped us to learn how to be completely honest and communicate. And so it benefitted us.'*

Discussing painful feelings such as jealousy or insecurity can take tremendous fortitude and establishing schedules that allow many lovers time with one another requires adept negotiation. Polyamorous communities create supportive networks in which people can learn and practice these skills.[50]

Those who had been isolated and then found organized polyamorous communities routinely commented on how much they learned about communication (among other things) from other polyamorists. Peck, a white 43-year-old editor and counsellor with three children, had initiated a polyamorous triad in her small Midwestern town where the threesome was secluded from other polyamorists:

> *'And unfortunately we didn't have any pool to communicate or no* (sic) *support groups back then. We lived in Ohio and it was the Midwest and again this wasn't heard of, there were no people around us, any of our close friends that we approached with it had a lot of judgments about it, and actually we got ostracized from several communities because of it . . . And again we didn't have very much support and didn't know – we ended up doing a lot of hurtful things to each other, and we didn't even realize. We just didn't have the communication tools and wasn't* (sic) *attentive of the other's needs, and we just didn't know how to make it work and how to do it.'*

Peck viewed role models who had previously navigated complexities, knew 'how to make it work' and could show others 'how to do it' as central to the successful function of her polyamorous family and individual emotional health.

Communication is key, not only in dealing with the emotional complexities of polyamorous relationships but also in negotiating the boundaries structuring those multiplistic relationships. While there are plenty of role models for people in monogamous relationships, they are fairly scarce for polyamorists, who create templates for their own relationships. Negotiating safer-sex agreements, boundaries structuring relationships with a variety of partners and even the domestic division of labour among multiple partners and co-parents requires extensive communication skills.

Poly relationships with poor communication tend to self-destruct rather rapidly. Morgan said of the disastrous and short-lived relationship that her husband, Carl, had with his first girlfriend, Janice:

'They had both been expressing [to others] how hard it was to be with one another. They don't communicate; they don't talk to each other. So it just wasn't a match.'

Although Janice and Carl tried to communicate and had an intense sexual connection, their relationship did not last because of the incompatibility in their communication styles. Communication is so important in polyamorous relationships that, when it fails, the malfunction often overshadows other aspects of the relationship. Even the strongest sexual connection might not be enough to keep a poly relationship together if miscommunication disrupts the emotional connection.

Polys use communication to get to know each other, and they often use *relationship maps* as a form of communication/foreplay possibly unique to polyamorous communities. Relationship maps are diagrams polys draw to explain their complex webs of relationships (generally with current and past lovers), the characteristics of the relationships (primary, secondary, fluid bonded, etc.), and lovers' lovers, when known. Vance, a 27-year-old white computer analyst, remarked:

'Every first-time date includes a map of everyone I am seeing at the time, relevant past relationships, and as much of their [his lovers'] sexual history as I can muster. Inevitably I find areas where my lovers overlap with the new person. It helps us figure out where we are and talk about [sexually transmitted] diseases.'

Usually everyone involved in the courting episode draws their own map, and these discussions almost inevitably lead to disclosing the presence of any sexually transmitted infections.

Flexibility
Because polys have few role models, they are forced to innovate their own relationship structures. Challenging monogamy means challenging lots of other things, and often engenders a freedom that allows polys to forge novel relationship and family formations. In some cases, polys who have divorced continue their relationships much as they did prior to the divorce. Peck's triad was characteristic of this tendency to create new familial patterns. She had already had two children with Cristof, her legally wed

husband, and she intentionally became pregnant with a third child when Quentin, her additional (extralegal) husband, expressed the desire for a child. Both Cristof and Quentin accompanied Peck in the delivery room when she gave birth to Zane, her second son.

Though the triad specified paternity and expressed their intent to co-parent, officials insisted on listing Cristof as the father on the birth certificate because state law stipulated that a married woman's husband is the legal father of any child she bears, regardless of evidence to the contrary. Peck said:

> *'We told everybody Quentin is the father. I'm married to Cristof, and Cristof's name had to be put on the birth certificate, legally, because we were married. Even though we said no, this is who is and this is who it isn't. And they were just like, we don't care. You're married, his name goes on. Quentin was outraged.'*

In order to clarify Quentin's relationship with his infant son and Peck's relationship with both men, the triad decided that a legal divorce was in order. Ironically, a social system designed to support families in this case actually encouraged divorce through its lack of flexibility. The triad's relational adaptability allowed them to outlast the legal marriage by negotiating a flexible arrangement to suit their kinship needs. Peck was optimistic about the impact the divorce had on the family, and she felt it set a good example for her children, who saw their parents remaining connected during a congenial divorce:

> *'They get to see that a divorce or break-up doesn't have to be this destructive: I hate this other person, I have to choose between mom and dad, I have to hear them arguing, they don't talk to each other. Children take on so much stress and trauma from divorce where parents pit one against the other. That didn't happen.'*

As society grows ever more complex and social changes continue, this ability to maintain friendly contact through changes in family life and structure is increasingly important. By de-emphasizing biolegal connections and embracing a broader definition of family, both polys and lesbigays demonstrate the resilience of polyaffectivity and chosen kinship.

Resilient outcomes through polyaffectivity

If success is conceived of as remaining in the exact same relationship form until one of the partners dies, then very few polyamorous (or monogamous) relationships are successful. If, however, success is conceived as the ability to meet people's changing needs and retain a familial connection even when the sexual connection no longer persists, many polyamorists are able to build successful and resilient relationships. In this section, I discuss the ways in which polyamorous people sustain emotional continuity in the face of shifting relationship configurations by emphasizing *polyaffective* relationships, where polyamorous adults define their chosen significant others as family, but do not have sexual relationships with them – either because they were never sexually connected or because their sexual connection has ceased and they remain emotionally intimate.

For some respondents, no longer having sex did not signal the end of a relationship. Instead, it indicated a shift to a new phase. In these cases, the emphasis of the relationship changed to a non-sexual interaction, but the emotional and social connections remained continuous.

JP, a 68-year-old mother of five children with eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild, had been married eight times, four of them to her first husband Richard,[51] with whom she retained an emotionally intimate, non-sexual relationship. Reflecting on her long and varied relationship with Richard, JP reported that:

> *'We have a tremendous closeness. We've always been able to talk. Intellectual connection, spiritual connection. Just a very intimate relationship. We've got all of this history together, grandkids, a great-grandchild even! I went to Houston not too long ago, and we celebrated the 50th anniversary of our wedding. We got to celebrate all of it!'*

While JP harboured no illusions that Richard was perfect – stating that he has a '*multi-faceted personality: a wonderful person on one hand, and a male chauvinist controlling jerk on the other*' – she was able to retain the positive aspects of the relationship and celebrate a 50th wedding anniversary with her long-time companion, even though they had both been married to other people over the years. Their relationship overflowed the boundaries of conventional marriage, and their emotional continuity overshadowed

the fact that they no longer had sex. Polyaffectivity allowed JP and Richard to forge a durable relationship, even if their family did not mirror conventional resiliency.

True to form in poly communities who shape language to reflect their relationships,[52] some polys reject or redefine the concept of the 'ex'. Laszlo, a man in his mid-thirties, commented that:

> *'The notion of ex is ill-defined unless you have a social context, like (serial) monogamy where at least some 'privileged' relationship statuses are single-person-only exclusive. That is, if you don't* have *to 'break up' to be with someone else, then attempting to categorize* all *of the people from your past relationships as 'ex-'(pick relationship label) is kinda goofy/nonsensical . . . I can see using the 'ex' label structure for relationships that were abusive and continued contact would be unhealthy, but if instead they're still-or-once-again a friend, why focus on what they aren't-anymore instead of what they are-right-now?'*

While Gaelle, a woman in her mid-forties, was clear that '*I am not best buddies with all of my exes, not by any stretch*', she nonetheless asserted that:

> *'I have other former lovers that I suppose ex would be* a *term for. But, I don't think of them as exes. We were lovers and now we're friends, and ex just seems kind of a weird way to think of someone I'm close to and care about. The real difference here, I think, is that the changes in relationship tended to have a much more gentle evolution rather than 'official' break-ups.'*

Rather than an 'official break-up', Gaelle's relationships went through transitions and entered a new phase. Emphasizing the present and continuing existence of the relationship, Gaelle defined some of her former lovers as friends with whom she remained close and caring.

As in most relationship styles, this varies by relationship and depends on how people handle transitions. Sorcia, a woman in her mid-thirties, commented that:

> *'Of course, it depends on the person. Of my former triad – one parent is*

. . . not even on the remotest of friendly terms with the other two of us. On the other hand, my ex-wife and I are still good friends. We do the holidays together with the kids, get together regularly for dinner and generally weather our ups and downs. We consider each other to be family. She moved in with a boyfriend last fall and one of her pre-reqs was being OK with our familial connection. It's turned out much better than I ever expected and it's pretty cool.'

Thus people in poly relationships have a range of relationship outcomes and a wide array of meanings from which to select. Some follow a conventional pattern of alienation when a sexual relationship ends, while others forge values and perspectives that define former partners as continued intimates, or 'chosen family'.[53]

Shifting the crux of the relationship from sexuality to emotional intimacy can foster more connected co-parenting, because it allows for continued and cooperative relationships among adults. While Michael and his co-parent divorced 15 years ago, they continued to cohabit for 6 years afterwards and:

'[W]e have stayed in frequent contact, taking vacations together (sometimes with our other lovers), continuing to raise our kids in close concert, and recently undertook a major multi-year project together (though we were on opposite coasts). She recently told me that she was thinking about her best friends in the whole world, and of the four people she identified, one was me and another was my long-term nesting partner.'

Michael reported that his non-sexual relationships had been crucial to his life and well-being, and that being in poly relationships allowed him the unique opportunity to not only remain emotionally intimate in a co-operative, co-parenting relationship, but being free *not* to have sex with your intimate partner(s):

'I have these amazing relationships that were once sexual, and in the monogamous world, if I stayed as close as I am with these women, it would be likely to cause substantial stress, or at least some negative social pressure. And each of my emotionally intimate relationships can be sexual or not, sometimes shifting one way or another, without damaging our basic relationship. In a monogamous world, if I stopped being sexual with my

primary partner, this would either be a major source of distress, or might end the relationship entirely. As a poly person, I don't feel uniquely responsible to meet my partner's sexual needs. If it best serves our intimacy not to be sexual, either temporarily or permanently, then we can do that without any other necessary consequences.'

Michael emphasized the changing nature of relationships over time, as sexual interest waxed and waned due to the vigour of youth, having children, shifting circumstances and passage along the life-course.

'Over the years, I've had two lovers, both previously very sexually assertive, who found that menopause made sex less interesting and less enjoyable for them. They suspect that this may change back at some point, when their hormones settle down, but in the meantime, sex is pretty much off the table for them with all their lovers. This didn't change our connection at all, though. We still sleep (sleep!) together from time to time, do naked cuddling, and have intense, intimate conversations. We just don't have sex, as it is usually conceived of.'

Regardless of whether this relationship phase was truly the end of their sexual connection or simply a hiatus, Michael's long-term relationships with his partners continued despite changing sexual and relational circumstances. By emphasizing polyaffective connections, some polyamorists are able to sustain resilient relationships even as the exact form of the relationship shifts over time.

Conclusion

Understanding polyamorous families enriches family resilience models, because they demonstrate an elasticity characteristic of resilience that allows complicated families to manage daily life and navigate intricate relationships. They can also highlight ways in which more conventional families can deal with the complexity of blended families with multiple parents from past and current relationships. The ability of poly families to retain a relationship after a break-up offers insight for (ostensibly) monogamous families who divorce, and their experiences in co-parenting can illuminate the ways in which blended, post-divorce families of all

types might deal with multiple parents, regardless of how or whether they are sexually connected.

This form of resilience becomes important as divorce can dilute the expectation of permanent, connections with legal kin, while simultaneously creating new multiple-parent, blended family connections for which children as much as adults require psychological and emotional adaptation. Like lesbigays who offered a new vision of chosen families in the 1970s and beyond, poly families demonstrate new forms of chosen kinship that are not necessarily dependent on conventional biolegal kin, sexual connections, or even kinship ties as previously defined by society. Expanding understandings of families becomes more important as family forms and structures themselves change, shape and expand.

My data indicates that poly relationships may not last in the traditional sense of permanently retaining the same form. Instead, some poly relationships appear to last more durably than some brittle monogamous relationships because the polys can flex to meet different needs over time in a way that monogamous relationships – with their abundant norms and requirements of sexual fidelity – find more challenging, especially in divorce and post-divorce contexts. While the familiar and well-explored structure that monogamy provides can foster a comforting predictability, it can also constrain the meanings and strategies available to people who engage in monogamous relationships. This is not to say that there are no relationship innovators among heterosexual, vanilla, monogamous people – feminists and others have a long history of creating alternative definitions that provide meanings outside of a patriarchal framework, while retaining a monogamous form. But the scarcity of role models frees people in polyamorous relationships to create new meanings, and innovate alternative roles that better suit their unique lives. A polyamorous identity framework provides the flexible and abundant relationship choices that a conventional monogamous identity, with its firmly defined roles and well-explored models, cannot.

Such persistent polyamorous emphasis on fluidity and choice has several ramifications for the multitude of ways in which people can define the ends of, or changes in, their relationships. The most flamboyant version of poly identity is explicitly sexual, in that it centres on being open to multiple sexual partners. Polyaffectivity, a quieter version of poly identity, appears to be more durable and flexible – able to supersede, coexist with and

outlast sexual interaction. Relationships that have such a multitude of options for interaction, that define emotional intimacy as more significant than sexual intimacy, provide poly people with a wide selection of possible outcomes in relationships that are subject to change.

These expanded kinship choices have two primary implications for poly relationships: *graceful endings and extended connections between adults*. When a relationship can end without someone being at fault, the social mandate for couples to stay together and fixed in exactly the same way at all costs can relax. As stigma subsides, the subsequent drop in shame and blame simultaneously decreases the need for previous lovers to stay together until they have exhausted their patience with and sympathy for each other, and have possibly lied to or betrayed each other in the process. When it becomes clear that a relationship no longer meets the participants' needs or works for people who have grown apart, accepting the change and shifting to accommodate new realities can contribute to more graceful endings and transitions. When people are able to amicably end one phase of their relationship, it increases their capacity for change and transition into a new phase characterized by continued connection, communication and cooperation. As one respondent stated:

> '*Don't drag it out until the bitter end, disemboweling each other along the way. Split up while you can still be friends,* before *anybody does something they will regret later.*'

Dethroning sexuality as the hallmark of 'real' intimacy and legal contracts that control behaviour is key to this redefinition. If sexuality can be shared among more than two people and emotional intimacy can outlast or super-sede sexual intimacy, then *non-sexual relationships can take on the degree of importance usually reserved for sexual or mated relationships*. That is, friends and chosen family members can be as *or more* important than a spouse or sexual mate. People who used to be a spouse or mate and remain platonic emotional intimates don't have to be exes, forever defined by what they used to be. They can be friends, co-parents, and kin. This extra-sexual allegiance is fundamental to my concept of *polyaffectivity*, or emotional intimacy among non-sexual participants linked by poly relationships.

Expanding important adult relationships beyond sexual confines, whether

they be former sexual partners or polyaffective partners who don't have sex, provides people with more templates for interaction and choices in how to define relationships. Such choice becomes increasingly important as the limited range of conventional templates prove unworkable or inadequate for many contemporary relationships. People in developed nations live far longer now than they used to, and these longer life-spans include more time to change and potentially grow apart. If they are to remain in relationship, some of these long-lived people require the room to shift and expand over time, outside the narrow confines of previously entrenched social scripts. Others might be wiser to avoid organizing their lives around marriage, and instead invest their emotional and material resources in something more durable than romantic love, crafting relationships that provide reciprocal care and support with siblings, friends, or other chosen family members. This need not mean an end to sexual relationships or childbearing, simply a shift in which relationship (or relationships) takes (or take) on practical and emotional – if not sexual – primacy.

Serial monogamy – the pattern in which two people couple in sexually exclusive relationships for a time, break up, and recouple exclusively with someone else – has replaced classical monogamy in which young people marry as virgins, remain sexually exclusive for their entire lives, and become celibate after their spouse's death. As a social pattern, serial monogamy inevitably creates some families with multiple parents related to children through various legal, biological, and emotional connections. Parents who used to be romantic partners often end up trying to figure out how to create a workable co-parental relationship when they were unable to create or sustain a spousal relationship. For the many people in this situation, remaining on positive terms with a former partner/current co-parent makes the transition less painful for children and more cooperative for adults.[54] Crafting relationships able to transition from a romantic phase to a platonic co-parental phase can be challenging. Polyaffectivity provides a pathway to continuity and a way to remain connected across time, even through a break-up and beyond. In an era when conventional stability appears to be difficult for many to sustain, this new form of stability can prove quite useful.

Public policies should facilitate resilience and the ethical freedom of kinship choices, rather than hinder families' abilities to cope with crises. The June 2015 US Supreme Court ruling recognizing same-sex marriage

contributes to this endeavour in the United States. There remains, however, much room for more progress in making policies that serve polyamorous and other forms of families. Rather than evidence of decline, poly families, just like chosen and lesbigay families, are a symptom that the singular family model – precariously perched on the unwavering emotional, sexual and financial investment of a monogamous, heterosexual couple linked by romance alone – is not functional for everyone.

As divorce statistics illustrate, for many people it is no longer appropriate to invest the entirety of one's life energies, expectations and commitments into a partner associated solely through the tenuous bonds of romantic love. Other family forms with broader foundations can better meet the needs for some, and should be recognized. In some cases, it would be wiser to invest in friendships, siblings, or platonic co-parenting.[55] It is the continued attempts to enforce overly restrictive definitions of family that are actually damaging society, not the proliferation of additional familial forms. These families embody resilience precisely because they have evolved in direct response to shifting social realities and, in some cases, appear better able to manage the complexity of contemporary life than a more rigid family form.

I hope that this chapter provides professionals in counselling and psychology with sufficient understanding of polyamorous families to be of use in couples and family therapy. Therapists in practice need to recognize poly families' potential to offer a loving and resilient environment for adults and children, and understand how they may do so. Polyamorous families can contain the crucial elements of resilient adaptation and the ethical freedom of chosen kinships to provide the basis of healthy human relationships and communication in emotional and sexually intimate relationship contexts. This in turn is a contribution to the psychological and emotional maturity of members of a healthy society.

Endnotes

1 Bartell 1970, 1971; Fang, 1976; Henshel 1973.
2 Denfeld & Gordon, 1970; Spanier & Cole, 1975.
3 Constantine & Constantine, 1973; Smith & Smith 1973, 1974.
4 Rubin, 2001.

5 Anapol, 1992; Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2005; Block, 2008; Easton & Liszt, 1997; Munson & Stelboum, 1999; Nearing, 1989, 1992; Sheff, 2015b.
6 Sheff, 2014, 2013a, 2013b, 2012, 2011, 2010.
7 Op cit.
8 2005, p. 106.
9 Riggs, 2010.
10 Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Sheff, 2010.
14 Sheff, 2011.
15 Sheff, 5 July 2015.
16 Sheff, 20 July 2015.
17 Sheff, 2012.
18 Sheff, 2013.
19 Goldfeder & Sheff, 2013.
20 Sheff, 2014.
21 Sheff, 2015a.
22 Sheff, 2015b.
23 Popenoe, 1996; Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Wilson, 2002.
24 Cohen et al., 2002; Coontz, 1992, 1998, 2005; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996; Olsson et al., 2003; Olson, 1995; Oswald, 2002; Patterson, 2002; Skolnik, 1991; Stacey, 1996; Waller & Okamoto, 2003; Walsh, 2002.
25 That is, Engels, 1970 [1884]; Firestone, 1971; Hochschild, 1997; Hochschild & Machung, 2003.
26 Coontz, 2005.
27 Ibid., p. 306
28 Conger & Conger, 2002; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996; Patterson, 2002.
29 Orthner et al., 2004; Waller & Okamoto, 2003.
30 Olsson et al., 2003, p. 4.
31 Olsson et al., 2003; Patterson, 2002.
32 Patterson, 2002, p. 240.
33 Cohen et al., 2002; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1996; Olsson et al., 2003; Olson, 1995; Oswald, 2002; Patterson, 2002; Waller & Okamoto, 2003; Walsh, 2002.
34 Op cit., p. 13.
35 1991.
36 Ibid.
37 Muraco, 2006.
38 Op cit., p. 111.
39 Ibid., emphasis in original.
40 Charmaz, 2000.
41 LaRossa, 2005.
42 Lofland & Lofland, 1995.
43 Glaser & Strauss, 1967.
44 Glassner & Hertz, 1999.
45 Sheff & Hammers, 2011.
46 Sheff, 2005, 2006.
47 1999.
48 Weston, op. cit.
49 Sullivan, M., 2004.
50 Sheff, 2014.
51 JP and Richard had a passionate relationship, both sexually and emotionally, which began in high school when they '*got pregnant and got married immediately – both of us were virgins and we got pregnant on our first time, imagine that!*' They would become intensely

angry at each other, divorce, date or marry other people, reunite (sometimes before breaking up with the other person, sometimes not), live passionately for a period, remarry, love each other, fight (sometimes violently); Richard would drink too much, JP would kick him out, they would break up, and the cycle would repeat. JP said that they just could not stay away from each other, they loved each other so much, but they had unhealthy patterns that kept repeating. Polyaffectivity allowed JP to retain an emotional relationship with Richard, while maintaining enough distance to keep the cycle from reigniting.

52 Ritchie & Barker, 2006.
53 Weston, op. cit.
54 Sheff, 2013.
55 Muraco, op. cit.; Oswald, 2002; Weston, op. cit.