Journal of Contemporary Ethnography

Polyamorous Families, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Slippery Slope
Elisabeth Sheff

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jce.sagepub.com/content/40/5/487

Published by:
$SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

>> Version of Record - Sep 7, 2011

What is This?

Polyamorous Families, Same-Sex Marriage, and the Slippery Slope

Elisabeth Sheff[1]

Abstract

Opponents of same-sex marriage identify multiple-partner families as the pivotal step that, were same-sex marriage legalized, would propel society down a "slippery slope" to relational chaos. Like the families of same-sex partners, polyamorous families—or those with adults in openly conducted multiple-partner relationships—demonstrate alternate forms of kinship not necessarily dependent on conventional biolegal kin, sexual connections, or even chosen kin ties as previously understood. This article extends sociological knowledge by detailing characteristics of relatively unknown family form; comparing original data on polyamorous families with published research on same-sex families instead of heterosexual families, a contrast that decenters heterosexual families as the sole measure of legitimacy while simultaneously expanding knowledge about same-sex families and explaining how polyamorous families' differences have implications for the same-sex marriage debate and how these shifting social norms implicate changes for the field of family studies and larger society.

Keywords

polyamory, same-sex, gay, marriage, divorce

[1]Department of Sociology, Georgia State University

Corresponding Author:
Elisabeth Sheff, Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, 38 Peachtree Center Avenue NE, General Classroom Building 1069, Atlanta, GA 30303
Email: esheff@gsu.edu

Recent events such as the ongoing dispute over same-sex marriage, the legal prosecution of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) in polygynous relationships, and media attention (such as the television series *Big Love* about a husband with three wives) have propelled multiple-partner relationships into public attention. In the United States, the conflict over same-sex marriage is the latest installment of an ongoing debate over the meanings, configurations, and social implications of family forms. This discussion has grown increasingly shrill as the confluence of major social shifts in gender norms, sexuality, and the economy culminate (for the moment, at least) at the question of whether people of the same sex should be allowed to legally marry. At stake in this debate are what defines a family as legitimate, and who gets to decide. The social and political implications of these changes have significant consequences, for families and other institutions as well.

A growing body of scholarship on varieties of families addresses these dramatic shifts. Most germane to this discussion, research on families of sexual minorities, primarily those of lesbians, bisexuals, and gays (henceforward *lesbigays*,[1] Carrington 1999), indicates the importance of what Stacey (2003, 145) describes as "a historically unprecedented variety of family life." Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals differ not only in gender and desire, but vary tremendously in a number of other ways including by race (Anzaldua 1987; Hemphill 2007), social class (Gamson 1999), and geographic locale (Oswald and Culton 2003).

Polyamory is a form of relationship in which people openly court multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners. With an emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships, practitioners see polyamory as different from swinging—and from adultery—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.

The emergence of self-consciously polyamorous families follows the rise in lesbigay families, though to date academic examination of polyamorous families has been minimal. Polyamorous communities are smaller, less organized, and appear to be far more homogeneous than the larger and more diverse lesbigay communities, with the majority of (identified) polys being white, middle- or upper-middle class, well-educated people with relatively high socioeconomic status (Sheff and Hammers 2011). Most of the women in my sample of mainstream polyamorous community members are bisexual, and the majority of the men are heterosexual (Sheff 2005a, 2005b, 2006). In

this article, I compare polyamorous families to those of lesbigays for four reasons: (1) poly families follow directly in the social wake of the lesbigay challenge to heterocentric family forms; (2) as stigmatized sexual minorities, lesbigay and poly people face similar challenges and use many of the same strategies to navigate family life; (3) conservative politicians and journalists frame arguments against same-sex marriage as leading to a "slippery slope" that inevitably sanctions multiple-partner marriage, bestiality, and incest; and (4) this comparison decenters heterosexual families as the sole comparison point while simultaneously expanding knowledge about lesbigay families.

Polyamorists and lesbigays face many similar challenges—disclosure, stigma, custodial issues, and relationships with families of origin—and use comparable strategies to navigate them. One major difference between lesbigays and polyamorists is that the mainstream public is relatively oblivious to polyamory, with poly people remaining virtually invisible to society at large. Whether they embrace, despise, or are indifferent to lesbigays, almost everyone in the United States today is aware of the existence of lesbians, gay men, and (to a lesser extent) bisexuals. The same cannot be said of polyamorists, and this affords them a measure of protection from social stigma that is not as readily available to the more easily recognized lesbigay people in same-sex relationships.

I argue that the many similarities between polyamorous and lesbigay families are indicative of adaptive strategies that have evolved in response to the same social circumstances, and that such flexible approaches to family life can provide positive role models for other groups in society and thus merit legal recognition as legitimate families. I begin with a review of relevant family and kinship literature and then detail my research methods. Next I describe the characteristics of poly families and discuss the manners in which polyamorists organize their relationships with biolegal (consanguine and/or legal; Carrington 1999) families, marriage, commitment, and divorce. Using my original data on polyamorous families, I draw comparisons between my sample and those in others' published studies of lesbigay families. Finally, I conclude with an analysis of the impact of polyamory on the same-sex marriage debate and the implications of the increasing public awareness for polyamorists and society at large. This article extends sociological knowledge by (1) detailing some characteristics of a relatively unknown family form; (2) comparing same-sex families to poly families rather than heterosexual families; (3) contributing an alternative to the debate on same-sex marriage; and (4) exploring some of the implications these families hold for sociological theory and society.

Literature Review

This section first introduces readers to literature on polyamory and places this information in the context of sociological views toward families and same-sex marriage. Next it focuses on kinship and divorce, two areas in which poly-amorists and lesbigays share many common issues and strategies, and with which I deal in greater depth later in the article.

Polyamory

A spate of research in the 1970s examined non-monogamous relationships such as swinging (Bartell 1971; Fang 1976: Henshel 1973), mate-swapping (Denfeld and Gordon 1970; Spanier and Cole 1975), and open marriage (Constantine and Constantine 1973; Smith and Smith 1974), focusing almost exclusively on extra-dyadic, heterosexual relationships among white people. Research on sexually nonexclusive relationships dwindled in the 1980s, as the sexual revolution collided with the spread of the AIDS epidemic and a back-lash of political conservatism (Rubin 2001). It was during this period of social and political turmoil that polyamory emerged as an identity and familial form.

While polyamorists have documented their relationships and familial experiences[2] (Anapol 1992; Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2005; Block 2008; Easton and Liszt 1997; Munson and Stelbaum 1999; Nearing 1992), outside of my own research (Sheff 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2010), few academicians have studied poly-amorous families. Rubin (2001) briefly mentions polyamory in his review of family studies in which he documents a decline in the study of non-monogamous relationships. Bettinger (2005, 106) 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 teenage sons. Using exam-ples from lesbian, gay, and poly families, Riggs (2010) explores various possi-bilities for kinship structures that value children's definitions of and contributions to their families, rather than relying solely on the adults' views of the relation-ships. Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz (2003) study polyamorous relationships among women and their actively bisexual husbands, and Pallotta-Chiarolli addresses "polyfamilies'" interactions with school systems, detailing the costs of invisibility (2006) and the strategies these families use to manage their interactions with school personnel and bureaucracies (2010a, 2010b).

Familial Adaptability

Sociological views of families have shifted dramatically in the past 60 years. In the 1950s Parsons (Parsons 1951 [1964]; Parsons and Bales 1955) cast the

gendered division of labor in "the" family as the ideal way to meet the functional prerequisites for successful familial maintenance in which men specialized in instrumental roles of earning money, making decisions, and adapting[3] to the outside world, and women focused on expressive roles of meeting the family's emotional, physical, and social needs. With men functioning as the decision-making leaders and women acting as deferential followers, the patriarchal Parsonian family has become enshrined as the quintessential "traditional" family in the United States. Feminists responded with a significant body of scholarship critiquing the conventional patriarchal family form as heterosexist, racist, and oppressive, demanding women's sexual servitude and exploiting their unpaid labor (i.e., Chodorow 1978; Firestone 1971; Hill Collins 1990; Hochschild 1997; Hochschild and Machung 2003). Others argue that non-monogamy is a preferable alternative to life as sexual chattel under the ownership of one man (Bennett 1992; Robinson 1997; Rosa 1994).

Some contemporary scholars hearken back to the Parsonian family as the ideal familial form, arguing that society is in a state of decay, and lamenting 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 (Popenoe 1996; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Wilson 2002). Others, however, assert that families reshape themselves in response to shifting social conditions and contend that the traditional family was never as idyllic as it has been made to appear in retrospect (Coontz 1988, 1992, 1998, 2005; Skolnik 1991; Stacey 1996). In a pivotal series of books chronicling historical and social shifts in families, Coontz (1988, 1992, 1998, 2005) demonstrates compellingly how the cultural fascination with and idolization of an ahistorical vision of "traditional marriage" reifies a romanticized patriarchal family that never existed as we imagine it did, creating the false impression that families are currently in an unprecedented state of chaos. Coontz details the rise and fall of the "male provider marriage" or "patriarchal marriage" as one among numerous changes families have undergone.

Same-sex marriage is not the vast departure from a (supposedly) singular model the traditionalists mourn. Indeed, marriage was already undergoing a profound transformation from an economic to an emotional relationship, even before Victorian sexologists (Ellis 1897; Krafft-Ebing 1898) invented the personage of "the homosexual" who would later become the center of this controversy (Foucault 1978). As other institutions have taken on many of the economic, political, and educational functions families had previously filled, marital partners' expectations have shifted from instrumental to emotional fulfilment. "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" (Coontz 2005, 306). In this paper I analyze polyamorous and lesbigay families as an adaptive response to shifting social conditions, thus enlarging examination of families of sexual minorities and beginning to examine differences between and among them.

Same-Sex Marriage

In this section I discuss three views on same-sex marriage. First, many people believe that same-sex marriage would be advantageous for people in same-sex relationships and offer numerous reasons why it should be legalized as a pathway to civil rights and full citizenship (Babst 2002; Chauncey 2004; Hull 2001). Some endorse same-sex marriage as a means of gaining social acceptance and even domesticating potentially unruly same-sex relationships (Rauch 2004; A. Sullivan 1996, 2004), while others discuss religious attitudes toward same-sex marriage (Ellingson et al. 2001), advocating the separation of marriage into legal and religious components (Babst 2002), and emphasizing the "importance of distinguishing between legalization and ritualization" (Oswald et al. 2008, 411) while decrying the "impermissible expression of sectarian preference" (Babst 2002, 2) in laws that constrain some citizens' rights to marry. A large group identifies the need to "expand the boundaries of marriage and supplement marriage with other forms of legal recognition" (Hull 2006, 214), offering suggestions such as privatizing marriage to allow partners to structure their relationships in much the same manner as the wide variety of options available for businesses (Jones 2006).

Scholars find that lesbigay community members generally desire access to legal marriage and have a fairly positive assessment of same-sex commitment ceremonies. Hull's (2003, 629) respondents in same-sex relationships soundly endorse the value of legal marriage and "enact marriage culturally" in their bids for social and cultural equality. Yip (2004) finds that LGB Christians want at least the option to marry, even if they elect not to avail themselves of it. Lannutti's (2005) LGBT respondents cast same-sex marriage as a pathway to legal (and potentially social) equality, though some see it as creating schisms among LGBT communities as well. In her study of commitment rituals among lesbians, Manodori (1998, 41) found that these ceremonies "fortified them in their daily battles against oppression." Clarke, Burgoyne, and Burns (2006, 154) note that while a few of their respondents (members of same-sex couples) had serious reservations regarding the desirability of same-sex marriage, "most supported the notion of choice, even when they did not personally aspire to legally recognized relationships." Schneider (1997, 271) contests a simplistic

view of same-sex marriage and commitment as mimicry of conventional marriage and asserts that same-sex marriage has a unique social gravity for gays and lesbians, with "special qualities and distinctive features all its own."

A second view on same-sex marriage is less optimistic, with many remaining ambivalent about its desirability and proposing instead to redistribute privileges and benefits independently from marital status. Some lesbigays eschew commitment ceremonies, which they cast as misguided attempts to gain legitimacy through conformity (Lewin 2001; Stiers 1999), or useless symbolic gestures that will have no impact because the partners are committed to each other even without a ceremony, though legal marital status would lend the formalization of the commitment importance (Reczek, Elliott, and Umberson 2009). This second view also includes scholars who are suspicious of marriage and question lesbigay's desire to embrace this inherently problematic institution just as the rest of society is "beginning to shed practices and institutions at the cultural moment when they beg[in] to hinder us more than they help us" (Archer 2004, 160). In her examination of "compulsory monogamy," Emens (2004) details the failures of monogamy and questions why some conservatives are so distraught by the prospect of same-sex marriage, or plural marriage for that matter. Card (2007, 28) identifies both the dangers of legal marriage for abused spouses and the disadvantages presented by lesbigays' lack of access to legal marriage, cautioning that "the romanticism of much of the rhetoric of marriage, when what is at issue is a *legal* status, is misplaced" (emphasis in original) because it can dangerously constrain choices, and arguing instead for deregulating lesbigay and other relationships rather than legalization. Polikoff (2008, 210) advocates dethroning marriage from its unique position as arbiter of myriad privileges and benefits, and instead "valuing all families" by creating laws that ensure "every relationship and every family has the legal framework for economic and emotional security."

Rather than focusing on the legality of marriage, some emphasize its absence as a loss of a master point of reference, and explore how the "marriage void" actively frames pivotal choices along the life course (Green 2006), or complicates those major life events with lack of clarity of definitions, timing, and meanings (Reczek, Elliott, and Umberson 2009). Finally, others assert that the assimilationist desire to marry and the resistance to the potentially domesticating effects of same-sex marriage are paradoxically related. Hequembourg and Arditi (1999, 676) use a Foucauldian perspective to argue that "in the context of a politics of assimilation . . . resistance means to transform the interiorities of power" and, in so doing, change the institutions of marriage and family from within. Assimilation itself is a form of resistance, they conclude, and

"Only through a multiplicity of these strategies working together within a field of power can resistance achieve its aims" (Hequembourg and Arditi 1999, 677). Similar to the views of the participants in Kates and Belk's (2001) study who viewed consumption at gay pride days as both an act of resistance and an act of conformity to be resisted, marriage can simultaneously embody and challenge a dominant paradigm.

Conservative politicians and pundits articulate a third position in opposition to same-sex marriage. Public figures such as former Senator Rick Santorum (R-Nebraska), Supreme Court Justice Anton Scalia, National Review Online columnist Stanley Kurtz, and Focus on the Family founder James Dobson include polyamory in the "parade of horribles" (Lithwick 2004) marching down the "slippery slope" that same-sex marriage would propel families. This slope includes adultery, prostitution, masturbation, bigamy, fornication, incest, pedophilia, bestiality, and ultimately the destruction of monogamous marriage itself (Associated Press 2003; Kurtz 2003a, 2003b; Lithwick 2004). Legally acknowledging lesbigay families threatens to literally destroy the future of society, Santorum argues, because it would mean that "the state doesn't have rights to limit individuals' wants and passions. I disagree with that . . . there are consequences to letting people live out what ever wants or passions they desire" (Associated Press 2003). Kurtz (2003b, 3) cautions that

> The harms of state-sanctioned polyamorous marriage would extend well beyond the polyamorists themselves. Once monogamy is defined out of marriage, it will be next to impossible to educate a new generation in what it takes to keep companionate marriage intact. . . . What lies beyond gay marriage is no marriage at all.

Kurtz (2003b) identifies the inevitable spread of polyamory as an idea, if not a practice, as the force that can eradicate (patriarchal) marriage simply by offering options previously unimagined, and argues that any endorsement of it will make (patriarchal) marriage meaningless. In this view, legitimacy for lesbigay families would strip away the final constraint on all passions, leaving society defenseless against an onslaught of unbounded desire. Polyamory is portrayed here as the pivotal step down the slippery slope from same-sex marriage to absolute debauchery and chaos.

Chosen and Biolegal Kin

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

scholarship. In a groundbreaking examination of the manners in which gay people construct family groups, Weston (1991) found that friends, former lovers, and partners became more reliable and supportive family members for gay people than were their biolegal families of origin. My findings indicate that polyamorous families and those headed by same-sex partners share significant similarities, primary among them the creation of families of choice. Families of choice are kin networks formed by a malleable web of relationships constructed through careful, self-conscious, and reflexive negotiation processes (Weston 1991). 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 (Muraco 2006; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001).

A primary focus among scholars studying lesbigay's relationships with biolegal family has been on the response to family members who come out to their biolegal kin (Baptist and Allen 2008; Valentine, Skelton, and Butler 2006; Waldner and Magruder 1999). Scholars find that relationships between lesbigays and their families of origin vary from congenial to highly conflictual, frequently shifting over time to establish higher levels of comfort with each other (Baptist and Allen 2008). Adolescents with strong family ties and/or access to lesbigay community support are more likely to come out to their parents (Waldner and Magruder 1999), and young people who come out to their parents may "shrink" and seem more vulnerable or "grow" and seem more adult in their parents' estimations (Valentine, Skelton, and Butler 2006).

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 (1991, 111) respondents emphasize the importance of "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" (Weston 1991, 111, emphasis in original). My data indicate that polyamorists have a very similar tendency to retain contact with former lovers and continue to view them as family members.

Method

This article is part of a larger project based on two waves of data collected through participant observation, content analysis of websites and print media, and in-depth interviews. In the first portion of the study (1996-2003), which was approved by the IRB at the University of Colorado in Boulder, 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, potlucks, community meetings, and two national conferences. For the second round of data collection (2007-2009) which was approved by the IRB at Georgia State University in Atlanta, I located seventeen previous respondents, fifteen of whom consented to interviews,[4] and expanded the sample to include an additional thirty-one people, for a total sample of seventy-one across both studies. Race was the most homogeneous demographic characteristic, with 89 percent of the sample identifying as white. Socioeconomic status was high among these respondents, with 74 percent in professional jobs. Fully 88 percent reported some college, with 67 percent attaining bachelor's degrees and 21 percent 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. For this study, I included people who self-identified as polyamorous, and in this article I focus on those who identify as members of poly families. Quantifying poly families is similarly difficult, and there are no reliable data regarding their prevalence.

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted from one and one-half to two hours, and 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). Participants selected their own pseudonyms.

I utilized a modified form of grounded theory to analyze the data (Charmaz 2000), a method that has proven particularly useful in other family studies (LaRossa 2005). Employing inductive data-gathering methods (Lofland and Lofland 1995) and constant comparative methods (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I analyzed the interview data and my field notes using a process that included (1) reading transcripts and generating initial coding categories, (2) identifying and relating similar ideas and the relationships between and among categories, (3) adjusting these analytical categories to fit emergent theoretical concepts, (4) collecting additional data to verify and/or challenge the validity of those concepts, and (5) probing these data for the boundaries and variations of common themes (Glassner and Hertz 1999).

The data in this article come from both waves of data collection. Because the initial study was not designed to be a longitudinal research project and the

University of Colorado 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. The initial study was also restricted to adults, and to date my sample of children is too small for analysis, so the present discussion does not include children's responses.[5]

Characteristics of Polyamorous Families

Mirroring the demographics of identified polyamorous communities (Sheff and Hammers 2011), the preponderance of these families are composed of white, middle-class, well-educated, liberal adults. A large majority of the men are heterosexual, and most of the women are bisexual. There are far fewer bisexual men than women, and almost no gay men or lesbians involved in these mainstream polyamorous families. The apparent dearth of bisexual men might be due at least in 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 (Sheff 2005a, 2005b, 2006). Munson and Stelbaum's (1999) 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 gained access to their ranks for interviews. 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.[6] This factor, combined with (usually quite subtle, though occasionally overt) homophobia, has led to a virtual absence of gay and comparative dearth of bisexual men in mainstream polyamorous communities in the United States. In response to numerous queries from the press and audience members at presentations (Sheff 2010), my research has come to focus increasingly on polyamorous families with children. Thus, these families represent both the demographic characteristics of mainstream polyamorous communities in the United States, as well as my own focus on families with children.

The most common form of poly family I have thus far 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. 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 of their expanded familial unions, 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 (M. Sullivan 2004). Many of these issues stem from the lack of familial role models on which sexual minorities can pattern their families, and by which conventional society can understand these diverse relationships. In both cases, poly people and lesbigays innovate new roles, language, and communities to construct for themselves what conventional society lacks.

Findings

My findings indicate that polyamorous families and those headed by same-sex partners share significant similarities, primary among them the creation of families of choice. In this section, I detail my findings regarding relations with biolegal families, marriage, commitment, and divorce.

Relations with Biolegal Families

As sexual minorities, both polys and lesbigays must innovate novel ways to interact with biolegal families, who are most likely heterosexual, dyadic, and monogamous. Both experience a range of reactions from their family members, from unproblematic acceptance to complete rejection. Some of my respondents are comfortable being "out" with their families of origin regarding their polyamorous relationships. For example, Louise, a 43-year-old white astrologer and photographer with three children, is comfortable being candid with her mother, Amanda, because:

> My mom is poly too. She doesn't call herself that, but she has been my whole life. She was very open about her sexuality and we talk about our sex lives together all the time. . . . She doesn't judge me for anything, she's one of my best friends!

Key polyamorous ideals like communication and honesty cultivate the sense of intimacy Louise perceives between herself and Amanda, whose ostensible status as an insider in a polyamorous lifestyle further bolsters their connection. Louise and Amanda's comfort being candid with each other mirrors that of those lesbigays who are also at ease being candid about their sexual orientations with their families of origin (Baptist and Allen 2008).

The Wyss quad has experienced a wide range of acceptance and rejection from biolegal family members. The quad evolved from a sextet of three female–male couples that first lost a wife in a messy divorce, and then a husband who was killed in a car accident. The remaining members stabilized as a quad and had a daughter shortly after their husband's death. Quad family members are Patrick, a 40-year-old white woodworker and student; Kiyowara, a 40-year-old Japanese and Native American business owner; Albert, a 48-year-old white English computer programmer; Loretta, a 48-year-old white business owner; and Kethry, the 11-year-old daughter of Kiyowara and Albert. Initially Kiyowara and Patrick were monogamously married, as were Loretta and Albert.

Kiyowara Wyss related a story regarding her mother Suka's eightieth birthday party. The party was a major event for Suka's extended family, which came from all over the United States and Japan to attend. It was also the first such event the entire quad attended as a family unit. Because of their appearance as two heterosexual couples, the Wyss quad expected the true nature of their relationships to remain unrecognized. During the party, Kiyowara reported that she was

> focused on my mom's birthday. You know, I didn't feel a need to make a statement about "We're here together" or anything. And I couldn't believe that, she was up on stage thanking everyone for coming and she called us all up and she said "I want to introduce you to my children" and that was it. Everybody knows that me and my sister are her only *biological* children, so some of them had no idea what she was talking about. But now we're all her kids and that was that! I was really touched, for her, you know, to do that, it really meant a lot.

The public acknowledgement of all the spice (the polyamorous term for multiple spouses) as her children, Kiyowara opined, was Suka's way of recognizing the legitimacy of Kiyowara's unions. Suka's public acceptance of the quad facilitated friendly contact between herself and the quad, as well as their interactions with Suka and Kiyowara's extended family. Such open

acknowledgement contributes to adaptability by reinforcing the definition of the group as a family and the importance of family ties (Oswald 2002). In this way, family members who accept each other and accord each other the importance of kin are better able to retain ties with their kinship network.

In the Wyss quad's case, Suka's acceptance varied and was ultimately revealed to be firmly rooted in the quad's ostensible heterosexual relationships. Eventually Suka became quite ill and moved in with the quad to convalesce. She was confused, in pain, could barely breathe, and required full-time monitoring, so Loretta assumed the responsibility of caring for Suka. In an effort to manage the considerable caretaking demands, Loretta applied to many state and federal agencies for assistance and was scrupulously forthcoming with the various social workers, home health aides, and assistants regarding the quad's relationships with each other and familial connections with Suka. Suka, however, routinely attempted to cloak the romantic relationship between Kiyowara and Loretta by telling the parade of personal and medical assistants[7] that Loretta and Kiyowara were sisters. Loretta suspected that the acceptance Suka displayed earlier may have obscured underlying unease and homophobia that surfaced as her mental and physical health deteriorated. Kiyowara's extended family of origin was similarly ambivalent, willing to accept Loretta's commitment as a full-time caregiver and the Wysses' repeated financial gifts (including purchasing Suka homes on two separate occasions) but unwilling to grant them recognition as legitimate family members at Suka's funeral. This experience of being discounted and rejected at family events mirrors that of Oswald's (2000) respondents who encountered similar marginalization at heterosexual weddings, and were often required to appear without their same-sex partner and adhere strongly to traditional gender norms in order to attend the wedding.

Like the Wyss quad, the Southern triad of Earl, Tom, and Melinda, all white and in their early forties, maintain sometimes friendly and sometimes inimical relationships with their biolegal families. Tom and Melinda had been married for 11 years and had two children when they formed a triad with Earl, a long-time friend. Each invited their parents to the commitment ceremony that marked the triad's eventual coalescence as a family unit. Earl said his parents were "thrilled . . . they'd given up on ever having grand-kids when I came out to them as gay, so to have two ready-made grand-kids put them into grand-parent heaven!" Melinda's parents were accepting, though less enthusiastic than Earl's. Tom's parents, however, refused to acknowledge their son's unconventional relationship and not only declined to come to the commitment ceremony but terminated contact with the triad and their children.

Several years later, when Tom's father was diagnosed with cancer, Tom's parents reinitiated communication with him because they felt that "life was too short to hold this kind of a grudge." While the triad's relationship with Tom's parents improved, Tom harbors residual feelings of hurt and anger, saying "Things can't ever be the same again once your parents have told you that you aren't their son anymore." Although other issues are undoubtedly extant, polyamory aggravated existing problems and created new ones for Tom's relationship with his family of origin. While the presence of a same-sex partner in Tom's life worried his parents, it was the extra-dyadic relationship that they found so objectionable as to terminate contact with the triad. Dyadic relating, even if between those of the same sex, is at least a recognizable relational form that mirrors heterosexual marriage. Poly families, however, magnify unease with familial nonconformity by including not only same-sex partners but multiples of partners. This presents a challenge to monogamy—the very base of modern marriage. The existence of this challenge indicates its utility: clearly the family form fills a gap in the kinship system for some or they would not organize their families in that manner.

Commitment and Marriage

While marriage and commitment used to be combined as a single process, social changes have separated them into distinct life events. Now it is common for people to cohabit in committed relationships without being married, and many others no longer see marriage as the lifelong commitment it once was when life spans were shorter and women's choices more constrained.

In contrast to the clear dedication to marriage equality displayed by some same-sex marriage advocates, polyamorists appear to be far less personally or politically devoted to plural marriage than lesbigays are to same-sex marriage. In the only study of polyamory and attitudes toward plural marriage of which I am aware, Aviram (2007) finds that most of the 35 polyamorous activist interviewees did not see plural marriage as a desirable or attainable goal. Aviram (2007, 282) asserts that this indifference to marriage stems in part from the cultural background of poly communities that emphasizes free-form, fluid, almost utopian relationships among individuals who are suspicious of institutions, disdain mainstream homogeneity, and "equate the public official aspects of marriage with legal rights" that regulate and limit relationships, leading ultimately to "submission to an archaic, rigid, undesirable social order." Although Aviram did not address the relevance of class, race, or socioeconomic status, elsewhere I argue that race and class privileges provide polyamorists some

buffer against discrimination (Sheff and Hammers 2011), making the rights associated with legal marriage less important for polys than they would be to others with fewer social privileges. Polys' desire for plural marriage might also be diluted or negated by their access to ostensibly heterosexual, dyadic marriages. Such access grants polys greater social maneuverability than those in recognizably same-sex relationships, a latitude that is reflected in polys' views of marriage. Some reject marriage as inherently flawed; others are married but accord it little import; and still others view marriage as profoundly important in shaping their relationship structures and interactions.

Commitment ceremonies. My respondents report a variety of views pertaining to marriage and commitment ceremonies. Like some lesbigay couples, polyamorists occasionally formalize their commitments with public ceremonies that acknowledge the group as a family unit. For some, ceremonially announcing that they are "fluid-bonded" (a negotiated safer-sex agreement that allows people to share bodily fluids with specific lovers) signals their lasting pledge to their partners and communities at large. One trio of two women and a man who had dated for several years gleefully informed the attendees at their ceremony/party that marked their fluid-bonding that "We are a family now!" Other polys choose alternative forms of union such as handfasting, a pagan ritual in which people are ceremonially bound wrist to wrist with soft cord for three days and thereafter considered to be married.

Occasionally large and stable families like the Wyss quad deal with the lack of official recognition by creating corporations or trusts to manage taxes, child custody, medical power of attorney, inheritance, and joint property ownership. As scholars documenting lesbigays' attempts to secure similar legal rights find (Dalton 2001; Hequembourg 2007; Wright 1998), such arrangements require extensive legal documentation in an attempt to address every foreseeable contingency, from the division of property in case of "divorce," to the assurance of continued custody of children should the biological parents die. The high cost of this legal documentation makes this route prohibitive for those without the financial resources for such extensive legal preparation.

Marriage. Because many in polyamorous relationships can legally marry in ostensibly monogamous, heterosexual dyads, they have different relationships with marriage than do most lesbigays. While lesbigays may also elect to marry someone of another sex in a similarly ostensibly monogamous and heterosexual dyad, it requires a far greater effort to maintain a closeted gay life than it would for polys with other-sex partners—a configuration that makes them socially intelligible as heterosexual couples with "close friends." This ability to remain closeted almost effortlessly is a resource to which many people in same-sex relationships do not have access, and thus functions

as a form of (often misattributed) heterosexual privilege that provides a buffer against effects of stigma against sexual nonconformists.

Few of my respondents mention legal plural marriage at all, and none identify it as an important goal. Some respondents eschew and occasionally ridicule monogamous marriage as an ill-conceived experiment. Dylan, a 40-year-old white costume designer and mother of one, opines: "I think [marriage] is an institution, and that's fine if you want to be institutionalized." Others deride people in monogamous marriages as "coasting" or "on automatic pilot." Thaddeus, a 41-year-old white musician, casts marriage as detrimental to the health of relationships: "The thing that ruins their marriage was a piece of paper saying that they were married. . . . There wasn't communication, that these were things that they certainly couldn't talk about because they felt stuck." Polyamory provides Dylan and Thaddeus a vantage point from which to critique monogamous families and relationships, much like those who oppose same-sex marriage because they contest all marriage or advocate decoupling social benefits from relationship status (Card 2007; Emens 2004; Polikoff 1993).

Like the majority of polyamorists who have participated in research (Sheff and Hammers 2011), Dylan and Thaddeus are both white, well educated, and middle class—enjoying the privileges that allow them to focus on rebellion against the patriarchal norms of conventional families. Their socioeconomic status and cultural cache provide the kind of security that is scarce for lesbigay and/or working-class people. The larger and more diverse lesbigay community has a broader range of people, and the social privileges that attend legal marriage can be far more important to those who have few other privileges. The more scarce the privileges, the more precious each becomes. Mainstream polyamorists' myriad privileges allow them to downplay or eschew marriage in favor of rebellion precisely because they are so well endowed in other areas.

In some cases, legally married polys downplay their marriages. Phoenix and Zach, a white couple in their early sixties, date their relationship from its inception over thirty years ago, rather than the date of their actual legal marriage, which Phoenix sees as "pretty much just a piece of paper. We did it so he could get health insurance—at the courthouse." Many legally married polys mention it only in passing and do not identify it as important in their interviews, but are still able to avail themselves of its advantages and secure benefits that remain unavailable to their counterparts in same-sex relationships. This near-universal poly disinterest in legalizing multiple-partner marriage, or even investing heavily in conventional marriage, stands in sharp contrast to the significance many lesbigays accord same-sex marriage.

In rare instances, legal marriage plays a significant role in shaping partners' expectations of each other. For example, the Hadaway quad members have complex attitudes toward marriage. The quad is composed of two legally married couples and their ten children (five from each couple), with sexual relationships between the women and between the women and both men independently, but not between the men. Its members, all white and in their early forties, include Gwenyth, a full-time homemaker; her legal husband Mitch, a real-estate broker; Tammy, a part-time assistant to both Mitch and Gwenyth; and her legal husband Phil, an electrician and technician. Each couple had been together for almost 15 years when the women, both pregnant with their fifth child, met in an Internet parenting chat room and began an online relationship that was mostly friendship with, Tammy reported, an undercurrent of "strange intensity." After meeting in person with their spouses and eventually establishing "cross-coupled" sexual relationships between Gwenyth and Phil, and Tammy and Mitch, the four decided that Phil and Tammy would move from their neighboring state to live near Mitch and Gwenyth. Shortly after arriving, Phil had a nervous breakdown, partially in response to the tremendous stress of working in the Gulf Coast region of the Southern United States after hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans and the surrounding areas. Phil reported that "it had been coming for a long time," and Mitch opined that Phil was "finally able to let go once he knew there was someone else there to take care of his family." Tammy and Phil subsequently moved in with Mitch and Gwenyth, blending their households and nine of their children (Tammy and Phil's eldest daughter moved to her own apartment).

Tammy reports that Phil expects her to make him breakfast every day before he leaves for work—even though Gwenyth is already up getting the children ready for school—specifically because she is his wife and "that is the kind of thing a good wife does." Phil expresses dismay at what he interprets as Tammy's waning devotion, "She used to do it when it was just her and me, but now that we live with them it's like she's not really my wife anymore. At least not the way she used to be." Similarly, Mitch considers his relationship with Gwenyth to be his priority, not only because they have been together for many years, but because they are married and thus should have primary allegiance to each other. Gwenyth reports feeling hurt by Phil's "fixation" on having Tammy do things for him, "I like spending that time with you and you don't appreciate it at all. It doesn't matter that we're not married, I still love you and can make your lunch!" She rejects legal marriage as the overriding relational structure, saying "I don't recognize any primary-secondary, we're all on the same level," regardless of legal marital status. Even within this family, members do not necessarily agree on its terms. While this is possibly true of any marriage in

which partners have differing views on the nature, function, or dynamics of their relationships, it can be even more pronounced in poly families. Retention of significant elements of monogamous or other patriarchal familial types can potentially impair adaptability, as the attempt to graft on elements of the previous form inevitably chafe against the new form. The quad experienced growing pains as they attempted to redefine their roles and relationships to each other, stretching their abilities to adapt to changing relational configurations and precipitating various crises and conflicts over mundane issues of daily life.

Divorce

Polyamorists' various views on marriage parallel their similarly diverse relationships with divorce. Some of my respondents select polyamory as an alternative to divorce, while others become poly subsequent to divorce from monogamous marriages. Still others divorce and retain sexual and/or cohabitational relationships with their "exes" after dissolving their legal unions. Most similar to lesbigay families, some members of disbanded polyamorous families do not have access to legal divorce.

Alternative to divorce. Some people transition to poly families rather than divorce. Typically this happens when one of the partners is discovered engaging in an adulterous affair or confesses a transgression to their spouse, and those involved choose extramarital relationships for both partners rather than divorce. Claire and Tim, a Mexican American woman and a white man both in their midthirties and married for nine years, decided to become polyamorous instead of divorcing when Claire learned of Tim's extramarital affair. Claire articulated feeling betrayed by Tim's initial deception but, while she did not want to be the "dupe who stays at home with the kids while he is out screwing around," she was not willing to end their relationship. Claire and Tim reconsidered the meaning and stability of their union, and ultimately chose to open their relationship to outside lovers. Claire reports greater personal satisfaction and equality in her marriage now that she has outside relationships as well, in part, she thinks, because Tim no longer takes her for granted as much. By agreeing to alter the definition of their relationship, Claire and Tim have simultaneously reformed the power dynamic from a traditional familial structure rife with power imbalances to one that Claire opines "levels the playing field." Poly families' flexibility permits them to adjust to shifting family circumstances, allowing families to outlast the crisis moment and reposition themselves to accommodate changes in structure and form, fostering an adaptable kinship network.

Polyamorous subsequent to divorce. Some polys who previously engaged in adultery and subsequently divorced enter new relationships with the explicit intention of creating polyamorous families. Shelly and Sven, a white couple in their forties, each have a daughter from a previous marriage, and also have a daughter together. Sven's first marriage ended in a bitter divorce when his now ex-wife discovered he was having clandestine sex with men. In an effort to avoid repeating the mistakes of his first marriage, Sven was honest with Shelly about his bisexuality from the beginning of their relationship. Initially shocked by Sven's suggestion to add a boyfriend to their family, Shelly eventually became more accepting of polyamory, though she remained somewhat dubious at times. "I never would have considered it before I met Sven, but I would rather be involved with these guys than have him taking so much energy and time away from the family to be with them."

For several years Shelly and Sven dated men with limited success. Ultimately they met and fell in love with Adam, a 35-year-old white computer systems support provider with whom they established a triadic relationship. While the triad seemed to coexist peacefully for several years and all three members reported being happy together, the relationship eventually began to experience some difficulties. Shelly was more attracted to Adam than he was to her, and she occasionally felt some tension around this imbalance of desire. After almost four years together, Adam broke up with Shelly and Sven, who eventually began dating other men again. The flexibility of a poly family allowed Sven to be honest with Shelly and meet his need for sex with men while still retaining his familial connection with his wife and children. The frank dialogue characteristic of this and other poly families (Sheff 2010) similarly sets the stage for Shelly to verbalize her needs and openly negotiate a safer-sex agreement.

Divorced but still lovers. Some polys divorce but continue their relationships much as they had prior to the divorce. Peck, a 42-year-old white magazine editor and mother of three, had been in a triad that was characteristic of this tendency to create new familial patterns. She had already had two children with Clark, her legally wed husband, and intentionally became pregnant with a third child when Steven, her additional (extralegal) husband, expressed desire for a child. Both Steven and Clark accompanied Peck in the delivery room when she gave birth to her third child. Though the triad specified paternity and expressed their intent to co-parent, officials insisted on listing Clark 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 Steven is the father. I'm married to Clark, and Clark'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. Steven was outraged.

In order to clarify Steven'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. Peck's 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 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 extant social shifts continue, this ability to maintain friendly contact through changes in family life and structure is becoming increasingly important. By deemphasizing biolegal connections and embracing a broader definition of family, both polys and lesbigays demonstrate the adaptive utility of chosen kinship.

Lack of access to legal divorce. While divorce and its polyamorous proxy of separation exert a mixed impact on polyamorous people and their children, the lack of access to official divorce can sometimes be as difficult as a divorce itself. The Mayfield quad, composed of Alicia, Ben, Monique, and Edward, all white and in their late thirties or early forties, was together for 11 years before breaking up. Ben, Monique, and Edward had all been employed during their term in the quad, but Alicia's back injury prevented her from performing paid labor. Instead, she cared for their home and Monique and Edward's biological children who were five and seven years old when the quad coalesced as a family. When the quad disbanded, Alicia had no access to the usual recourses available to women whose monogamous legal marriages end. Without legally recognized relationships to any other quad members except her soon-to-be ex-husband, formalized access to the children she had cared for during the last 11 years, or recourse to seek the alimony traditionally awarded to homemakers who divorce a wage earner, Alicia was in a difficult position indeed. While legal protections would not have shielded

Alicia from the emotional impact of the family's dissolution, they would at least have allowed her visitation of the children she reared, and financial compensation for the years she spent raising them and maintaining the household to facilitate the waged work of her spice. Lack of official recognition of her polyamorous family contributed to Alicia's personal and financial devastation.

No marriage means no divorce, and in many cases, no mediated negotiation of custody and property issues. Legal divorce is clearly far from perfect, but it does provide some protections for nonbiological parents and homemakers that are unavailable to people in relationships denied official sanction. For both polyamorists and lesbigays who wish to marry or divorce, institutional recognition remains a double-edged sword: it constrains the forms families are able to take, but the lack of those institutional protections can be costly for those who fall outside its purview. In this case, the inflexibility of external society inhibits adaptability and hinders families' abilities to retain kinship ties in the face of crises like divorce.

Conclusion

While they differ in some ways, poly and lesbigay families' similarities are more marked. Each constructs chosen families from a mélange of biolegal family members, lifelong friends, and/or current and former lovers. Such novel mixtures defy conventional familial categorization, and thus require poly and lesbigay families to innovate new roles, options, and relationship configurations, offering a "less fossilized" (Green 2006, 187) version of family. Both lesbigays and polys celebrate their relationships with commitment ceremonies and suffer from their lack of access to legal divorce. As in lesbigay families with same-sex partners who do not occupy traditional gender roles, some poly families defy patriarchal heterosexual regulations and thus offer alternatives to conventional gender roles. These similarities are not accidental, as the same social forces have shaped both groups' strategies for family maintenance and relationships to institutions. The forces that have caused family forms to shift so dramatically are not going away: There is no "going back" in part because there is no "back" to go to, and in part because the profound interactions among these transformations have permanently altered the social landscape.

Poly families also diverge from same-sex families, most significantly in their access to dyadic legal marriage, indifference to legalized multiple-partner marriage, and their relative obscurity. These differences confer the myriad legal and social privileges associated with ostensible conformity to hegemonic norms that shape heterosexual, monogamous, married family life. In contrast with the

(hyper)visibility of lesbigays, polys are only now becoming socially apparent, and the general public remains largely unaware of polyamory. Certainly there are polyamorous people who also identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, and/or transgendered, and they are more likely *to be identified* as such, by both themselves and larger society. But they are very rarely visible *as polyamorists* per se. Public acknowledgement of lesbigays grants them an identity sufficiently substantial to self-define in large enough groups to establish a significant social presence. This same public awareness, however, can simultaneously disempower lesbigays when opposing groups use it to legitimate surveillance and discrimination against people who behave "differently" (Berbrier and Pruett 2006). Polyamorists are more likely than lesbigays to be able to pass as conventional or be out as sexual or relational nonconformists, as best fits the situation. This level of choice is a privilege that lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in same-sex relationships do not enjoy. That privilege comes at the cost, however, of the power that accompanies visibility. Strength is only endowed in *evident* numbers, and polyamorists' stealth comes at the expense of knowing each other and making a (more substantial) public presence.

There are several implications from this research. First, it provides not only an introduction to a little-known family form but also uses lesbigays as a point of reference rather than conventional, heterosexual, dyadic families that have heretofore been the sole point of comparison for all other family forms. Using families of sexual minorities, rather than heterosexual families, as a point of reference allows us to understand the differences and similarities among these family forms. One of these differences is that legal multiple marriage is not currently a concern for poly families because they have easier access to ostensibly dyadic heterosexual marriage, and they often have social privileges that grant them many of the benefits associated with marriage. This indicates that there is great variance among sexual minorities, not only regarding race and class but also in relation to the diverse impacts of ostensible monogamy coupled with ostensible heterosexuality, and how groups are politically constituted.

Second, given the persistence and growth of multiple-partner relationships (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2009; Bergstrand and Blevins Sinski 2010; Rubin 2001), the field of family studies must begin to consider levels of monogamy and non-monogamies when theorizing family forms. Similar to the manner in which heterocentrism obscured the previously unquestioned assumption that all couples were composed of a woman and a man, *monocentrism*, or the assumption that everyone is monogamous and all romantic relationships are at root dyadic, underlies much family research and discussion. Scholars must become aware that monogamy is no longer (and in fact never truly was) the

singular form of relationship in practice and thus include measures of levels and types of monogamy and negotiated non-monogamies. Shifting to a more multiplistic perspective will allow researchers to account for greater social diversity and document variation in levels and definitions of monogamy, as well as openly non-monogamous relationships. Continuing to assume monogamy not only obscures the true variance in families but reinforces monocentrism. In order to measure (non)monogamies we must allow the concept to surface in our collective conscience, which requires a shift in frame of reference, moving away from the assumed dyad and allowing our theories to expand to include multiplicity at both the theoretical and methodological levels. This means not only measuring the incidence of non-monogamies but shifting basic assumptions of fidelity rooted in an antiquated double standard that demands sexual exclusivity from women but allows men infidelity and access to prostitutes. Emotional fidelity can and does exist without sexual fidelity, and increasingly people are electing to negotiate levels of monogamy and forms of non-monogamy that have both emotional commitment and sexual multiplicity. As a field, sociology must acknowledge and account for this social trend.

Third, this article contributes to the debate on same-sex marriage by offering a fourth alternative to the three I discussed in the literature review. I argue that advocates of human and family equality can both work to legalize same-sex and polyamorous marriage while simultaneously acting to disengage privileges and benefits from marital or familial status. These goals are not as antithetical as they may appear: both aim to reposition sexual minorities (and others) within social hierarchies. Various branches of equality movements can work on differing goals, all ultimately contributing more effectively to an increasingly inclusive familial system than would any single attempt independently. Rather than wasting energy debating whether or not to legalize same-sex marriage among themselves, advocates of equality would do better to pursue their distinct goals of inclusion in the current marital hierarchy or redistribution of benefits independent of relationship status separately and trust that the other branches of the movement will do the same.

Fourth, understanding polyamorous families expands our knowledge of how families adapt to shifting social conditions. Rather than serving as the point of no return down the slippery slope of decline, polyamorous families demonstrate an elasticity that allows complicated families to manage daily life and navigate intricate relationships. Importantly, their innovations can highlight how more-conventional families might deal with the complexity of blended families with multiple parents and children from past and current relationships. Poly families' ability to retain relationship after a breakup offers insight for monogamous families who divorce, and their experiences

coparenting can illuminate how blended families of all types might deal with multiple parents, regardless of how or if they are sexually connected. This adaptability becomes increasingly important as divorce dilutes the expectation of permanent connections with legal kin, while simultaneously creating multiple-parent blended families. Like lesbigays who offered a new vision of chosen families in the 1970s and beyond, poly families demonstrate novel forms of kinship not necessarily dependent on conventional biolegal families, sexual connections, or even chosen kin ties as previously understood. Expanding understandings of families becomes more important as family forms themselves expand.

Finally, this examination of poly families exposes the links between polyamorous families, same-sex marriage, and the proliferation of choices outside the formerly singular family model predicated on a heterosexual, married, monogamous couple. Poly families prove especially problematic for conservative pundits because they blur the line between normal and abnormal, a line that Foucault (1978) identifies as crucially important in order to maintain hierarchies. While lesbigays disturb conventional arrangements, they are at least identifiable. Poly families are a greater threat to conventional hierarchies because they can so easily mirror dyadic, heterosexual families. This stealth allows them to infiltrate an otherwise "normal" environment unnoticed, potentially polluting average denizens who unwittingly interact with the polyamorists. If they continue to mirror lesbigay families, however, poly families will not remain cloaked forever. Should polyamorous communities continue to expand as they have during my time researching them, the attention the same-sex marriage debate attracts will continue even after that issue has been legally resolved.

Public policies should facilitate the lives of those who live in a society, not hinder families' abilities to cope with crises. That means offering the same marriage benefits to people in same-sex families, as well as polyamorous and other forms of families, as those available to people in heterosexual dyads. Even though many polyamorists and lesbigays disdain multiple or same-sex marriage, in the interest of full citizenship and equality they still deserve the option should they elect to avail themselves of it. Encoding second-class citizenship into marital laws serves to further alienate already disenfranchised sexual minorities and perpetuates institutionalized homophobia. 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 numerous divorce studies illustrate, for at the least 40 to 50 percent of all marriages that

experience a "disruption" (Cherlin 2010, 405), 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. The fragility of the monogamous dyad is evidence of its own limited utility, and it has already become one choice among many precisely because it does not work for everyone. For some people, family forms with broader foundations can better meet the complex needs of diverse contemporary lives. It is wiser for some, especially sexual minorities, to invest their long-term emotional and financial care and parenting arrangements in relationships with friends, siblings, or platonic coparents (Muraco 2006; Oswald 2000, 2002; Weston 1991). Rather than the proliferation of family forms, it is the continued attempt to enforce a narrow definition of "the" family that is actually damaging society.

Are same-sex or polyamorous marriages truly so terrifyingly powerful that their mere presence could obliterate heterosexual, monogamous marriage? I think not. Heterosexual, dyadic, monogamous marriage is and will probably continue to be a very popular form of relationship in some regions of the world. Because the majority of the population is heterosexual (Laumann et al. 1994), it is clearly better suited to more people than same-sex marriage. Dyadic, monogamous marriage can also be less complex, offer more plentiful conventional role models, and garner greater social approval, making it more appealing for many than a potentially more complex and high-maintenance polyamorous family.

These findings should not be taken as support for any attempt to bar people in same-sex, polyamorous, or any other sexual-minority relationship from marriage (or any other familial status) or deny them custody of their children. Researchers examining controversial topics have struggled with the potential for lawyers, journalists, and other academicians to use their work in ways antithetical to the original researchers' findings. Stacey and Biblarz (2001, 178) address the potential misuse of their findings that children of gays and lesbians have greater gender and sexual variation than do children of heterosexuals:

> In a homophobic world, anti-gay forces deploy such results to deny parents custody of their own children and to fuel backlash movements opposed to gay rights. Nonetheless, we believe that denying this probability capitulates to heterosexist ideology and is apt to prove counterproductive in the long run.

In this article, I have chosen my words very carefully in order to defuse as much misuse of my research as possible. Defusing it completely, however,

would require altering my findings, and that, as Stacey and Biblarz (2001, 178) point out, is "neither intellectually honest nor politically wise."

In the act of publicly discarding the yoke of heterosexuality, lesbigay families and communities open other restrictions such as monogamy to scrutiny, creating exactly the slippery slope that opponents of same-sex marriage fear. Only the end of the slope that need concern them is not the extreme fringe of bestiality with which they appear so preoccupied, but rather the far more mundane continuation of changes already in progress—ongoing shifts toward individuality, tolerance of diversity, and gender equality. These changes persist in disturbing traditional arrangements, inexorably expanding the social frame of reference to include not only heterosexual dyadic families but other forms as well. Such legitimate diversity challenges the primacy of heterosexuality and monogamy, bastions of convention that prove indispensible for those who are deeply invested in the privileges they receive due to their positions in the hierarchies of patriarchal families. Refusing to change marital laws to reflect the true composition of society damages far more people than would the potential loss of privilege for heterosexual men in patriarchal marriages. In the highly unlikely event that same-sex and poly marriages actually do obliterate monogamous, heterosexual marriage as Kurtz (2003b) claims they will, it will result from the inadequacies of that "traditional" family form, not the "wickedness" of lesbigay and polyamorous families.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. I do not include transgender or transsexual people in this category because the level of public awareness of transgendered people is much lower than of gays and lesbians and even bisexuals, and there are issues specific to transfolk that are not addressed in lesbigay research. Space constraints prohibit inclusion of trans-relevant literature here. Most importantly, changing gender status is of such major consequence to the discussion of same-sex marriage that it warrants independent analysis.
2. For a more complete discussion of polyamorous families in popular press writings, see Pallotta-Chiarolli 2006.

3. While Parsons uses the term adaptability specifically to refer to a social system's or person's ability to interact with the external world (Parsons 1951 [1964]), I use it here in the less specific sense of "to make fit (as for a new use or situation) often by modification; to adjust or accommodate" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online* 2010).

4. Only one of the previous respondents who consented to an interview no longer identified as polyamorous and had started seeking a monogamous relationship.

5. In this article I discuss these implications in relation to the adults. Sufficient examination of these families' impacts on children is outside the scope of this paper, and I address it in other projects. My preliminary results indicate that children in poly families appear to be mainly self-confident, articulate, and satisfied with family life, though small sample size and recruitment limitations bias the results toward those who continued to identify as polyamorous. A larger and more diverse sample of children might prove less optimistic about poly family life.

References

Anapol, Deborah M. 1992. *Love without limits: The quest for sustainable intimate relationships*. San Rafael, CA: IntiNet Resource Center.

Anderlini-D'Onofrio, Serena. 2009. *Gaia and the new politics of love: Notes for a poly planet*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Anderlini-D'Onofrio, Serena. 2005. *Plural loves: Designs for bi and poly living*. New York: Routledge.

Anzaldua, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*. New York: Aunt Lute Books.

Archer, Bert. 2004. *The end of gay and the death of heterosexuality*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

Associated Press. 2003. Excerpt from Santorum interview, posted April 23, 2003. http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-04-23-santorum-excerpt_x .htm (accessed June 16, 2009).

Aviram, Hadar. 2007. Make love, not law: Perceptions of the marriage equality struggle among polyamorous activists. *Journal of Bisexuality* 7(3/4): 263-86.

Babst, Gordon. 2002. *Liberal constitutionalism, marriage, and sexual orientation: A contemporary case for dis-establishment*. New York: Peter Lang.

Baptist, Joyce, and Katherine Allen. 2008. A family's coming out process: Systemic change and multiple realities. *Contemporary Family Therapy* 30: 92-110.

Bartell, Gilbert. 1971. *Group sex: A scientist's eyewitness report on the American way of swinging*. New York: Van Rees Press.

Bennett, Kathleen. 1992. Feminist bisexuality: A both/and option for an either/or world. In *Closer to home: Bisexuality and feminism*, edited by E. Weise. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.

Berbrier, Mitch, and Elaine Pruett. 2006. When is inequality a problem? Victim contests, injustice frames, and the case of the office of gay, lesbian, and bisexual student support services at Indiana University. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (3): 257-84.

Bergstrand, Curtis, and Jennifer Blevins Sinski. 2010. *Swinging in America: Love, sex, and marriage in the 21st century*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Bettinger, Michael. 2005. Polyamory and gay men: A family systems approach. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 1(1): 97-116.

Block, Jenny. 2008. *Open: Love, sex, and life in an open marriage*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.

Card, Claudia. 2007. Gay divorce: Thoughts on the legal regulation of marriage. *Hypatia* 22(1): 24-38.

Carrington, Christopher. 1999. *No place like home: Relationships and family life among lesbians and gay men. Chicago*: University of Chicago Press.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2000. Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2nd edition, edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 509-35. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chauncey, George. 2004. *Why marriage? The history shaping today's debate*. New York: Basic Books.

Cherlin, Andrew. 2010. Demographic trends in the United States: A review of research in the 2000s. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72: 403-19.

Chodorow, Nancy. 1978. *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Clarke, Victoria, Carole Burgoyne, and Maree Burns. 2006. Just a piece of paper? A qualitative exploration of same-sex couples' multiple conceptions of civil partnership and marriage. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* 7(2): 141-61.

Constantine, Larry, and Joan Constantine. 1973. *Group marriage: A study of contemporary multilateral marriage*. New York: Collier Books.

Coontz, Stephanie. 1988. *Social origins of private life: A history of American families 1600-1900*. New York: Verso.

Coontz, Stephanie. 1992. *The way we never were: American families and the nostalgia trap*. New York: Basic Books.

Coontz, Stephanie. 1998. *The way we really are: Coming to terms with America's changing families*. New York: Basic Books.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2005. *Marriage, a history: From obedience to intimacy, or how love conquered marriage*. New York: Viking.

Dalton, Susan. 2001. Protecting our parent-child relationships: Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of second-parent adoption. In *Queer families, queer politics: Challenging culture and the state*, edited by Mary Bernstein, and Renate Reimann, 201-20. New York: Columbia University Press.

Denfeld, Duane, and Michael Gordon. 1970. The sociology of mate swapping: Or the family that swings together clings together. *Journal of Sex Research* 6(2): 85-100.

Easton, Dossie, and Catherine Liszt. 1997. *The ethical slut: A guide to infinite possibilities*. San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press.

Ellingson, Stephen, Nelson Tebbe, Martha Van Haitsma, and Edward Laumann. 2001. Religion and the politics of sexuality. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30(1): 3-55.

Ellis, Havelock. 1897. *Studies in the psychology of sex: Sexual inversion*, Volume 2.

Emens, Elizabeth. 2004. Monogamy's law: Compulsory monogamy and polyamorous existence. *New York University Review of Law and Social Change* 29: 277.

Fang, Betty. 1976. Swinging: "In retrospect." *Journal of Sex Research* 12(3): 220-37.

Firestone, Shulamith. 1971. *The dialectic of sex: The case for feminist revolution*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The history of sexuality, vol. 1: An introduction*. New York: Penguin.

Gamson, Joshua. 1999. *Freaks talk back: Tabloid talk shows and sexual nonconformity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Glaser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Glassner, Barry, and Rosanna Hertz. 1999. *Qualitative sociology as everyday life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Green, Adam. 2006. Until death do us part? The impact of differential access to marriage on a sample of urban men. *Sociological Perspectives* 49(2): 163-89.

Hemphill, Essex. 2007. *Brother to brother: New writings by black gay men*. Washington, DC: Redbone Press.

Henshel, Anne-Marie. 1973. Swinging: A study of decision making in marriage. *American Journal of Sociology* 78: 885.

Hequembourg, Amy. 2007. Becoming lesbian mothers. *Journal of Homosexuality* 53(3): 153-80.

Hequembourg, Amy, and Jorge Arditi. 1999. Fractured resistances: The debate over assimilationism among gays and lesbians in the United States. *Sociological Quarterly* 40(4): 663-80.

Hill Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.

Hochschild, Arlie. 1997. *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Hochschild, Arlie, and Annie Machung. 2003. *The second shift*. New York: Penguin.

Hull, Kathleen. 2001. The political limits of the rights frame: The case of same-sex marriage in Hawaii. *Sociological Perspectives* 44(2): 207-32.

Hull, Kathleen. 2003. The cultural power of law and the cultural enactment of legality: The case of same-sex marriage. *Law and Social Inquiry* 28(3): 629-57.

Hull, Kathleen. 2006. *Same-sex marriage: The culture of love and law*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, Colin. 2006. A marriage proposal: Privatize it. *The Independent Review* 11(1): 115-19.

Kates, Steven, and Russell Belk. 2001. The meanings of lesbian and gay pride day: Resistance through consumption and resistance to consumption. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30: 392-429.

Krafft-Ebing, Richard von. 1898. *The psychopathia sexualis: A medico-legal study*. Oxford, UK: F.A. Davis Co.

Kurtz, Stanley. 2003a. Heather has 3 parents. *National Review Online*, March 12. http://www.nationalreview.com/kurtz/kurtz031203.asp (accessed September 12, 2006).

Kurtz, Stanley. 2003b. Beyond gay marriage. *The Weekly Standard* 8(45). http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/002/938xpsxy.asp Accessed March 23, 2010.

Lannutti, Pamela. 2005. For better or worse: Exploring the meanings of same-sex marriage within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 22(1): 5-18.

LaRossa, Ralph. 2005. Grounded theory methods and qualitative family research. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67: 837-57.

Laumann, Edward, John Gagnon, Robert Michael, and Stuart Michaels. 1994. *The social organization of sexuality: Sexual practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lewin, Ellen. 2001. Weddings without marriage: Making sense of lesbian and gay commitment rituals. In *Queer families, queer politics: challenging culture and the state*, edited by Mary Bernstienand Renate Reimann, 44-52. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lithwick, Dahlia. 2004. Slippery slop. *Slate*, May 19. http://www.slate.com/id/2100824/ (accessed June 2, 2009).

Lofland, John, and Lynn Lofland. 1995. *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth.

Manodori, Chiara. 1998. This powerful opening of the heart: How ritual affirms lesbian identity. *Journal of Homosexuality* 36(2): 41-58.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adapted (accessed August 16, 2010).

Munson, Marcia, and Judith Stelbaum. (eds.). 1999. *The lesbian polyamory reader: Open relationships, non-monogamy, and casual sex*. Philadelphia, PA: Haworth.

Muraco, Anna. 2006. Intentional families: Fictive kin ties between cross-gender, different sexual orientation friends. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68:1313-25.

Nearing, Ryam. 1992. *Loving more: The polyfidelity primer*. Captain Cook, HI: PEP.

Oswald, Ramona. 2000. A member of the wedding? Heterosexism and family ritual. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 17(3): 349-68.

Oswald, Ramona. 2002. Resilience within the family networks of lesbians and gay men: Intentionality and redefinition. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64(2): 374-84.

Oswald, Ramona, Abby Goldberg, Kate Kuvalanka, and Eric Clausell. 2008. Structural and moral commitment among same-sex couples: Relationship duration, religiosity, and parental status. *Journal of Family Psychology* 22(3): 411-19.

Oswald, Ramona, and Linda Culton. 2003. Under the rainbow: Rural gay life and its relevance for family providers. *Family Relations* 52(1): 72-81.

Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria. 2006. Polyparents having children, raising children, schooling children. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* 7(1): 48-53.

Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria. 2010a. *Border sexualities, border families in schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria. 2010b. "To pass, border, or pollute": Polyfamilies go to school. In *Understanding non-monogamies*, edited by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge. London: Routledge.

Pallotta-Chiarolli, Maria, and Susan Lubowitz. 2003. Outside belonging: Multi-sexual relationships as border existence. *Journal of Bisexuality* 3(1): 53-86.

Parsons, Talcott. 1951[1964]. *The social system*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Parsons, Talcott, and Robert Bales. 1955. *Family, socialization and interaction process*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

Polikoff, Nancy. 1993. We will get what we ask for: Why legalizing gay and lesbian marriage will not dismantle the legal structure of gender in every marriage. *Virginia Law Review* 79(7): 1535-50.

Polikoff, Nancy. 2008. *Beyond (straight and gay) marriage: Valuing all families under the law*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Popenoe, David. 1996. *Life without father*. New York: Free Press.

Rauch, Jonathan. 2004. *Gay marriage: Why it is good for gays, good for straights, and good for America*. New York: Owl Books, Henry Holt.

Reczek, Corrine, Sinikka Elliott, and Debra Umberson. 2009. Commitment without marriage: Union formation among long-term same-sex couples. *Journal of Family Issues* 30(6): 738-56.

Riggs, Damien. 2010. Developing a "responsible" foster care praxis: Poly as a framework for examining power and propriety in family contexts. In *Understanding non-monogamies*, edited by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge. London: Routledge.

Robinson, Victoria. 1997. My baby cares just for me: Feminism, heterosexuality, and non-monogamy. *Journal of Gender Studies* 6(2): 143-58.

Rosa, Becky. 1994. "Anti-monogamy." In *Stirring it: Challenges for feminism*, edited by Gabriele Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai, and Sasha Roseneil, 107-20. London, UK: Taylor & Francis.

Rubin, Roger. 2001. Alternative family lifestyles revisited, or whatever happened to swingers, group marriages and communes? *Journal of Family Issues* 7(6): 711-27.

Schneider, David. 1997. The power of culture: Notes on some aspects of gay and lesbian kinship in America today. *Cultural Anthropology* 12(2): 270-74.

Sheff, Elisabeth. 2005a. Gender, family and sexuality: Exploring polyamorous community. Unpublished dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado, Boulder.

Sheff, Elisabeth. 2005b. Polyamorous women, sexual subjectivity, and power. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 34(3): 251-83.

Sheff, Elisabeth. 2006. Poly-hegemonic masculinities. *Sexualities* 9(5): 621-42.

Sheff, Elisabeth. 2010. Strategies in polyamorous parenting. In *Understanding non-monogamies*, edited by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge. London: Routledge.

Sheff, Elisabeth, and Corie Hammers. 2011. The privilege of perversities: Race, class, and education among polyamorists and kinksters. *Sexuality & Psychology* 2(3). doi:10.1080/19419899.2010.537674.

Skolnik, Arlene. 1991. *Embattled paradise: The American family in an age of uncertainty*. New York: Basic Books.

Smith, John, and Lynne Smith. 1974. *Beyond monogamy: Recent studies of sexual alternatives in marriage*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Spanier, Graham, and Charles Cole. 1975. Mate swapping: Perceptions, value orientations, and participation in a Midwestern community. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 4(2): 143-59.

Stacey, Judith. 1996. *In the name of the family: Rethinking family values in the postmodern age*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Stacey, Judith. 2003. Gay and lesbian families: Queer like us. In *All our families: New policies for a new century*, edited by Marcia Mason, Arlene Skolnik, and Stephen Sugarman. New York: Oxford University Press.

Stacey, Judith, and Timothy Biblarz. 2001. (How) Does the sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review* 66(2): 159-83.

Stiers, Gretchen. 1999. *From this day forward: Commitment, marriage, and family in lesbian and gay relationships*. New York: St. Martin's.

Sullivan, Andrew. 1996. *Virtually normal: An argument about homosexuality*. New York: Vintage.

Sullivan, Andrew. 2004. *Same-sex marriage: Pro and con reader*. New York: Vintage.

Sullivan, Maureen. 2004. *The family of woman: Lesbian mothers, their children, and the undoing of gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Valentine, Gill, Tracey Skelton, and Ruth Butler. 2006. Coming out and outcomes: Negotiating lesbian and gay identities with, and in, the family. *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 21(4): 479-99.

Waite, Linda, and Maggie Gallagher. 2000. *The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier, and better off financially*. New York: Doubleday.

Waldner, Lisa, and Brian Magruder. 1999. Coming out to parents: Perceptions of family relations, perceived resources, and identity expression as predictors of identity disclosure for gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Homosexuality* 37(2): 83-100.

Weeks, Jeffrey, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan. 2001. *Same-sex intimacies: Families of choice and other life experiments*. New York: Routledge.

Weston, Kath. 1991. *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, and kinship*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wilson, James. 2002. *The marriage problem: How our culture has weakened families*. New York: HarperCollins.

Wright, Janet. 1998. *Lesbian Step Families: An Ethnography of Love*. Hawthorn Press: New York.

Yip, Andrew. 2004. Same-sex marriage: Contrasting perspectives among lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians. *Feminism and Psychology* 14(1): 173-80.

Bio

Elisabeth Sheff received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Colorado in 2005 and has taught at the University of Colorado and the University of Montana, and is currently an Assistant Professor at Georgia State University. Dr. Sheff's publications on polyamory include "Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity, and Power" in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (2005), "Poly-Hegemonic Masculinities" in *Sexualities* (2006), "The Reluctant Polyamorist: Conducting Auto-Ethnographic Research in a Sexualized Setting" in *Sex Matters* (2007), "Strategies in Polyamorous Parenting" in *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (2010), and "The Privilege of Perversities: Race, Class, and Education among Polyamorists and Kinksters" in the *Psychology & Sexuality* (2011).