

Polyamory: A Critical Introduction, Features and Issues

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Abstract

In the recent years, primarily in the western societies, there has been an emergence of a new phenomenon called polyamorous family based on a non-monogamous relationship polyamory. It is a form of relationship in which people keep multiple romantic/sexual and affective partners. Unlike, infidelity, the partners committed in a polyamorist relationship know about each other and there is an honest disclosure about their network of relations to all who are involved. In a polyamorous household, mates accept each other's more than one romantic/sexual/platonic relationship. Based on the secondary data, this article is an exposition introducing the phenomenon of polyamory and polyamorous family and how is this different from the conventional forms of family. It has been found that polyamorists (polys) believe that honesty is the base of their relationship. There is long term commitment with all the partners with each other's consent; therefore it is not adultery or cheating upon their partners. Moreover, in polyamorous families, both men and women have the liberty to keep multiple partners.

Keywords: *family, polyamory, polyamorous family*

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Introduction

The word polyamory was first coined in 1960. It has Latin roots implying 'many loves' (poly means many + amor means love). It has emerged as a new type of relationship whereby people are challenging the boundaries of monogamy and indulging into more than one romantic relationship at one time with the consent of all the existing partners. It is described as a committed, consensual, ethical and non-monogamous relationship maintained with loyalty. Marriage which is considered as the beginning point of family and is the age old universal institution is losing its significance. Specifically, since the middle of twentieth century, not only there has been a substantial increase in the marital breakdown rates but also the marriage rates have declined globally (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020). Stevenson & Wolfers (2007) argue that across the world, fewer people are choosing to marry. This has happened due to increase of women's participation in the work force, and new legislations that confer more legal security and rights to the unmarried couples (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). This transformation has led to the emergence of alternatives like cohabitation, single parent families, and households where parents are not married but co-parenting etc. Polyamory is also one of the outcomes of de-institutionalisation of marriage. Polyamorous model contends the conventional model of marriage that popularised in modern times which restricts love to the ritualistically stamped monogamous pairs protected through social and legal safeguards.

In this article, after giving an overview to the conventional forms of family, polyamory as an emerging alternative has been discussed. The article introduces the phenomenon of polyamory, polyamorous family, its features and issues faced by people indulged into polyamorous relationships.

Evolution of Family: An Overview

Family is the basic unit of social organization, comprising relations based on marriage, blood and adoption. Family is a social institution which has existed since times immemorial. Besides providing economic, psychological and emotional security to its members, family legitimizes the sexual relationship between at least one adult male and female and institutionalizes procreation. Though, the institution of family exists universally but it prevails in a variety of forms. This variedness has been explained in terms of number of members, basis of authority, rules of descent and residence etc. However, due to factors like secularization, education, industrialization, and modernization etc. the institution of family is continuously undergoing change. Scholars like Burgess, Locke, & Thomas (1963) believe that from hard and fast social structure, family is becoming a very liberal institution offering flexibility in human relationships. Though, the exact stage of its origin is not known but it is believed that family was found from the beginning of the primitive societies and there has

been no such stage when family was non-existent. About the evolution of family, scholars have different takes. However, there are various theories about the origin of family.

- 1. Sex Communism Theory:** It propounds that the need to build up an institution of family was felt because in ancient societies there was no legitimization of sexual behaviour. The mating relationships were open; any woman or man could practice sex without any restrictions. This stage of free sex was called as sex communism. It is believed that the need to develop the institution of family arrived due to man's feelings of jealousy. As they would desire to have their own women on whom they could have exclusive sex rights.
- 2. Patriarchal and Matriarchal Theories:** These are contrasting approaches that explain that the family in ancient times existed on the basis of dominant authority of either man or woman. The patriarchal theory is supported by Plato and Aristotle claiming that man was called the patriarch and was so much empowered that in earlier times, particularly in Rome, he was authorized even to kill his wife and sons. Therefore, family when originated was patriarchal in nature.

However, this approach has been contested on the grounds that in ancient societies mothers also enjoyed the power to control. Matriarchal theory explains that in ancient times when the sex regulations were not there, intercourse was free and open; only mother was known and it wasn't possible to identify the father. So, the family in the beginning was matriarchal. The importance of father and patriarchy evolved later with the coming of agriculture. Engels (2004) in his illustrious work on 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State' also mentions that the patriarchal family that exists in contemporary times has evolved with the rise of class society. Patriarchal family originated in the man's interest to maintain control over their property. He elaborates that in pre-class societies, men and women enjoyed sexual freedom to a greater extent. Children were ignorant of their parentage; they would know only about their mother and fathers' identity wasn't important. With the transition of society from primitive type to agrarian, the concept of family also changed. The advent of agriculture and domestication of animals, for the first time made it possible for people to accumulate wealth and make surplus. Initially, accumulation of wealth created inequalities and stringent gendered division of labour, whereby men controlled the resources of production and women were confined to the role of producing children and household chores. Thus, to retain one's property (that was men's domain), it was passed to the next generation. Therefore, 'father and lineage of father' gained importance and family turned out to be patriarchal in nature.

- 3. Morgan's Evolutionary Theory:** Anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan (1877) in his work 'Ancient Society' explains the evolution of family in the following stages:

Consanguine Family: It was the phase when the family would constitute of people related to blood indulging into sexual relations.

Punaluant Family: In this phase, the strict sex regulations were not developed but marital ties started establishing outside the consanguine kin. Brothers of one family would get married to sisters from another family but amongst them there were no rigid restrictions on sexual relations.

Syndasmian/Pairing Family: It was the phase, whereby one man would marry one woman but sex regulations for the married woman in the family were not defined. This was the time when focus shifted from large groups in marital relations to pairing individuals.

Patriarchal Family: Gradually, patriarchy as a system evolved and in the institution of family, man got the powerful position. In this type of family, the idea of pairing or coupling was fully established but the restrictions on the women sexuality were imposed and men were allowed to have sex with many women.

Monogamous Family: This according to Morgan is the current stage of family. In this arrangement at the given time one man can marry one woman and the mating relations are confined within the pair only (Morgan, 1877). Any sexual relations, if practiced outside this union are considered as illegitimate.

On the whole these approaches reflect that from the times when human beings started living in collective units, they devised some sort of arrangement to carry out the vital function of reproduction. Gradually, as the civilization advanced, the restrictions on sexual behavior started evolving in terms of institutionalizing family and defining the stringent roles for family members. Sociologists believe that factors like need for sex, reproduction and economic organization led to the evolution of institution of family.

Polygamy and Monogamy: Features and Limitations

The marital relationship is the fulcrum point on which family begins; conventionally it has been either polygamous or monogamous. Polygamy refers to the relationship in which there can be multiple partners at a given point of time. Polygamous family system is indigenous and was practiced in olden days. Polygamous relationships are of various forms but are broadly categorized as polyandry (several husbands and one wife) and polygyny (several wives and one husband). Usually, polygamy is practiced in a society when there is imbalance in the sex ratio. Moreover, it has a strict normative structure based on economic conditions, religious beliefs and gender roles. Ethnographic Atlas Codebook by George Perter Murdock (1981) states that the marital composition from 1960-1980 is found to be polygamous (<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Polygamy>). In present times also

polygamy, particularly polygyny is practiced in various societies and is also legal in some countries. Polygamy has various benefits like ensuring the availability of sexual partners in the conditions of skewed sex ratio, variety of partners, and surety of offspring etc. Polygyny in particular helps in having more children and adding to the human resource where needed. Polyandry prevents fragmentation of property, helps in controlling population and ensuring high status of women etc. Despite these advantages, maintaining multiple partners in a restricted manner is cumbersome. As this system leads to problems like jealousy among mates who are more (either multiple wives or husbands), sex related health disorders, earning more resource for livelihood and issues related to inheritance of property etc.

Monogamy is the form of relationship in which an individual is engaged with only one partner in a lifetime or at a given point of time. Second spouse is looked for only after the break up/divorce or death of any of the partners. Monogamy is a relatively recent phenomenon and considered most suitable for civilized societies in the present times. Therefore, it is accepted by law as the most ideal form of marriage in various countries, including India. World over, about 20 percent of the societies are strictly monogamous. Ethnographic Atlas states that 183 out of 1231 societies were found to be monogamous in marital composition in the years 1960-1980 (<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Polygamy>). Monogamy is considered advantageous because it offers emotional security, close acquaintance, companionship and trust amongst the partners; reduces the chance of acquiring sexually transmitted diseases; ensures equal status of the partners; leads to fewer children and their better upbringing; and ensures security of property and its smooth transference. Engels (2004) also puts forth that with the rise in accumulation of private property, monogamy was the most convenient means to pass on the same down the generations. Thus, for him monogamous form of marriage is little more than a property relationship.

However, despite being considered as ideal for reproduction and nurturance of children and safeguarding property, monogamous relationships face many contradictions in recent times. A few of them are discussed as follows:

1. Monogamy is not the rule of nature. It is argued that human beings 'by nature' are not monogamous. Monogamy is a social construct; sexual attractions for many always happen irrespective of one's relationship status (Wolf, 2015). Choosing and sticking on to one partner is due to convention and social bondage and not always out of choice, particularly in the societies that approve only monogamous marriages. *"There is empirical evidence indicating that monogamy has been prevalent only among a minority of human societies (less than 20%) and an*

even smaller minority among mammals, about 3%" (Wolf, 2015).

2. People who do not favour monogamy argue that while human beings do not rely on a single person for their emotional well-being, how can they restrict themselves to a single sexual partner?
3. Monogamy is criticized for providing a false sense of security. It is assumed that entering in a monogamous relationship and maintaining it for years may ensure life-long financial, emotional and health security but it also leads to monotony and boredom. The only options left to add newness to the monotony is either to break up the secured relation or cheat on the partner and get into extramarital relations.
4. Monogamy is seen as a failure because there has been an increase in the cases of infidelity in recent times. An article on infidelity states: *"Some say that monogamous relationships are not natural. They believe human beings are not biologically inclined to mate for life. I say that for every person who has had an affair there is probably a reason to justify it, in their eyes. My opinion is that we set our expectations of what marriage is too high. When our expectations aren't met we look outside the marriage for someone who can meet them"* (Wolf, 2015). In terms of committing infidelity, the data indicates that both men and women are almost equally inclined towards it (Wolf, 2015).
5. Monogamy is a sort of a compromise. Critics believe that some people (both men and women) are not capable of sexual monogamy but they drag the relationship for many years out of compulsion. They do not want to break it nor do they indulge into dalliances outside marriage as it is considered as cheating in monogamous structure. This leads to living an incomplete life with doomed emotions.

Therefore, both polygamy and monogamy are closed relationships restricted with stringent social and legal norms. Any sexual relationship outside the confined boundaries is considered as illegitimate and the people engaged in such attempts are charged with infidelity. In recent years, adultery has been one of the prominent reasons for rising marital breakdowns and divorce cases. Consequently, the institution of marriage that forms the beginning point of family is perceived as bondage. New alternatives like open-relationships, live-ins, and remaining single by not opting for any relationship etc. are evolving. A new facet that has evolved as an alternative to conventional forms of marriage is 'Polyamory'. Presently, it is gaining popularity in different parts of the world, particularly in the western societies.

Polyamory: An Emerging Alternative

Polyamory is emerging like a cultural movement across the world (King, 2017). The ones who practice this form of relation are called Polyamorists (Polys). They believe that love

doesn't come only in pairs, there can be many loves. They believe that all 'love is valid and all love is equal'. Melissa Hogenboom in her series on 'Sexual Revolutions' for BBC quotes a narrative of her polyamorist respondent Franklin Veaux:

"As a child, Franklin Veaux recalls hearing his school teacher read a story about a princess who had a tantalising dilemma. Two male suitors had been wooing her and she had to choose between them. Franklin wondered why she could not choose both. This early insight was revealing. Franklin has to this day never stuck to one relationship at a time. Franklin says that he had never been in a monogamous relationship in his life. When he was in high school, he opted two dates and he claims to have lost his virginity as a threesome." (Hogenboom, 2016)

Hogenboom (2016) elaborates that Franklin Veaux lives with his long-term girlfriend. In this same house this girlfriend's other boyfriend also lives. And this boyfriend has a teenaged daughter, who is an occasional visitor to this household. Franklin is also indulged into another four long-distance relationships, whom he visits occasionally. The interesting aspect of this 'relationship-complex' is that all indulged know about each other and accept one-another's multiple romantic relations.

So, polyamory means a consensual non-monogamous relationship which does not amount to infidelity or cheating. Another feature of polyamorous relationship is that it can be only platonic or romantic and sex is not necessarily included. Polys argue that there is a possibility that they fall in love with two persons simultaneously and can still practice monogamous sexual relation. *"Sexuality typically follows from polyamorous love, but it is perfectly possible to be polyamorous and sexually monogamous at the same time"* (King, 2017). This phenomenon is more understandable in biological anthropologist Patrick Clarkin's work on 'Flexible Sexual Behaviour'. He notes that there are usually four common components in the model of erotic relationships; namely, sexual desire, romantic love or infatuation, comfort love or attachment, and obsessive love. These components may or may not overlap and these are biologically distinct and can be felt for different people (King, 2017). This perhaps justifies the limitation of a monogamous relationship that despite loyalty, there is some sort of incompleteness and people look for options outside marriage.

Unlike monogamous and polygamous families which have strict norms and fixed numbers of spouses at a given point of time, polyamorous household is not confined with such rules. Some polys have live-in partners and romantic relations outside home; some have a mixture of short-term and long-term relationships going on simultaneously; and

others live in big groups with their partners, partner's partner(s) and so on. However, polys claim that the strength of their relationships is openness, honesty, understanding and trust of all involved.

Features of Polyamorous Relationships

This being a recent phenomenon has not been extensively researched. However, a few surveys and studies conducted on the subject reveal the following features of polyamorous relationships:

1. In a survey conducted by Conley (2014) it was found that friendships are maintained for longer spans by the people engaged in polyamorous relations as they keep their networks wide. Also, as compared to people engaged in monogamous relations, polys are less likely to completely cut -off, even after parting ways. Polys are better in communicating and jealousy is lower amongst them (Hogenboom, 2016).
2. Individuals who feel avoided otherwise, favour polyamory as a choice for relationship. However, individuals with high levels of anxiety were found to be unwilling for this kind of relationship, perhaps because of high anxiety levels, these people give too much importance to the negative implications of such relationships. For instance, they feel good about being loved by so many partners but at the same time get anxious thinking that they will be abandoned someday (Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2015). When compared with monogamous people, it has been found that relationship satisfaction levels are higher amongst the polyamorists.
3. Another study states that people indulged in consensual non-monogamous relationships like polyamory, practice safe sex as compared to those who tend to maintain monogamous relations and cheat (Hogenboom, 2016).
4. Lehmiller (2017) reveals that despite higher levels of satisfaction, people indulged in polyamory feel stigmatized as the pervasive belief is that monogamy or pairing is the most superior and accepted form of relationship. They go through the intense pressure to pair. He adds that polyamorists usually do not reveal their identity out there to everyone and maintain their network of relationships secretly. Many times, polyamory is confused with throuples.
5. Polyamory is not just limited to heterosexual unions, but is also popular amongst individuals with different sexual orientations. Lehmiller (2017) states that polyamory is a popular choice of homosexuals and transgender people.
6. In a polyamorous unit, relationships are uniquely placed. Each relationship in the

network has its own pros and cons. While there can be stronger emotional bonding with a few, and simultaneously more time can be spent on sexual activities with other partners. Polyamorists seek partners considering different needs. Therefore, unlike monogamous relations, the baggage of all needs ranging from financial to sexual to emotional etc. is not put on to just one partner.

Thus, polyamory is a consensual non-monogamous relationship emerging in contemporary times, whereby individuals develop many romantic/emotional/sexual relations with the consent of all. Instead of strict normative structure, polyamorists maintain and commit to long term relations based on better understanding, trust and honesty among all the partners. Studies reveal that people engaged in polyamorous relations are found to be satisfied and happy (Lehmiller, 2017). However, polys are typified as the people obsessed only with sex and not ready for commitment. In this context, Ichikawa Jenkins, a professor at the University of British Columbia in Canada, has distinguished between promiscuity and polyamory, stating earlier as 'orgy' limited to a few individuals, and latter as strong 'emotional/platonic' bonding involving even as many as 25 persons also (Chakkrabarty, 2017). Hence, polyamory is about a long- term relationship with many partners (with or without sex) where all know about each other and accept their partners' polyamorous nature. Polys have overcome the societal norm of monogamous relationships and accept their non-monogamous identity honestly.

Children in Polyamorous Families

In the past 60 years, sociological views of families have shifted dramatically. Polyamorous families are the families of choice formed of very flexible relationships chosen from self-conscious and reflexive negotiation process (Sheff, 2011). In the study on American poly families, Elisabeth Sheff maintains that most of the poly families comprise open couples (two or more individuals in long term relations) with children. Relationships being open, there is a possibility of having more children from outside relations and previous relations. At the same time these individuals in polyamorous relationships have their own families of orientation and other kin. Polyamorous families have greater fluidity in terms of membership. In addition, some polyamorous families comprise only adult members as they remain childless or childfree. In the nutshell, these families can be the blend of long-term friends, lovers (current or former or both), legally married partners with their extra partners and children.

As these families are complicated so they deal with issues like children's custody, maintaining relations with their other kin, confusions/difficulties amongst the children in addressing co-parents, and impact of parents' open relationships on children etc.(Sullivan, 2004). Polys believe that these problems evolve because societies lack ideal models of

non-monogamous families, therefore, there is no pattern established out there which can be followed. Consequently, polys being sexual minorities, innovate novel methods to make their children adapt to this unusual family system while they see other families as dyadic or monogamous units.

A study for understanding the well-being of children in poly families by Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli reveals that the common belief that prevails amongst outsiders for children of poly parents is that they are negatively affected by the open relationships of their parents. This she calls is the deficit model (Hogenboom, 2016). Contrarily, the research shows that children are happy growing up with so many adults. "These children are more insightful and wise, and open to understanding diversity and many forms of religion and culture"(Hogenboom, 2016). However, polyamorous relationships are so stigmatized that even if children from these families do anything that other children might also do, they are judged on the lines of their parents' relationship networks. For instance, if they underperform in school or indulge into any quarrels or brawls it is straight away related to their inappropriate upbringing because of their parents' unusual relationships. Such responses from society add to the additional strain on these families when it comes to dealing with children and their issues.

Popularity of Polyamory in Media

In the recent times, there are a few widely popular TV series that depict polyamorous relations. 'House of Cards' (Netflix) is a series that has various characters that are entangled in romantic relationships and have healthy and familial cohabitation. In another popular comedy series 'I Love Dick' (Amazon Prime Video), there is a couple who is together obsessed with one artist. A drama series, 'You Me Her', revolves around a polyamorous triad, dealing with issues that people face in unconventional relationships. 'Unicornland' is a web series about the experiences about unicorn (a bisexual woman) who is willing to date couples. The increasing popularity of these TV shows that portray consensual non-monogamous relationships indicates the changing connotation of institution of family and acceptance of a new idea of polyamory, making the institution of family more liberal, based on the emotions of love, trust and understanding over conventional roles and restrictions.

Conclusion

The institution of family is an age old institution as human beings having a variety of needs always desired a social provision to get loved and feel secured. Evolving of such a provision (family) started from the times immemorial. Engles (2004) quotes, "The family, represents an active principle. It is never stationary, but advances from a lower to a higher form as society advances from a lower to a higher condition" (Engels, 2004, pp: 46). Sexual relations

forms the foci of institution of family. Norms defining ideal sexual behaviour have evolved in various phases. In primitive times, sex communism was practiced. It meant that there were no mating restrictions. Sex was understood as merely a biological activity and important for the process of reproduction. Mating was not confined to any fixed number of partners. Thereafter, as the societies transited from homogeneity to heterogeneity, institution of family also got structured and sexuality was restricted. Not only the ideal sexual behaviour was defined but notions of morality were also attached to it. Gradually, the institution of family got its structure on the basis of number of partners, rules of authority, descent/lineage and residence etc. On the aspect of number of partners, the norms were derived for both multi-partner (polygamy) and single partner (monogamy) relationships.

In the modern times monogamous relationship became the most ideal form. It is considered advantageous in terms of ensuring financial, social and emotional security to the partners, providing better nurturance for the children, and an easy option for retaining and transferring the property. Therefore, monogamy is legally and socially considered superior to multi-partner relationships. However, recently there has been an increase in the divorce and marital breakdown cases. So, monogamy is being critiqued for being a relation of compromise as human beings are not monogamous by nature. Monogamous arrangements over pressurize one partner for all the support. This makes the relationship boring and monotonous. Either people carry-on with the monotony due to social pressures or end the relationship or practice infidelity.

As an alternative, there is the emergence of another type of relationship called polyamory. It is a consensual non-monogamous arrangement whereby individuals indulge into long-term multiple romantic/sexual/emotional relations at a given point of time with the consent of all the partners. These multiple relations are based on the virtues of honesty and trust. Polygamous families comprise multi-partners, partners' partners and their children. Partners (both men and women) have the flexibility to establish relationships (sexual/emotional/platonic) without any boundaries. The idea is not to cheat but to love many, upfront, keeping in the knowledge of everyone involved. It has been found that polyamorous relations are not just confined to heterosexual unions but are popular amongst individuals with homosexual/bisexual orientations as well. Polyamorous relationships are found to be increasing particularly in western society. In the media there are many popular TV shows that depict these types of relationships. However, there are no social and legal safeguards developed for polyamorous relationships so far. Thus, people involved in polyamorous relationships feel stigmatised and usually do not openly reveal their poly status to everyone.

On the whole, it appears that polyamorous relationships are an alternative to divorce. Instead of divorcing or getting separated from the partner with whom there has been an

intense and prolonged relation, it is better to add on more partners and accomplish whatever was missing in that relationship. This phenomenon is an indicator of social change, but challenging is to decide whether this change is towards a new phase or it is about going backwards to the primitive times where sex was seen only a biological activity and not linked with moralities. But considering the claim of polyamorous people that it is not just about sex but love which is not confined and restricted, it appears that polyamory is a post-modern way of loving. As postmodernism contends the limitations in different fields set out in the phase of modernity, and celebrates diversity and heterogeneity, polyamorous model too challenges the restrictions on love. This model rejects the modern model which restricts love to the ritualistically stamped monogamous pairs protected through various social-legal safeguards. It promotes the idea that love and platonism can happen to many and not just one. Therefore, instead of restricting love in the monogamous relationship, polyamorous relationship is about honestly celebrating love with many. This novel idea does not match with conventional connotations of love and romantic relationships and therefore it needs to be institutionalized with new roles and relationship titles.

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