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# "We Are Pioneers": Polyamorists' Stigma Management Strategies

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“WE ARE PIONEERS”: POLYAMORISTS’ STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

by

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B.A., University of Missouri-Saint Louis, 2012

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Sociology degree.

Department of Sociology  
in the Graduate School  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

“WE ARE PIONEERS”: POLYAMORISTS’ STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the field of Sociology

Approved by:

Dr. Chris Wienke, Chair

Graduate School  
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May 29, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

JESSICA M. YOUNG, for the Master of Arts degree in Sociology, presented on May 29, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: “WE ARE PIONEERS”: POLYAMORISTS’ STIGMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Chris Wienke

Despite a shift in our late-modern period to erode more traditional forms of relationships and a growth in polyamory’s popularity, non-monogamy remains highly stigmatized. Polyamory is a relationship style wherein participants have multiple romantic and/or sexual partners with whom they focus on building commitments, sharing intimacy, and establishing honesty (Sheff 2006). While scholarship on polyamory and the stigma of non-monogamies generally is growing, little is known about how polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities. Using Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma management, I inductively analyze discussion board posts on a polyamorous community’s website and find that polyamorists manage their stigma differently in private life and public life, but typically do so in a way that defies the stigma of non-monogamy. I argue that the source of polyamorists’ resistance to their stigmatization stems from the Polyamorous Ethos, an in-group perspective in the polyamorous community that advocates for polyamory’s superiority over monogamy and power to effect social change.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In our late-modern period, non-monogamies have emerged as part of the larger shift to new relationship formations that erode traditional marital arrangements (Giddens 1992; Haag 2011). In American society, however, monogamy remains a reified norm (Finn and Malson 2008) and non-monogamy continues to be deeply stigmatized (Anderson 2010; Treas and Giesen 2000). Despite monogamy's hegemony (Anderson 2010), polyamory has grown in popularity both in the public and among scholars (Barker and Langdridge 2010).

Polyamory is a relationship style wherein participants have multiple romantic and/or sexual partners with whom they focus on building commitments, sharing intimacy, and establishing honesty (Sheff 2006). While scholarship on polyamory (Barker and Langdridge 2010) and literature exploring the stigma of various sexual minorities (Nack 2000; Tanenbaum 1999; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) are growing, more research is needed to specifically address how polyamorists manage the stigma of non-monogamy.

Using Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma management, I begin to fill this gap by conducting an inductive qualitative content analysis on discussion board posts from a polyamorous community's website—PolyamorousPosts—to answer the question "how do polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities?" I found that polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities differently in private and public, but usually do so by defying their stigma regardless of whether they are interacting with intimates or strangers. Additionally, I found that polyamorists in my study engage in a Polyamorous Ethos that I argue characterizes and accounts for the defiance in their stigma management strategies.



I will argue that the Polyamorous Ethos is the crux of my participants' resistance to their stigmatization. These findings have implications for our understanding of other non-monogamists' stigma management and how polyamory and non-monogamies shape normative relationship arrangements. I conclude this paper by calling for greater attention to stigma management in the polyamorous community and the possible effects of privilege on it, as well as the impact polyamorists' defiance of non-monogamy's stigma may have on our mononormative discourse.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociologists have begun establishing a body of research on non-monogamies, their stigmatization, and the costs of that stigmatization. Unfortunately, little is known about how non-monogamists manage their stigmatized identities. In particular, there is a dearth of literature on polyamory. Though social scientists have studied the consequences of stigma associated with various other sexual minorities, the limited number of studies on polyamory that have been conducted have not yet explored the stigma polyamorists face and the way they manage their stigmatized identities.

#### *The Stigma of Non-Monogamy*

A series of studies have shown that Americans disapprove of non-monogamy, and therefore establish that being unfaithful or engaging in a relationship where monogamy is not the norm is highly stigmatized. Two independent studies have found that Americans think monogamy is very important whether married or cohabiting (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Greeley 1991). Furthermore, Smith (1994) demonstrates that nearly the entire population thinks marital infidelity is wrong all the time or almost all the time. In a more recent study, Treas and Giesen (2000) write that approximately all of the married and cohabiting respondents in their study (99%) expected sexual exclusivity from their partner and in turn believed that their partner held that same expectation of them (p. 54). Despite these beliefs, not all participants in Treas and Giesen's (2000) study were monogamous: only between eighty-eight and ninety-two percent of participants were actually faithful to their partners (p. 54). Because nearly all participants

expected monogamy, it is possible that some lied to their partners about their infidelity, effectively passing as monogamous.

In his study of cheating among undergraduate college men, Anderson (2010) also establishes that non-monogamy is stigmatized. He attempted an explanation at why his participants were not monogamous and how they handled the consequences of non-monogamy's stigma. Anderson (2010) argues that non-monogamy is stigmatized because monogamy is considered superior, natural, and "righteous" (p. 864), even by his participants who engaged in non-monogamous behavior (p. 858-859). Because society also socializes men to be sexually adventurous, his participants had to reconcile these two competing demands by having extra-dyadic sex (Anderson 2010). Being unfaithful provided Anderson's (2010) participants the ability to fulfill both social scripts—monogamy and sexual adventure—but the stigmatized act of cheating may have had several negative effects of its own. The men could have caused harm to their partners and relationships, and often felt guilt and shame (Anderson 2010, p. 864). To manage the stigma of their non-monogamy, Anderson's (2010) participants continued to identify as monogamous (p. 858).

The stigma of non-monogamy is so pervasive that it is even a source of problems and distress for those who openly avoid commitment: participants in the college hook-up culture, for example. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) found that many women in their study of the college hook-up culture faced a "sexual double bind" that allowed them to delay involvement in committed relationships by "hooking up," but that hook-ups could also stigmatize them due to their non-monogamous behavior (p. 606). Women in the college hook-up culture had such a fear of being stigmatized due to their non-monogamous behavior that the authors concluded it "constrained women's sexual behavior and perhaps even shape their preferences" (Hamilton and

Armstrong 2009, p. 598). Some of the women even found themselves returning home from college due to the stigmatization they faced from participating in the non-monogamous behaviors of the hook-up culture (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009, p. 608). We can use Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma and stigma management to make sense of the opinions about and experiences of non-monogamists in the above studies.

### *Stigma and the Management of Stigmatized Identities*

Goffman (1963) defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” but ultimately depends on social context and relationship, as what stigmatizes one person may not stigmatize another (p. 3). Of the three forms of stigma that he identifies, non-monogamy can be considered a stigma that represents a “blemish of individual character,” meaning that non-monogamists belong to a category Goffman (1963) labeled as the discreditable (p. 4). The discreditable are stigmatized individuals whose discrediting attribute is not known to others in his or her presence or easily perceived by them, though others' ignorance of the stigma is never guaranteed (Goffman 1963, p. 4). As a result, even the discreditable may be forced to face the consequences of their stigma.

As the above literature on the stigma of non-monogamies illustrates, Goffman (1963) argues that we think of the stigmatized as less than human (p. 3-5). It is not surprising, then, that the stigmatized are often uncertain of what the un-stigmatized think of them and therefore feel like they must “be self-conscious and calculating about the impression” they make (p. 14). Particularly applicable for stigmas of “individual character” such as the stigma of non-monogamy is Goffman's (1963) observation that intimacy will not lessen the negative consequences of the stigma (p. 52). In fact, those closest to the stigmatized may be the ones who he or she wishes to hide the stigma from the most (Goffman 1963, p. 53-54). Because of the

costs of stigma, discreditable, like non-monogamists, are likely to deploy one or more stigma management strategies.

One strategy Goffman outlines for managing discreditable stigma is passing, which is a way to manage information about the stigma so that it remains unknown to everyone but the stigmatized herself (Goffman 1963, p. 73). Passing may be intentional or others who do not know about the stigma may assume the person is not stigmatized, in effect allowing him or her to pass without trying to (Goffman 1963, p. 75). When a discreditable passes, she may portray the stigma as a less discrediting attribute, distancing herself from the stigma (by moving to a new town where no one knows of her stigma, for example), or even by avoiding getting to know people because they may find out about the stigma (Goffman 1963, p. 94-99). If the discreditable chooses to stop managing the stigma by passing, he or she may decide to voluntarily disclose their stigma to others.

The stigmatized may disclose their stigma in several ways. A discreditable may discredit herself by purposefully providing evidence of the stigma or by mentioning it “in a matter of fact way” (Goffman 1963, p. 101). After disclosing the stigma, the individual may manage its resultant tension in social interactions by covering. Covering is the attempt to draw attention away from the stigmatizing attribute by making “an effort to restrict the display of those failings most centrally identified with the stigma,” sometimes even behaving in the same exact way as the un-stigmatized (Goffman 1963, p. 102-104). One place where the stigmatized do not need to disclose their stigma is with their “in-group.”

“In-Group Alignments” help the stigmatized to manage their identity because they are communities of “like-situated individuals” and “fellow sufferers” who claim to be the stigmatized person’s “natural” group (Goffman 1963, p. 112). Although the in-group may

ultimately discredit the discreditable (Goffman 1963, p. 113), it can provide a source of empowerment to facilitate the management of the stigmatized identity. Goffman (1963) notes that adherents of the in-group perspective “may advocate a militant and chauvinistic line—even to the extent of a secessionist ideology” (p. 113). When in the company of the un-stigmatized, in-group members might celebrate the group’s stigmatized but unique characteristics and what they have to offer while pointing out the thinly veiled tolerance of the un-stigmatized (p. 113-114). The discreditation and consequences of stigma are particularly salient in the study of sexual minorities, including non-monogamies like polyamory.

### *Stigmatized Sexual Minorities: Costs and Management Strategies*

Various studies have demonstrated the costs of having a stigmatized sexuality and how those stigmatized identities are managed. In her work on the stigma teenage girls experience when being called a “slut,” Tanenbaum (1999) argued that sexuality is the defining characteristic for this population (p. 516). The costs of being stigmatized as a “slut” were varied and dramatic. Many participants reported being bullied at school due to just the perception that they were sexually active, while others were ostracized from their peer groups (Tanenbaum 1999, p. 517-520). Most drastically, many of the girls and women Tanenbaum (1999) interviewed internalized others’ disbelief of their experiences and allegations of rape (p. 519).

Though Tanenbaum (1999) suggested that all of the participants in her study gained strength and knowledge about gender roles from their stigmatizing experiences, she also accounted for the range of stigma management practices that the women engaged in to “blot away the stigma” (p. 521). Some participants attempted to divert attention away from the stigma of being a “slut” by dressing more modestly, focusing on schoolwork, or avoiding sexual behaviors (Tanenbaum 1999, p. 521). Others suffered from low self-esteem that led to depression

and eating disorders or the decision to engage in “self-destructive” behaviors, like excessive drinking and drug use (Tanenbaum 1999, p. 521).

Unfortunately, sexuality continues to define women past their teenage years. Even adult women face stigma when they contract sexually transmitted diseases, as Nack (2000) found in her study of stigma management among this population. Making sense of her failed efforts at establishing a support group for women with STDs, Nack (2000) suggests that “the stigma of having an STD is so severe that the perceived cost of disclosing this sexual health status to strangers outweighs the possible benefits” (p. 457). Because nearly every participant in the study was profoundly negatively affected by her STD diagnosis due to its stigma, Nack (2000) was able to detail the numerous stigma management strategies the women used, including passing, covering, and transferring stigma.

Many participants were able to pass either by convincing themselves and others that they were sexually healthy or by simply allowing others to assume they were (Nack 2000, p. 458-459). Other participants were able to cover their stigmatized status by lying or telling only part of the truth about their STD diagnosis (Nack 2000, p. 459). While some women disclosed their STD status to friends, partners, or family members due to the guilt of covering and passing, others transferred the stigma of the disease onto someone else. When transferring their stigma, participants blamed previous partners for infecting them, ‘warned’ their past partners’ potential future partners of the STD, or became suspicious of future partners’ sexual health (Nack 2000, p. 460-461).

Sex stigma and its consequences are so pervasive that even those who are not sexually active and identify as asexual face sexual stigma. In her study of the construction of asexual identities online, Scherrer (2008) learns that asexuality has been conceived of as a health

problem relating to either the body's dysfunctions or the mind's need for therapeutic intervention (p. 622). In short, asexuality has only been considered as an illness, not an identity. Scherrer (2008) found that some asexuals might manage their stigmatized status by passing and claiming a less stigmatized identity (p. 635). While we know the harmful effects of stigma for a number of sexual minority groups and how they manage their identities, we lack a similar knowledge of polyamorists.

*Polyamory: Stigma, Consequences, and Identity Management*

Though sociologists are learning more about polyamory as a form of non-monogamy, there is a striking lack of discussion regarding the stigma that polyamorists face, what the consequences of it are, and how they manage their stigmatized identities. Extant literature does provide the foundation for beginning to understand polyamorists, however, as the growing body of scholarship includes much information about who polyamorists are and the main tenets of their relationship style.

Polyamorists are a privileged group of non-monogamists: most are white, college-educated, middle- to upper-middle class professionals (Klesse 2011, p.8). Although polyamorists have a fair amount of social privilege that typically would indicate that they have access to whatever resources they need or desire, polyamory is rooted in the sexual and political revolutions of both the early 1900s and the 1960s through 1980s (Anapol 2010, p.49-53). Evolving throughout revolutionary moments in history, this emerging community of non-monogamists holds many beliefs that are reminiscent of the 1960s' effects on our culture. Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy (2009) argue that "many ideals of that era [the 1960s]—nonconformity...openness about sexuality...the possibility of ethical and loving nonmonogamy—have permeated the greater culture" (p.29).



Polyamorists claim to strive for multiple-partner relationships that are created around core values of honesty, commitment, consensus, integrity, and equality (Anapol 2010, p.76-82). While these qualities are not inherently radical, the ways polyamorists enact them sometimes involve transgressing social norms. For example, Sheff (2005, 2006) found that polyamorists in her ethnographic study actively tried to establish equality and honesty by radically redefining the way that they perceived their own roles and related to one another. When they experienced the loss of traditional ones that accompanied monogamy, women in the polyamorous community altered or created new roles for themselves that enabled them to be equals with men by giving up their socialized submissiveness and acknowledging their high sex drives (Sheff 2005, p.260-263). Even when women retained more relational power than men, they attempted to come to a consensus with the men and considered them their equals in their relationship by establishing rules and boundaries regarding acceptable behaviors (Sheff 2005, p.271-273). Men also made strong efforts to ensure equality in their polyamorous relationships by acting on poly-hegemonic masculinity—acknowledging patriarchy and not acting out “the most blatant forms of hegemonic masculinity” (Sheff 2006, p. 625). Despite experiencing greater equality and harmony in their personal relationships, polyamorists still experienced stigma due to their non-monogamous relationships.

Sheff (2005) reports that stigma was a problem in the community she studied and that “many [of her participants] discussed the social intolerance and fear of censure that sometimes accompanied their polyamorous lifestyle” (p. 277). The cost of stigma for polyamorists in Sheff’s (2005) study ranged from potential loss of employment (p. 278) to being ostracized by friends, family, and social groups (p. 277). Regarding how stigma was managed among these participants, Sheff (2005) notes only that some of the women passed as monogamous (p. 278).

Scholars have suggested that persons with immense privilege, such as polyamorists, have the ability to organize their lives in non-normative ways because the incredible disadvantage that those without race, class, and education privileges encounter is not an obstacle (Sheff 2005; Collins 1996, 2005; Sheff and Hammers 2011). For instance, those without race and class privilege have less freedom to deviate from normative sexualities due to the compounded disadvantage they are more likely to experience, such as discrimination, fewer work opportunities, limited educational prospects, and impoverishment (Collins 1996, 2005; Sanday 2007; Steinbugler 2005). Conversely, race and class privilege ensure a social and financial safety net to rely on should the polyamorous relationship be unsuccessful or the identity undesirable (Sheff 2005, p. 278; Sheff and Hammers 2011).

While polyamorists' privilege helps us to understand how they are able to forge a non-monogamous lifestyle and their ability to disassociate themselves from it if they are unable or unwilling to manage the stigmatized identity, we still lack knowledge about how polyamorists *do* manage their "spoiled identity" (Goffman 1963). To date, the only knowledge we have of polyamorists'—and non-monogamists'—stigma management strategies is that passing as monogamous is often relied on. Polyamorists' stigma management strategies have not been explored in their own right. As a result, we are missing valuable information about this emerging sexual community that could have implications for the management tactics of other non-monogamies, as well. In this study, I attempt to begin addressing this gap in the literature by asking "how do polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities?", "under what conditions do polyamorists use stigma management strategies?", and "what accounts for the defiance that characterizes polyamorists' stigma management strategies?"

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This study is an inductive content analysis of polyamorists' stigma management strategies. The data for this analysis are discussion board posts from an online discussion board forum connected to a website, PolyamorousPosts. PolyamorousPosts is designed to convey information about polyamory and be a source of communication for polyamorists. I have provided a pseudonym for all participants and for the name of the website from which the discussion board data is derived.

PolyamorousPosts is one of few sites established to discuss polyamory that is not a blog or personal site documenting the personal experiences and opinions of participants in just one relationship. Rather, participants on the PolyamorousPosts site include those involved in many independent relationships whose partners may or may not also contribute to what is produced on the site or discussion board. PolyamorousPosts provides a number of resources, including the discussion board, for polyamorists and people who are interested in learning about polyamory. The site seems to be a major hub of communication and information within the polyamorous community: many other websites, blogs, and even books that cater to the polyamorous population refer readers to the PolyamorousPosts site for more information. Aside from the discussion board, PolyamorousPosts also boasts a list of links to other sites and organizations for polyamorists, a chat room, a Frequently Asked Questions page, a number of new and archived articles and columns by and about polyamorists, a page of references to when polyamory was in the 'news,' and a function to write a letter to "ask Aunt Poly" which allows users to anonymously ask questions of a staff member at the site about polyamory. The discussion board

forum is a major function of the site that allows members and visitors to exchange information and experiences about being polyamorous. I chose to gather data from the discussion board on the PolyamorousPosts website because compared to other polyamorous sites and blogs, it has a high level of activity and a history of such high activity, as is evidenced by continuous updates and new posts to the discussion board that extend several years back from the present. The discussion board is updated at least weekly (if not daily) and each new conversation or post within a conversation sparks many responses and new conversations.<sup>1</sup>

The PolyamorousPosts discussion board contains twenty-five discussion board topics ranging in subject from members' creative contributions (such as poetry) to an outlet for children raised in polyamorous families to share their stories. Three of the discussion board topics exist for the site's members and visitors to discuss common "issues" with polyamory, often including references to and experiences with stigma and stigma management.

I chose to collect one year's worth of discussion board data from these three discussion board topics that address "issues" because they allowed me to adequately address my research focus of the stigma that polyamorists face and how they manage their stigmatized identities. The three discussion topics I chose to gather data from include "Emotional Issues," "Practical Issues," and "Lifestyle Issues." Though the varied conversations in these three topics about

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<sup>1</sup> The location and organization of the discussion board are as follows: the PolyamorousPosts website has a page titled "Forums." This is the discussion board. Within the "Forums" page is a list of many discussion topics, such as "Practical Issues" or "Spiritual Polyamory." These discussion topics are time-stamped so that the viewer may see when a participant last posted a comment or started a conversation within the topic. Upon clicking on one of these discussion topics, the viewer sees a list of conversations related to the discussion topic, such as the "Moving in/living together" conversation located in the "Practical Issues" discussion topic. Again, a time-stamp of when a user last posted within this conversation is visible without needing to enter the conversation's page. Upon clicking on the conversation's title, such as "Moving in/living together," the viewer may read the community members' posts about that subject (like moving in and living together); members' posts may be in response to the conversation title itself or to one of the other community member's posts regarding the conversation's title.

“issues” extended back several years, I chose to analyze only the conversations that have been active within one year of my analysis (meaning someone posted within them within the year preceding the analysis). All discussion board conversations are time-stamped on their topic’s main page to indicate the time a member or visitor *last* posted in it; for this reason, the three topics about “issues” from which I gathered data contain posts from as long as three years ago (because that was when their parent conversation was started) but within the last year members were still posting within it.

Using data from an Internet discussion board was a strategic decision because it is the center of communication among individual polyamorists who otherwise may remain isolated and be unable to organize a group based on this common identity (Strassberg 2003). Following scholars who have made the case that the internet allows stigmatized and marginalized individuals to experience a sense of support through community (Turkle 1995; McKenna and Bargh 1998), I believe that drawing from a discussion board to make sense of polyamorists’ stigma and the strategies they use to manage it has enabled me to capture experiences and information I may not have been able to access in another way, such as through interviews or surveys. Additionally, conducting content analysis on discussion board posts enabled me to prioritize the stigmatizing aspects of polyamory that participants considered most salient to their identities and how they manage them.

I analyzed the data (the discussion posts) from these three discussion board conversations inductively rather than deductively because little is known about the way that non-monogamists, in particular polyamorists, handle the stigma that they face due to not being monogamous. To conduct a deductive study, I would have needed to build assumptions of polyamorists’ or non-monogamists’ stigma management strategies into my analysis. Because there is a dearth of

literature on this topic, I was unable to identify such assumptions and code for them within my data. Rather, I have allowed polyamorists' stigma management strategies to emerge from the data and reflect the lived experiences of this unrepresentative population.

To conduct this content analysis, I first openly coded all the data I collected to understand what "issues" and stigmatizing experiences participants prioritize (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Through this inductive open coding, my research question became refined and focused and began reflecting participants' concerns; I began to ask how polyamorists managed their stigmatized identities when interacting with intimates versus strangers and why they chose the tactics they did, both of which emerged as prominent themes during coding. With this new research focus, I began to engage in focused coding to identify variations and make comparisons between participants' experiences with stigma (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Focused coding allowed me to identify the strategies polyamorists in this online community use in private and public life to manage their stigmatized identities, as well as the in-group perspective that accounts for them.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

Conducting the inductive grounded coding and analysis process allowed me to capture the variation in polyamorists' stigma management strategies by identifying three themes that have two sub-themes each. Each theme demonstrates the range of stigma management strategies polyamorists use in their private lives, public lives, and in-group community.

I find that polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities differently depending upon whether they are doing so in their private lives with their intimates or in their public lives with strangers. Each is comprised of two themes. In private life, polyamorists manage their stigma in interactions with family, friends, and social peers by Controlling the "Situation" or Establishing Ultimatums. In public life, polyamorists manage their stigma by Passing as Monogamous or Challenging the Stigma when in interaction with strangers. It is notable that in both private and public life, more often than not polyamorists opted to manage their identity by *defying* the stigma of non-monogamy rather than trying to pass as monogamous or even cover by downplaying their non-monogamy. I believe that a Polyamorous Ethos that results from in-group alignment accounts for this phenomenon.

What may drive and enable my participants' stigma management strategies is a shared perspective about polyamory and their ability to effect social change by participating in it. The Polyamorous Ethos within the in-group alignment that I identified on PolyamorousPosts illustrates two sub-themes that seem to form the basis of polyamorists' defiance of their stigmatization: Denouncing Monogamy and "Changing the World." Denouncing Monogamy and

“Changing the World” therefore form the crux of this community of polyamorists’ defiant stigma management strategies.

*Private Life: Stigma and ‘Intimates’*

One major source of concern and discussion on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board was finding a way to manage the stigma of non-monogamy when interacting with intimates—particularly family. I find that polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities by generally disregarding their intimates’ negative sanctions of their stigmatized non-monogamy. Despite the variation in family reactions to polyamory, I find that polyamorists manage their stigma by employing two consistent responses: Controlling the Situation or Establishing Ultimatums.

*Controlling the situation.* Controlling the Situation involves accepting that the polyamorist’s family has negatively sanctioned his or her behavior due to the stigma of non-monogamy and making the decision to avoid accommodating the family’s demands for monogamy. Controlling the Situation involves the polyamorist accepting that the only control he or she has in the situation is over his or her own actions and emotions—specifically, in the way that he or she manages their stigma. In taking control of one’s own emotions and actions (and not letting the family control them with their demands that the stigmatized polyamory be abandoned or covered) the polyamorist maintains control of the situation and his or her own identity instead of allowing the family to control either with their demands and expectations of monogamy. Tim explains how to manage polyamory’s stigma in private life:

“Remember, you can't control what other people do, you can only control what you do. If people act judgmentally toward you, that's their decision to make, and perhaps you'll have to have less contact with certain people for awhile.” (Tim; January 26, 2013)



Just as some participants in Hamilton and Armstrong's (2009) study managed the stigma of non-monogamy in the college hookup culture by leaving the university and effectively avoiding situations in which they could be stigmatized further, polyamorists on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board were prepared to remove themselves from family situations where their stigmas intrusion into the relationship was unacceptable to their intimates.

In another case, Nina seeks to empower a fellow discussant by indicating that the polyamorous relationship offers something more valuable than what the family can offer and is worth the stigma:

“We can't control how people react to us, we have to be comfortable with ourselves to know their reaction isn't the end all be all and accept that. It's why I keep going back to - you can only control your emotions. I understand why it upsets you but you have the choice to not let it upset you. You don't need their acceptance. You don't need to be treated better by them. What you have instead with husband and gf [girlfriend] is so much more than anything you can get from her family... At most, what I would strive for with family behaving like this is civility and respect. But in the end, I don't even need that cause [sic] I can ignore them as easily as they ignore me.” (Nina; August 9, 2013)

Similarly to Tanenbaum's (1999) research on teenage girls stigmatized as “sluts,” polyamorists in my study also Controlled the Situation by controlling their self-images. Tanenbaum's (1999) participants managed their stigma by altering their image: dressing in baggy clothes, avoiding sexual activity, and becoming more studious (p. 521). As Nina exemplifies in the above example, polyamorists may also use their self-image to manage their identity when they Control the

Situation by portraying themselves as too proud and dignified to need the support of family members who do not offer them “civility and respect.”

Both Tim and Nina suggest that Controlling the Situation is an ideal way to manage the stigma of polyamory because it allows polyamorists to maintain their dignity and turn the potential cost of polyamory’s stigma—exclusion from family (Sheff 2005) —into a source of empowerment. Many participants struggle with their level of entrenchment within their (and their partners’) families. Resultantly, all participants did not easily reach this decision, and the comments Nina makes to empower another discussant and encourage her to Control the Situation indicate the insecurity some participants had in making this choice. Nonetheless, Controlling the Situation was a recurring pattern among participants when forced to manage the stigma of polyamory in private life.

*Establishing Ultimatums.* In addition to or rather than Controlling the Situation, some participants would manage their stigma by Establishing Ultimatums for their families. Whereas Controlling the Situation was a form of passive stigma management in which the polyamorist made the decision to maintain their stigmatized identity despite their family’s negative sanctions, Establishing Ultimatums involves actively deciding that the family will accept the polyamorist’s stigmatized identity or will not need to have a relationship with him or her at all. Christine explains how she justifies establishing such an ultimatum:

“It would be easier to make the poly as invisible as possible. But, at the end of the day, it's not worth it to hide my real self. How much benefit can I get out of the relationship, if their love and support is not for the real me? I get more out of them feeling confused and conflicted about the real me, than having them feel satisfied and proud of an incomplete

picture of me.” (Christine; June 26, 2013)

Making the sexual stigma into someone else’s problem—in this case, the family’s—is not an unlearned of tactic for managing sexual stigma: Nack (2000) found that women with STDs sometimes transferred the stigma from their infection to someone else (p. 460-461). Just as Nack’s (2000) participants transferred their stigma to relieve themselves of the pressure they felt because of it, perhaps the polyamorists in this study are similarly seeking to distance themselves from the pressure to conform and the costs of being stigmatized deviants.

Much like making the decision to Control the Situation, Ultimatums are not easily settled on as the best way to manage the stigma. By Establishing Ultimatums, however, the polyamorist forces the family to consider the extent to which they believe monogamy is necessary and non-monogamy discrediting. The polyamorist is essentially taking a risk that his or her family may not be a part of his or her life in the future.

In both Controlling the Situation and Establishing Ultimatums, there is the sense that polyamorists do not need their family to fulfill social or emotional roles in their lives. Though polyamorists seem to value the social and emotional rewards of being accepted by their families, they make clear that they are capable of moving forward without their families and are not fearful of what they would lose—socially, emotionally, or otherwise—by their family’s absence.

### *Public Life: Stigma and Strangers*

When polyamorists interact with strangers in public, they are often challenged by assumptions of mononormativity and risk experiencing negative sanctions due to their non-monogamy should they disclose their stigma or be discredited in some way. When faced with mononormative assumptions in public life, I find that polyamorists manage their stigma by Passing as Monogamous or Challenging the Stigma. Essentially, polyamorists resist the negative

sanctions they experience due to their stigma by rendering them as displays of ignorance that can be ignored or used as moments to defy the stigma of non-monogamy.

*Passing as monogamous.* As Goffman (1963) defined it, passing is a way for a stigmatized person to manage their identity so that the un-stigmatized do not find out about the stigma. Polyamorists may Pass as Monogamous using passive or active behaviors. Passing as Monogamous sometimes involves the polyamorist allowing strangers in public to think that they are monogamous rather than disclosing their polyamory. Lauren explains to the other discussants on the discussion board how she Passes as Monogamous in casual conversation:

“It's become a minor annoyance, I figure to most people marriage or marriage-like is the culmination of a relationship and if it doesn't go there what's the point of being together. *They don't understand anything else, so I let it slide and learned to dodge questions* [emphasis mine].” (Lauren; December 27, 2012)

As she illustrates in her comment, Lauren relies on passively allowing others to believe she is monogamous so she can manage her identity without others learning of her stigma. Likewise, Nack (2000) observed that women with STDs in her study would pass as sexually healthy in social interactions by allowing others to negatively sanction people with STDs or those presumed to have them (p. 459). While Nack's (2000) participants seemed to passively pass due to the shame of their stigma, I found that polyamorists on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board may choose to passively Pass instead of using other stigma management strategies due to their belief that those they interact with “don't understand anything else,” to quote Lauren (above).

Other times, Passing as Monogamous involves pretending to monogamous when interacting with strangers. Just as Scherrer (2008) found that asexuals may identify with a less-stigmatizing identity in social interactions, I find that polyamorists may identify as monogamous to manage their stigmatized identity. In response to a restaurant server who asked her if she would marry her already-married boyfriend, Christine discusses how she handled the situation:

“I brushed off the question. I laughed and *said I’d let her know* [emphasis mine]. *She pressed a bit more asking me if a wedding at the hotel is something I would want to do, and I said sure* [emphasis mine]. I just wanted that interaction to end as quickly as possible.” (Christine; December 25, 2012)

In this post, Christine demonstrates how she actively Passes as Monogamous by pretending to be potentially interested in (presumably monogamously) marrying her already-married boyfriend at the hotel where they were eating. Knowing she could not (and perhaps even did not want to) marry her already-married boyfriend, Christine managed her stigmatized identity by identifying as monogamous briefly in this encounter so the conversation would “end as quickly as possible,” to quote Christine (above).

Despite the potential costs of Passing, such as the guilt that Nack’s (2000) participants felt, Tim explains why Passing as Monogamous is a desirable solution for managing the stigma of polyamory in interactions with strangers:

“By responding in a way that doesn’t buoy up the other person’s conditioning, we have to risk making the other person uncomfortable, and/or disappointing the other person (and possibly disrupting the comfort of all within earshot).” (Tim; January 2, 2013)

Tim justifies Passing as Monogamous by arguing that it is the most comfortable way of interacting with strangers who may react negatively to having their monogamous socialization challenged by polyamory's deviance. Socialization of hegemonic monogamy should not be discounted as a possible reason for Passing; Anderson (2010) argues his unfaithful participants passed as monogamous due to their socialization in a monogamous culture. However, Tim also subtly renders the assumed monogamous public as ignorant of polyamory and unable to respond in any way other than negatively due to the stigma of non-monogamy.

Among the participants on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board, Passing seemed to be done during brief encounters to ease the tension of managing their stigmatized identity. Furthermore, polyamorists justify the negative sanctions they experience due to their stigma as the result of strangers' assumed socialization to believe monogamy is natural. Though the participants reconcile strangers' reactions to their stigmatized identities as the result of socialization into hegemonic mononormativity, literature on the polyamorous community provides reason to believe that the general public may not be familiar with polyamory because of the way polyamorists construct their identities and organize their lives.

Previous research shows that polyamorists tend to remain disengaged from the government (Aviram 2008), prefer isolationist politics instead of inclusive ones that would expose the public to their lifestyle through battles for rights from the state (Sheff and Hammers 2011), do much of their identity construction online (Barker 2005), and often create their identity in conjunction with other polyamorists either through online groups (Ritchie and Barker 2006) or in groups who gather together in a community (Sheff 2005; Sheff 2006). Therefore, it is possible that those who encounter polyamorists and their associated non-monogamous behaviors in public are not incapable of understanding polyamory (as Lauren and Tim suggested) but rather have not

had the opportunity to do so because polyamorists are generally fairly isolated. Regardless, participants acknowledged that monogamy is the social norm and that sometimes the most convenient way to manage the stigma of deviating from it is Passing.

*Challenging the stigma.* Some polyamorists challenged polyamory's stigma and managed their discreditable identities by openly disclosing their polyamory to brazenly draw attention to it. Lauren explains how she challenges non-monogamy's stigma by drawing attention to it when strangers question her relationship:

“By far my favorite is so are you guys married or bf[boyfriend]/gf[girlfriend]? Both or somewhere in between. It's so unexpected the only response is a look of confusion.” (Lauren; December 27, 2012)

Although Lauren illustrates two of the forms Goffman (1963) provides for disclosing one's stigma—providing “fleeting offerings of evidence” and stating the stigma “in a matter of fact way” (p.101)—the purpose of her tactic was not quite the same. Lauren has challenged the stigma of polyamory by overtly attempting to provoke or fault the person she is interacting with, whereas the disclosure Goffman (1963) describes implies subtlety and the desire to minimize tension the stigma may cause.

Likewise, when responding to stares and bad service Angela, her girlfriend, and their boyfriend received at a restaurant, Angela explains how she and her partners challenged the stigma of non-monogamy by brazenly drawing attention to their polyamory:

“BF [boyfriend]...made a point of grabbing both of our hands on the way out. The woman \*literally\* jumped when she saw that!” (Angela; August 4, 2012)

Just as Tanenbaum's (1999) participants engaged in self-destructive behavior when stigmatized by being labeled "sluts," the participants on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board challenged their detractors by even more boldly acting out the stigmatized identity's associated behaviors. Though Angela and her partners deliberately dramatized their polyamorous behavior to challenge their stigma, they differ from Tanenbaum's (1999) participants in that they did so out of pride and confidence, not out of shame and low self-esteem.

After outlining the two above processes of how polyamorists manage their stigma, I asked of the data: "why is it that polyamorists on PolyamorousPosts manage their stigmatized identity with such defiance instead of accepting that they are 'deviants' and allowing others to think of them that way?" To be sure, it would be easier to either Pass as Monogamous or cover rather than Establishing Ultimatums or Challenging the Stigma. Yet, most polyamorists on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board cite stigma management strategies that do not attempt to hide the stigma of non-monogamy but rather draw attention to it. In essence, I wanted to learn why polyamorists reacted to their stigmatization with defiance rather than the shame other sexual minorities seem to experience. When accounting for these patterns of defiance, I find that participants in this study share a perspective on their relationship style and believe they are forging an alternative lifestyle for themselves and others in the future by being polyamorists. I will argue that this shared perspective and its attendant beliefs form the foundation for my participants' defiant stigma management tactics.

#### *In-Group Alignment: The Polyamorous Ethos*

I find that there are two factors driving and enabling the polyamorists on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board to manage their stigma defiantly: Denouncing Monogamy and "Changing the World." Denouncing Monogamy and "Changing the World" are sources of



in-group alignment and empowerment for stigmatized polyamorists. These two tenets establish a Polyamorous Ethos by which community members come to make sense of their relationship style and manage their stigma.

*Denouncing monogamy.* Denouncing Monogamy is characterized by participants often making claims about why monogamy and monogamous marriage are undesirable, unfulfilling, and unrealistic. When Denouncing Monogamy, participants tended to do so in a way that implied the benefits of polyamory as an alternative. For example, Nina alludes to some of polyamory's perceived benefits in her post regarding monogamous marriage:

“I personally detest marriage. The institution itself feels like another way for people to put other people down. Or to control them.” (Nina; September 10, 2011)

Similarly, Ellen's comments call monogamy's merit into question and problematize the stigmatization of polyamory:

“Would life be easier if I'd just be like everyone else? Get married, grow apart, have an affair, live life as a serial monogamist and teach my kids to buy into the fairy tale life....We all really know the answer.” (Ellen; January 4, 2013)

As Nina and Ellen make clear, the community on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board exemplifies many of the same qualities that Goffman (1963) detailed in his discussion of in-group alignments. In particular, both Nina and Ellen imply the “assumed special values” of polyamory by pointing out the shortcomings of monogamy (Goffman 1963, p.113). Additionally, both participants' posts characterize aspects of a “secessionist ideology” that advocates for the abandonment of the norm in favor of the alternative (Goffman 1963, p. 113).

When participants Denounce Monogamy they are making a clear demarcation between monogamy and polyamory that helps us to understand why they so actively resist their stigmatization in private and public life. Recognizing that polyamorists Denounce Monogamy helps us to understand why stigmatizing polyamory only begets defiance.

*“Changing the world.”* “Changing the world” refers to polyamorists’ beliefs that they are effecting change for others by bravely transgressing norms and resisting the stigma of non-monogamy. Even though they bemoan that society is currently unappreciative of the good they are doing, polyamorists on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board generally express that they are willing to defy polyamory’s stigma so that others in the future may experience the positive social change they anticipate their resistance will bring. Parker’s comments illustrate this perceived tension between polyamorists’ efforts and the public’s ignorance of it:

“Ppl [people] who know us often articulate that we're nuts, and perhaps we are, but we've taken the attitude that we are pioneers, paving the way for others who will come after us. “ (Parker; January 7, 2013)

Christine also states that being polyamorous will effect social change:

“truly, just by living our lives, we're changing the world, one tiny bit at a time.” (Christine; December 30, 2012)

Parker and Christine suggest that being polyamorous will effectively challenge the norm of monogamy and the stigma of polyamory enough to eliminate it, therefore making it easier for future generations to be non-monogamists. In doing so, they illustrate that the Polyamorous Ethos maintains what Goffman (1963) refers to as a “chauvinistic” and “militant” ideology that celebrates the community’s contribution in spite of their stigma (p. 113). Understanding that

polyamorists view themselves as effecting social change through their relationships clarifies why they manage their stigma with such defiance.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

Because monogamy is hegemonic (Anderson 2010) and therefore reified as a natural phenomenon (Finn and Malson 2008), polyamory (and non-monogamy in general) is stigmatized. Scholars are establishing a growing body of literature on non-monogamies and the stigma of sexual minorities, but research focusing on the stigma management strategies of non-monogamists is lacking. Using Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma management to frame my study, I have attempted to fill this gap in the literature by outlining how the polyamorists on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board managed their stigmatized identities in private and public life. The main research question guiding this analysis was "how do polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities?" Because I used inductive, grounded coding to analyze the content on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board, I was able to capture variation among participants' experiences using constant comparative methods (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and allow themes to emerge from the data that I had not initially anticipated. In particular, focused coding led me to ask the question "what accounts for the defiance that most polyamorists in this study use to manage their stigmatized identities?"

I find that polyamorists manage their stigmatized identities differently depending upon whether they are doing so in their private or public life. When managing stigma in private life with their intimates, polyamorists were apt to try to passively Control the Situation by accepting that their family disapproved of their stigmatized identity and that the only control they had was over themselves. Polyamorists would also actively Establish Ultimatums for their family

members if the family disapproved of polyamory due to the stigma by expressing that if the family member could not accept polyamory they would no longer have a relationship.

In public life, polyamorists managed their stigma by either Passing as Monogamous or Challenging the Stigma. When Passing as Monogamous, polyamorists allowed strangers to think they were monogamous or pretended to be monogamous. Challenging the Stigma was a strategy that involved the polyamorist drawing attention to their non-monogamy and dramatizing its associated behaviors in an effort to provoke strangers or fault them for paying too much attention to it.

Finally, I find that polyamorists share an in-group perspective on their relationship style—the Polyamorous Ethos—that forms the foundation for and facilitates the defiant stigma management strategies they tend to employ. The Polyamorous Ethos is comprised of Denouncing Monogamy and “Changing the World.” Denouncing Monogamy was the pattern among participants on PolyamorousPosts’ discussion board of making claims about monogamy’s ills while praising polyamory. “Changing the World” refers to participants’ assertions that they are creating social change for others by being polyamorous.

Much like Goffman’s (1963) suggestion, it is possible that the militancy and “secessionist ideology” exemplified in these two stigma management tactics could lead participants to have lives that differs more from the mainstream than they already did (p.114). For example, in the Denouncing Monogamy theme I quote Ellen, who insinuated in her post that she did not intend to “teach [her] kids to buy into the fairy tale life” of monogamy; while her comments indicate she is managing her stigma by aligning herself with the polyamorous community and engaging in the Polyamorous Ethos, her life will likely differ dramatically from those of her monogamous peers as she raises children with a multiple-partner relationship orientation.

Because I conducted a content analysis rather than interviews, I was unable to learn what motivated polyamorists to create the Polyamorous Ethos in which they Denounce Monogamy and express their beliefs that they are “Changing the World.” Surely, these are stigma management strategies themselves, but interviews would have provided greater depth into why such defiant actions and beliefs characterize the way that polyamorists in this study manage their stigma when Passing as Monogamous or covering would be nearly effortless since monogamy is assumed in our culture. In short, we have left to learn why polyamorists have an in-group alignment with a shared perspective on society that seems to encourage defying the stigma of non-monogamy.

Although I cannot make this conclusion from my own study due to the lack of detail I was able to garner from participants on the PolyamorousPosts discussion board, one possible explanation for polyamorists’ defiant stigma management strategies is their privilege. According to literature, polyamorists in general have the resources to mitigate the costs of their stigma and resist their stigmatization. Applying the findings of previous studies to the stigma management strategies I have outlined here, we may speculate that polyamorists Control the Situation or Establish Ultimatums with their families because their privilege affords them financial resources as well as social capital to rely on should they choose to live without their family’s support (Sheff 2005, 2006; Sheff and Hammers 2011). Additionally, polyamorous relationships and the polyamorous community can provide a network of ‘family’ or fictive kin who can fulfill the emotional and social roles of family members, if necessary (Sheff 2005, 2006).

Using prior research as a lens through which to possibly make sense of polyamorists’ defiant stigma management in public is possible, as well. We could speculate that polyamorists are able to Challenge the Stigma of their non-monogamy in interactions with strangers because

the high level of race and class privilege that most of them possess means they do not fear the possibility of increased attention from government officials that the threat to “conventional family structures” could bring (Sheff and Hammers 2011, p. 199). Most polyamorists probably do not worry that disclosing their stigma in public will compound the disadvantages that less privileged persons would face, such as discrimination (Collins 1996, 2005; Sanday 2007; Steinbugler 2005). In fact, despite participants’ clear expressions that they perceive themselves as agents of change, the literature indicates that polyamorists tend to promote a politics of isolation that upholds their race and class privilege while ignoring the potential to generate change for a wider population of individuals (Willey 2006; Noel 2006; Sheff and Hammers 2011).

In an attempt to distance themselves from monogamy and continue their deviant lifestyle without interference by engaging in the Polyamorous Ethos, it is possible that polyamorists might find themselves in a paradox Goffman (1963) predicted of the stigmatized: “the more he separates himself structurally from the normals, the more like them he may become culturally” (p. 114). Though polyamorists have established an in-group alignment, they have done so in a way that brings them in line with mainstream culture by celebrating their race and class privilege while denying inclusion to those without it (Willey 2005; Noel 2006; Sheff and Hammers 2011).

By outlining the strategies that polyamorists use to manage their stigmatized identities, this research expands sociologists’ knowledge of both the polyamorous community and non-monogamies more generally. In particular, this research has implications for beginning a discussion among sexualities scholars about how polyamorists (and perhaps other non-monogamists) may shape normative sexual and relationship arrangements by *not* Passing as Monogamous or covering their stigma. If polyamorists openly defy the stigma of non-

monogamy, there is the potential that it could become more acceptable and contribute to the gradual erosion of mononormativity and traditional relationship formations (Haag 2011).

Additionally, the stigma management strategies discussed in this study may be applicable to the way other non-monogamous groups manage their stigma as well: previous research indicates polyamorists and other non-monogamists share race and class privilege as well as some of the same ideas and behaviors regarding relationships (Sheff and Hammers 2011).

Future research should further explore the varied motivations behind Passing as Monogamous or defying stigma by Controlling the Situation, Establishing Ultimatums, or Challenging the Stigma. Such projects should work to distinguish the differences between polyamorists who Pass versus those who defy stigma as well as the variations among situations where Passing is preferred to defiance, and vice versa. Additionally, the role of privilege in polyamorists' stigma management strategies should be investigated in more detail so we can better understand how much or how little it influences the defiance exhibited. Finally, studies evaluating the effects of polyamorists' defiant stigma management strategies on our culture's mononormative assumptions and discourse should be conducted. The results from such a study might be helpful in understanding any potential changes in our culture, such as growing acceptance of non-monogamies or alternative relationship arrangements.



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