

ABSTRACT

TOWARD A MODEL OF POLYAMOROUS IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

SANDRA LINN PEACE

John F. Kennedy University

College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Pleasant Hill, CA

2012

Polyamorous people – those who have multiple loving, sexual relationships that are based on honesty and mutual consent – are a subculture that has not been given much attention in academic literature. To date, only a handful of psychologists, sociologists, and legal scholars have published research. U.S. culture, media, and dominant religious institutions support coupled monogamy as the only relational style rendering other relational styles (i.e. being single, living with non-romantic roommates, polyamory, etc.) invisible.

Polyamorous people challenge mononormativity and often face stereotypes and social rejection from others. Many stay closeted about their poly identity and relationships only coming out to other poly people and supportive allies. Psychologists are not immune to stereotypes and biases held by the dominant culture and may do harm to polyamorous clients seeking their services. Psychologists have conducted research with other

oppressed groups (i.e. LGB, people of color, immigrants) to address these biases and learn about people's resiliency in the face of prejudice, their awareness and acceptance of their target identities, and their adaptation to dominant culture. This qualitative study conducted interviews consisting of semi-structured, open-ended questions inquiring about participants' polyamorous self-identity development. Conventional content analysis was utilized to identify themes common to most participants. Identity development tasks shared by participants emerged: Unaware of Polyamory, Attempt to Conform to Monogamy, Failed Monogamy, Introduction to Polyamory, Acceptance of Polyamory, Engaging in Polyamorous Relationships, Participating in Poly Community, and Self-Identify as Polyamorous. These statuses are similar to other identity development models. There is debate in the literature about whether polyamory is an innate way of being or a socially constructed phenomenon. Most poly people interviewed felt they were inherently polyamorous, but had to consciously choose to reject mononormativity and practice polyamory. While this adjustment was hard for many participants, and support from family was mixed, most participants felt positively about having a lifestyle that supported their authentic selves. Further research is needed to validate this model and make recommendations for how psychologists can assist people struggling with their polyamorous identity. Research including people of color and lesbian, gay, and transgender polyamorous people is warranted.

KEYWORDS: "Identity Formation", "Relationship", "Couple", "Psychosexual Behavior", "Polygamy", "Content Analysis"