
Building Competence in Practice with the Polyamorous Community: A Scoping Review

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The landscape of relationships, gender, and sexuality continues to change rapidly across the world. This includes recognition of relationship styles such as polyamory, in which individuals have multiple romantic relationships with the knowledge and consent of all involved. In the academic literature on polyamory, social work perspectives are noticeably absent. Thus, a scoping review concerning social work, counseling, and polyamory was conducted to assess knowledge from the last decade and to contribute to the field. The themes that arose were the need for clinicians to examine their biases toward monogamy and polyamory, including perceptions of insecure attachment and a lack of commitment in polyamorous relationships. The literature also recognizes that polyamorous individuals often have fluid identities and sexual orientations. Finally, social workers have a duty to create a safe environment for polyamorous clients because of widespread societal stigma. As social work values client self-determination and examination of societal discourses, the field would benefit from further research into polyamory; this article is just the beginning.

KEY WORDS: *counseling; polyamory; social work; stigma; therapeutic alliance*

In recent years, the field of social work has recognized the importance of culturally competent practice, including with individuals who identify along the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and gender identity spectrums (Fabbre, 2017; Scherrer, 2013). However, social work has neglected to engage with certain groups, including individuals who practice polyamory. Many definitions of *polyamory* have been offered in the literature, including “the practice of consensually and with mutual interest negotiating desire for more than one relationship” (Brunning, 2016, p. 2). Negotiating desire may look different, as the individual in question may consider themselves to be single, or they may be in more hierarchical primary and secondary relationships (Balzarini et al., 2017). There are also polyfidelitous relationships in which all partners are closed to other relationships, as well as multiple relationships that are not deemed to be more important than any other, known as relationship anarchy (Barker, 2011).

Currently, the field of social work is lagging behind allied fields in its recognition of, and research into, polyamory (Williams & Prior, 2015). Only two articles for this review were published in social work journals; the others were published in journals related to psychology, relationship and

family therapy, and sexuality. Whereas these disciplines offer useful theories and techniques, social work takes a more holistic person-in-environment perspective in which environments may stigmatize identities and practices (Scheyett, 2005).

As Balzarini et al. (2017) found that approximately 4 percent to 5 percent of North Americans practice consensual nonmonogamy (CNM), social workers are likely to encounter polyamorous (hereinafter, poly) clients. When they do, clinicians need to be aware of how to work with this population, and how their values show up (Bairstow, 2017). Thus, this scoping review will ask the following: What do social workers need to know when working with poly people? This question will be answered in four sections: social workers need to be aware of their own biases toward monogamy and nonmonogamy; the identities and relationships of poly people may shift over time; commitment and secure attachment are as salient within polyamory as with monogamy; and finally, social workers need to create a safe environment for their poly clients due to widespread stigma. These four themes were chosen after reviewing the literature related to polyamory, social work, and therapy. They address the dynamic nature of the therapeutic relationship by examining the

obligations of social workers toward their clients and the experiences of poly individuals within and outside of the therapy room. As social work emphasizes clinician self-reflection and critiquing dominant discourses, creating a safe environment for poly clients and examining one's beliefs toward monogamy, commitment, and secure attachment are critical (Heron, 2005).

CONCEPTUAL TERMINOLOGY

Polyamory falls under the broader umbrella of CNM, which includes various types of relationships in which individuals agree to have multiple sexual or romantic partners (Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017). The literature on CNM focuses on the relationship styles of polyamory, swinging, and open relationships. Swinging generally involves couples engaging in sex with other couples, many of whom are married (Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2015). In an open relationship, the primary couple agrees to have sex outside of their relationship, and this may occur together or separately (Barker, 2011). Thus, in swinging and open relationships, the emphasis lies on sexual relations with others, with emotional connection often limited to the primary couple (Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014).

For individuals who practice polyamory, there is an opportunity to fall in love with more than one person (Wosick-Correa, 2010). There may still be a hierarchy, in which a couple considers themselves to be in a primary relationship and other relationships are seen as secondary. This means that there may be boundaries set by the primary couple around activities such as sleeping over and various sexual acts (Ferrer, 2018a; van Tol, 2017). Where individuals seek out multiple emotional bonds, issues of commitment and attachment security become salient; however, these concepts have often been conflated with monogamy, where two individuals agree to sexual and romantic exclusivity (van Tol, 2017). Commitment involves individuals investing in and being satisfied by their relationships, whereas secure attachments are defined as supportive and emotionally safe (Hammack, Frost, & Hughes, 2019; Moors et al., 2015). Because polyamorous relationships are only beginning to be recognized, the shadow of stigma is still cast on these individuals, which may lead to a fear in disclosing relationship status and judgment of nonprimary relationships (Hauptert et al., 2017).

METHOD

The scoping review method detailed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) was used. The purpose of a scoping review is to rapidly explore a broad topic. It is also useful for identifying gaps in the literature and summarizing and disseminating knowledge to different audiences, all of which are applicable to the current article (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The first step was to identify the research question, mentioned earlier. The second step was to identify relevant studies. These studies were found with the aid of a social work librarian in the following databases: Medline, PsycINFO, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, CINAHL, and Web of Science. The database searches were conducted in November 2018 (see Table 1). The next step was to choose studies using the following inclusion and exclusion criteria: scholarly, peer-reviewed articles published in the English language from January 2008 to November 1, 2018, to capture the most recent scholarly work. The key words chosen were "polyamory," "polyamor*," "consensual non-monogamy," "non-monogam*," "social work," and "counseling." Using the key words generated 56 articles. Finally, the important data from the articles were charted, collated, and summarized.

RESULTS

Tables 2 and 3 show the results according to the journal and its impact factor or Scientific Journal Rankings (SJR), and article prevalence. Impact factor has been described as an objective measurement that illustrates the quality and visibility of the journal (Garfield, 2003). SJR aids in measuring the prestige of the journal and frequency of citations (Colledge et al., 2010). Many of the journals do not rank highly, as polyamory is an emerging topic. Tables 2 and 3 contain information from 47 articles, as five articles from the database searches were not relevant. Figure 1 illustrates the country of origin of 44 authors, as some of the authors wrote multiple articles; 31 originate from the United States, six from the United Kingdom, five from Canada, and one each from Israel and Australia.

Themes in the Literature

This article is divided into four themes: (1) biases on the part of the social worker toward monogamy and nonmonogamy, (2) recognizing the fluidity of

Table 1: Database Search

Database	Search Terms	Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	Number of Relevant Results
Medline	First search: counseling or therapy or psychotherapy or treatment AND polyamory AND nonmonogam* Second search: polyamory	English language, published since January 2008, with abstracts available	First search: 7
PsycINFO	First search: "social work" or counseling or therapy or psychotherapy or treatment AND polyamory or consensual non-monogamy or open relationships or multiple partners Second search: polyamor* Social work AND clinical social work AND polyamory	English language, published since January 2008, with abstracts available Peer reviewed journal articles published between January 2008 and November 2018 in the English language, excluding dissertations	Second search: 2 First search: 13
Social Services Abstracts	Social work AND clinical social work AND polyamory	Peer reviewed, published between January 1, 2008, and November 1, 2018; source type: scholarly journals; document type: article and literature review; in the English language	Second search: 2 3
Social Work Abstracts	Counseling or therapy or psychotherapy or treatment AND polyamory or consensual non-monogamy or open relationships or multiple partners	Scholarly articles from January 2008 to November 2018, in an electronic-only format	0
CINAHL	Social work or counseling or therapy or psychotherapy or treatment AND polyamory AND nonmonogam*	Full text; abstract available; published date: January 2008 to November 2018; English language; peer reviewed	3
Web of Science	First search: TS = (social work OR counseling AND polyamory AND nonmonogam*) Second search: TS = (polyamory)	Articles in the English language from 2008 through 2018	First search: 2 Second search: 24

Table 2: Results According to Article Prevalence

Journal Title	Journal Ranking	Number of Results	Percentage of All Articles (N = 47)
<i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>	1.108	10	21.3
<i>Journal of Sex Research</i>	2.921	4	8.5
<i>Sexualities</i>	1.091	4	8.5
<i>Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy</i>	1.832	3	6.4
<i>Psychology & Sexuality</i>	2.1	3	6.4
<i>Journal of Bisexuality</i>	0.72	2	4.3
<i>Journal of Clinical Psychology</i>	2.33	2	4.3
<i>Journal of Feminist Family Therapy</i>	0.17	2	4.3
<i>Archives of Sexual Behavior</i>	3.223	1	2.3
<i>Cultural Studies Review</i>	Unknown	1	2.3
<i>European Psychologist</i>	2.174	1	2.3
<i>Feminist Media Studies</i>	1.467	1	2.3
<i>Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour</i>	1.341	1	2.3
<i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i>	1.018	1	2.3
<i>Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology</i>	4.536	1	2.3
<i>Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy</i>	0.33	1	2.3
<i>Journal of Social and Personal Relationships</i>	1.697	1	2.3
<i>Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity</i>	1.16	1	2.3
<i>Perspectives on Psychological Science</i>	9.305	1	2.3
<i>PLOS One</i>	2.766	1	2.3
<i>Transactional Analysis Journal</i>	Unknown	1	2.3
<i>Sexuality & Culture</i>	0.57	1	2.3
<i>Social Work</i>	1.667	1	2.3
<i>Social Work with Groups</i>	0.302	1	2.3
<i>Theory & Psychology</i>	0.816	1	2.3

identities and relationships of poly people, (3) commitment and secure attachment within poly relationships, and (4) the need to create a safe therapeutic environment. Both theoretical and empirical work indicate that monogamous people are perceived more positively than poly individuals (Moors, Matsick, & Schechinger, 2017). This bias toward monogamy can mean that social workers may enact negative judgments toward clients without realizing it (van Tol, 2017).

Biases toward Monogamy and Nonmonogamy

Barker (2011) argued that therapists often do not acknowledge what type of relationships clients are in, including monogamy. This speaks to the fact

that many societies often assume that monogamy is the normal state for human beings, known as mononormativity (Ferrer, 2018b). However, as polyamory and other types of CNM such as swinging and open relationships have become more well known and widely adopted, social workers cannot take relationship status and sexuality for granted. As Hemphill, Simon, and Haydon (2017) argued, “To expect the norm of the traditional married couple to fit everyone denies so much of our clients’ lived experiences” (p. 36).

In the current age, mononormativity continues to have a strong presence in the lives of clients and in the therapy room. In their article, Jordan, Grogan, Muruthi, and Bermúdez (2017) cited research by Weber (2002) indicating that among a sample

Table 3: Results According to Journal Ranking

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<i>Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology</i>	4.536	1	2.30
<i>Archives of Sexual Behavior</i>	3.223	1	2.30
<i>Journal of Sex Research</i>	2.921	4	8.50
<i>PLOS One</i>	2.766	1	2.30
<i>Journal of Clinical Psychology</i>	2.33	2	4.30
<i>European Psychologist</i>	2.174	1	2.30
<i>Psychology & Sexuality</i>	2.1	3	6.40
<i>Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy</i>	1.832	3	6.40
<i>Journal of Social and Personal Relationships</i>	1.697	1	2.30
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<i>Sexual and Relationship Therapy</i>	1.108	10	21.30
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<i>Sexuality & Culture</i>	0.57	1	2.30
<i>Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy</i>	0.33	1	2.30
<i>Social Work with Groups</i>	0.302	1	2.30
<i>Journal of Feminist Family Therapy</i>	0.17	2	4.30
<i>Cultural Studies Review</i>	Unknown	1	2.30
<i>Transactional Analysis Journal</i>	Unknown	1	2.30

of poly individuals, “38% of participants did not reveal their polyrelationships to therapists, while of those who did, 27% reported negative experiences” (p. 8). This is a reminder that bias can interfere in the therapeutic process with polyamorous clients. However, polyamory is only one part of a client’s identity (Berry & Barker, 2014). The client may be seeking a social worker for reasons unrelated to their relationships, and there may be a temptation to view the client’s problems as stemming from polyamory. On the other side, social workers who are familiar with or practice polyamory may view their client as practicing it in an incorrect manner (Berry & Barker, 2014). Therefore, clinicians who identify as monogamous or poly both need to examine their biases and attendant impacts on the therapeutic alliance.

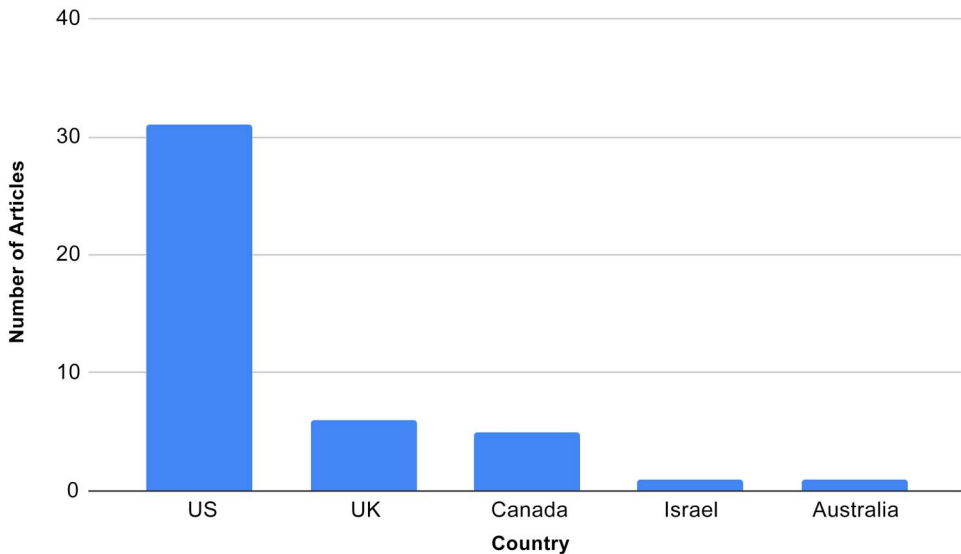
Compounding the issue of bias is the fact that academic literature on polyamory remains scant. Girard and Brownlee (2015) pointed to the lack of

assessment or treatment guidelines and that assessment tools such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale have been designed for those in monogamous relationships. In addition, relationship therapy using emotionally focused therapy and Gottman methods reserves commitment for two people (Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2017). Williams and Prior (2015) mentioned that social work textbooks often do not discuss polyamory. Thus, social workers may be left to explore the literature and examine their biases independently. Clients may also recognize that their relationships and understanding of polyamory are changing, challenging the social worker even further (Manley, Diamond, & van Anders, 2015).

Shifts in Identities and Relationships of Polyamorous Clients

There are many debates concerning whether polyamory is a practice, an identity, or a sexual orien-

Figure 1: Country of Origin of the Authors



tation. Benson (2017) reminds us of the assumption that nonnormative identities are fixed. However, the idea of polyamory as a practice suggests that there is greater freedom and fluidity. Henrich and Trawinski (2016), who conducted a study of poly clientele from their practice, quoted one such interviewee who “considered polyamorous identity as a process and explained that if or when she has a girlfriend in addition to her primary relationship . . . then she would identify as polyamorous” (p. 380). Of the nine CNM people in that study, six were unsure if they identified as poly, as their relationships varied. There may be situations in which clients are in one relationship and do not consider themselves poly, but this changes later.

Many studies have shown that poly individuals also differ from the general population in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. In their study, Balzarini et al. (2018) found that 7 percent of the participants identified as trans or another gender, compared with 1 percent of monogamous people. Moors et al. (2017) interviewed 175 CNM people, 46 percent of whom identified as bisexual; 18 percent as pansexual, omniseual, or queer; and 5 percent as gay or lesbian. Studies with more participants have shown similar percentages: Wosick-Correa (2010) surveyed 343 poly people, 54 percent of whom identified as bisexual,

4 percent as homosexual, and 3 percent as queer or other. Many poly individuals also seek not to define their sexual orientation as one exclusive identity, but one that depends on the person or people they are with. Manley et al. (2015) found that 34 percent of their poly participants experienced a shift in their sexuality, and “approximately 17% of the sample reported shifts in the gender of their partners” (p. 175).

The studies show that there is a large percentage of poly individuals who identify as bisexual. This group is often at a disadvantage because historically, there has been no way to show oneself as bisexual (Robinson, 2013). However, the ability to be in relationships with multiple genders makes bisexuality more visible. Manley et al. (2015) found within their sample that poly bisexual women were more likely to experience shifts in their sexual attractions. Thus, social workers need to be mindful of how their clients’ sexual orientation affect their poly identity or practice. Benson (2017) reminds us that norms within the poly community are subject to change. For example, there may be fewer individuals in hierarchical relationships and more individuals who practice relationship anarchy, the latter of whom are more likely to put all relationships on an equal footing. As poly people modify their relationship practices and identities, they may be

perceived as less committed and attached to their partners. However, the following sections show this perception as inaccurate.

Commitment within Polyamorous Relationships

The shadow of mononormativity has meant that commitment within CNM is seen as inferior; however, commitment within polyamory may be expressed in ways that are equally valid, and lead to individuals investing and feeling satisfied by their relationships (Hammack et al., 2019). A great deal of emphasis is placed on *agentic fidelity*, defined as knowledge of one's boundaries and the ability to articulate relationship needs (Wosick-Correa, 2010). This is needed in polyamorous relationships to illustrate commitment differently "from the socially normed tenets of sexual and emotional exclusivity" (Wosick-Correa, 2010, p. 45). The fluidity of polyamory means that relationships may be able to change in ways that meet needs more readily; when individuals have the agency to modify their relationships, they are more likely to be committed to their partners.

Some studies have questioned poly individuals about the level of satisfaction and the benefits derived from their relationships. In the study by Moors et al. (2017), 23 percent of the participants cited the benefit of commitment, including elements of support and security. In a study by Mitchell, Bartholomew, and Cobb (2014), 1,093 poly individuals reported a high level of commitment with "need fulfillment . . . consistently high with both partners across all needs" (p. 336). What this means for social workers is that there may be a perception that clients are practicing polyamory because their needs are not getting met; the aforementioned studies illustrate the opposite. Although much of the literature assumes that commitment only occurs within monogamy, a similar phenomenon exists with secure attachment.

Attachment and Poly Relationships

Much has been written about attachment theory through a monogamous lens. There is a belief that monogamy confers advantages to human beings, and that attachment bonds are only secure between two people (Ferrer, 2018b); any transgression of this norm is seen as insecure attachment. However, in their study of attachment and its prediction of relationship style, Moors et al. (2015) found

that individuals practicing CNM are more likely to be secure. Ferrer (2018a) also pointed out that couples often have a secure bond when changing their relationship style from monogamous to polyamorous.

At the core of the conversation about attachment and polyamory, there is an assumption that polyamory is about sex rather than love, where there is often more emphasis on the latter (Kean, 2018). As the world of mental health sees CNM relationships as lacking in attachment, it is important for social workers to ask clients about the nature of the relationships they are in (McCoy, Stinson, Ross, & Hjelmstad, 2015). There may be individuals or couples who create agreements to seek out sexual connections only. Although we live in a society that often stigmatizes sex, clients have the right to self-determine their relationships without judgment from social workers and other mental health professionals.

Creating a Safe Environment for Polyamorous Clients

As discussed, social workers must be aware of their biases toward and beliefs about monogamy and CNM. Social workers with poly clients may need to read literature on the topic and process any thoughts and feelings with a supervisor, their own therapist, or both (Bairstow, 2017). Depending on the client and literature they are exposed to, the social worker may have the impression that one relationship is more important than another (Bairstow, 2017). Although experiences within polyamory differ, becoming familiar with the literature is more likely to facilitate a strong therapeutic alliance (Bairstow, 2017). The literature for this review shows the importance of taking a learning stance and using techniques such as bracketing (Berry & Barker, 2014). *Bracketing* is "the suspension, or setting aside, of preconceived notions, prior beliefs, and personal values" (Berry & Barker, 2014, p. 24). Even social workers who are poly themselves may have beliefs about polyamory that are different than their clients'. For social workers who are new to the concept, setting aside their own relationship style is often helpful (Berry & Barker, 2014).

When poly clients face judgment in their daily lives, they may seek the aid of a social worker (Hammack et al., 2019). Clients may be experiencing stress due to coming out, or not, to those close to them (Haupt et al., 2017). Schechinger,

Sakaluk, and Moors (2018) remind mental health professionals that clients should never be pressured to come out. Within the therapeutic relationship and in wider society, clients can only come out when they are ready. There are other concrete actions that social workers can take to create a safe environment for their clients. For example, Jordan (2018) mentioned that “intake forms, assessments, and first-session questions should also indicate an open and affirmative stance. For example, over time, as I have asked questions such as ‘How many people are a part of your current relationship?’” (p. 123). When clients feel that their relationship style will be honored, they are more likely to feel safe. Although this is controversial, social workers may choose to disclose about their own relationships and beliefs. Poly clients may be comforted by the fact that their social worker is poly or that the social worker has examined their own beliefs regarding monogamy (van Tol, 2017).

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Polyamory and other forms of CNM are becoming more well known and adopted as identities and practices. Consequently, examining one’s own biases and creating a safe environment for clients is of the utmost importance. In addition, social workers need to recognize that all types of relationships, including those that are currently monogamous, have the potential for fluidity and that attachment and commitment may be articulated differently by all clients. Social work is currently lagging behind other fields in the scholarly investigation and acknowledgment of polyamory (Williams & Prior, 2015). Because the field emphasizes starting where the client is at (Pilesecker, 1994) and advancing human rights and social justice, it seems a natural fit for social work practitioners and academics to conduct research and publish work on polyamory. For example, interviewing clinicians and poly clients concerning helpful therapeutic practices and modalities would contribute to evidence-based practice. As the literature concerning attachment theory and polyamory is currently lacking, investigating the issue through a social work lens would also be helpful. Embarking on research into polyamory will allow for strong therapeutic alliances with poly clients, and will advance the field. **SW**

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