

**Open Containers:
The Phenomenology of Attachment in a Polyamorous Context**

by
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Abstract

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This thesis investigates the phenomenology of adult romantic attachment in a polyamorous context. Reviewing the literature revealed that the majority of psychologists have explored adult romantic attachment through the lens of childhood attachment, for which there is usually one primary attachment figure. However, the literature suggests that one can form romantic attachment relationships with a group. It also suggests that attachment in a polyamorous context will activate early attachment wounds more intensely than monogamous attachment. Using heuristic methodology, the author explored his experiences in two polyamorous contexts: the Burning Man festival and a romantic relationship. This exploration confirmed that romantic attachment is possible with a group and that secure attachment in a polyamorous context requires a safe container. Although the author found that polyamory may activate attachment wounds, he discovered that the conflict between polyamorous and monogamous desires is central to the experience of attachment in a polyamorous context.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, Dr. Deborah Natoli, who has supported me in every way throughout my life and who has encouraged me to find my truth. Thank you for helping me become myself. This thesis is also dedicated to my two best friends, Danielle Brown and Francis Grabowski. You are my polyamorous loves of a lifetime.

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Chapter I Introduction

Area of Interest

For a country founded by puritans, the United States is one sexy place. U.S. citizens have more sex partners in a lifetime than do the people of any other Western country (Ryan & Jetha, 2011). We “spend more money at strip clubs than at Broadway, off-Broadway, regional and nonprofit theaters, the opera, the ballet and jazz and classical music performances—combined” (p. 3). Our sex trade does not restrict itself to the shadows. General Motors, Rupert Murdoch, and AT&T make hundreds of millions of dollars annually by selling pornography through satellite companies. Sex is mainstream. At the same time, the U.S. is at war with sex. Our institutions repress female sexuality, prohibit same-sex marriage, and severely curtail the acceptable range of sexual expression among consenting adults. Our culture’s relationship with sex is deeply fragmented. My thesis explores some of the ways this fragmentation plays out in romantic relationships. Particularly, I examine the phenomenology of attachment in polyamorous contexts.

I have a complicated relationship with monogamy and polyamory. As a gay man, I am part of a subculture that does not assume monogamy as a default position. Although some gay men strive for monogamy, others happily eschew it. My hunch is that I am somewhere on the polyamorous side of the spectrum, but I am not certain. I wanted to use this thesis as an opportunity to thoroughly investigate my experiences of monogamy and

polyamory so that I could discover my own wants, needs, and fears within a romantic relationship.

Guiding Purpose

In this thesis, I explore the phenomenology of attachment in polyamorous contexts. I have two primary goals. My first goal is to validate polyamory as a relationship style that can offer attachment rewards. My second goal is to uncover how to meet one's attachment needs in a polyamorous context.

Rationale

According to psychologist Shirley Glass, 50 percent of all relationships include infidelity by one or both partners (as cited in Glass, 2009). Other surveys reveal that between 25 and 50 percent of married men and 30 percent of married women report having had extramarital sex at least once during the marriage (Barash & Lipton, 2002). Worldwide, adultery is the leading cause of divorce. Infidelity is common even in happy relationships. Fifty-six percent of male cheaters and 34 percent of female cheaters reported that they were happy with their marriages when they cheated (Glass, 2009). Polyamory is a reality, and it is common. Polyamory often compels people to risk their relationships, reputations, and entire livelihoods. U.S. Representative Anthony Weiner, a married man, resigned from congress after media caught him sending explicit photos to other women (Hernandez, 2011). Athlete Tiger Woods lost \$22 million in endorsements in 2010 after media reported his extra-marital affairs (Wei, 2010). Even over a decade after President Bill Clinton's sex scandals, between five and 30 percent of his media coverage on any given day refers to his infidelity (Pujol, 2011). It appears that no sanction, at least for some, can overcome polyamory's siren song. Instead of exploring

polyamory as a real force in relationships, my experience is that mainstream U.S. culture tells us merely to cover our ears. Mainstream U.S. culture offers no tools with which to process the force of polyamory other than to project it onto others, making them deviant and perverted, and to publically humiliate the most powerful man in the world for having consensual sex.

This thesis topic is worthy of exploration because mainstream U.S. culture has not taken an honest look at polyamory in romantic relationships. The result is a possibility of increased suffering due to cultural bias against polyamory and a failure of the psychological community to adequately investigate polyamory as a legitimate relationship choice. For example, psychological investigation of attachment has generally assumed that the attachment of the early mother-child bond transforms in adulthood into a single romantic attachment relationship (Johnson, 2004), Therefore, there is a gap in attachment research that excludes romantic attachment in a polyamorous context. This work contributes to the fields of counseling and depth psychology by exploring how attachment works in a polyamorous context. To the extent that polyamory is a reality in romantic relationships, therapists and partners need tools to work with it. The alternative is to continue ignoring or pathologizing polyamory. Finally, from a diversity perspective, therapists would benefit by examining their own relationships with polyamory. Doing so will help them treat the issue with respect and curiosity instead of consciously or unconsciously imposing their values onto clients.

Methodology

Research problem. There seems to be insufficient research and literature in psychology exploring the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context.

Instead, psychologists have tended to explore romantic attachment through the lens of childhood attachment, for which there is one primary attachment figure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although this perspective has contributed greatly to psychologists' understanding of romantic attachment, it normalizes monogamy and excludes other relationship styles, but does not consider that, as discussed in Chapter II, humans are naturally polyamorous (Barash & Lipton, 2002). Moreover, polyamory is a reality in romantic relationships. Therefore, psychologists' understanding of attachment is incomplete without exploring it in a polyamorous context.

Research question. This thesis will explore the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. What is the attachment experience in a polyamorous context? For the purposes of this thesis, *monogamy* is operationally defined as any situation in which there is no sexual activity of any kind with anyone other than one's relationship partner. Monogamy therefore includes asexual romantic relationships. *Polyamory* is operationally defined as any situation in which a person is not strictly monogamous. Unlike monogamy, polyamorous behavior exists on a spectrum. Examples of polyamory include one partner having sex with an outside party without the other partner's consent (i.e. cheating), partners placing no limitations on outside sexual activity (i.e. open relationships), partners occasionally inviting a third person to join them for sex (i.e. "threeways"), and sexual relationships involving more than two permanent partners. The spectrum of polyamory is as broad as one's imagination.

Methodological procedures. The research methodology for this work is heuristic. Heuristic research immerses the researcher in the research question as it is encountered in his or her life, using a depth psychological lens to examine data from

personal experience in order to create and illuminate a change in consciousness, contribute new meaning, and explicate relevant psychological processes (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2012). For this thesis, I explore my own subjective attachment experience in a polyamorous context. I immerse myself in the research question and look inward as I experience a polyamorous relationship and participate in a polyamory-friendly subculture. I believe heuristic research is the best way to explore my research question. I can better receive the full richness of my experiences by not reducing them to quantitative measurements. Further, by focusing on my personal experiences and processes, I can investigate my research question more deeply and intimately than I could by interviewing or surveying others. Interviewees might decline to reveal, be unable to articulate, or simply be unaware of the richness of their subjective experiences. By turning inward, I am limited only by my ability to be open, honest, and mindful.

Ethical Concerns

Because this thesis does not directly investigate or manipulate the experiences of others, it raises no significant ethical concerns. However, because this thesis explores the inner world of the researcher, the researcher's own biases and experiences constrict the findings. Heuristic research adds depth of understanding to theory and grounds it in lived experience (Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2012). Heuristic research does not determine the quantified generalizability of research findings or contribute to conclusions that may be stereotypical in nature.

Further, for some readers, exploring polyamory might be a morally challenging activity that raises uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. Readers might argue that just because humans are naturally polyamorous does not mean polyamory is desirable. Death,

for example, is natural but not a state toward which most people strive. Discovering that humans evolved to be naturally polyamorous does not necessarily imply that people should live polyamorously. Instead, the discovery merely exposes monogamy as a cultural institution and not an inherent virtue. In order to examine the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context, one must recognize one's cultural biases and acknowledge that there are many ways to live.

Overview of Thesis

In this introduction, the research question and the research methods were articulated. Chapter II reviews existing literature related to polyamory and attachment and articulates a theoretical framework. Research is presented that challenges assumptions about monogamy in relation to human's biological and instinctual nature (Baker & Bellis, 1995; Barash & Lipton, 2002; Glass, 2009; Kilgallon & Simmons, 2005; Lindholmer, 1973; Ryan & Jetha, 2011; Tooby & Cosmides, 2005) and connects evolution to the psychology of human sexual behavior (Barash & Lipton, 2002; Dawkins, 1976; Symons, 1979; Wilson, 1975). The theoretical lens for the heuristic research in Chapter III is established by a review of the literature on attachment theory and its relationship to secure bonding in adult romantic relationships (Crain, 2010; Finn, 2012; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Johnson, 2004) as well as depth psychological theories of the relationship between the process of individuation and romantic relationships (Aizenstat, n.d.; Guggenbühl-Craig, 1977/2008; Jung, 1928/1983, 1939/1983; Needleman, 1994).

Chapter III tests the theoretical framework through heuristic research in which I examine my own experiences to better understand attachment processes in polyamorous contexts. The findings illuminate processes of bonding in which the intimate other is a

group, the activation of attachment wounds in a romantic polyamorous relationship, and the role of the internal conflict between polyamorous and monogamous desires. Finally, Chapter IV summarizes the findings, explores how therapists might apply them in clinical practice, and offers suggestions for further areas of study.

Chapter II Literature Review

Introduction

What is the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context? This question deserves consideration because, despite some cultures' commandments, humans are a polyamorous species (Barash & Lipton, 2002). According to zoologist David Barash and psychiatrist Judith Lipton, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution initiated the Western world's scientific exploration of monogamy and polyamory from an evolutionary perspective. This perspective proposes that humans innately experience drives for both monogamy and polyamory in order to maximize reproductive success.

Psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth broke new ground by founding attachment theory, which suggests that interactions with one's primary caregiver fundamentally affect a person's emotional stability and interpersonal bonds later in life (Finn, 2012). Psychologists Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver (1987) applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships and concluded that childhood attachment styles influence the experience of attachment in a romantic context. However, there is little to no research on the experience of romantic attachment in a polyamorous context.

Psychiatrist Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig (1977/2008) explored romantic relationships from the perspective of depth psychology. He proposed that all romantic relationships contain fundamental and unresolvable problems. He suggested that these problems force partners to confront and wrestle with aspects of themselves in a way that

facilitates growth. Guggenbühl-Craig's theories suggest that the experience of attachment in a polyamorous context might involve confrontations with one's deepest attachment wounds that could help facilitate personal growth.

The Myth of Monogamy

“The ideal of monogamy hasn't so much been tried and found wanting; rather, it has been found difficult and often left untried” (Barash & Lipton, 2002, p. 1). Before one can explore the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context, one must dispel the myths that humans are naturally monogamous and that polyamory is deviant behavior. For the ancient Greeks, Hera and Zeus represented the archetype of marriage (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1977/2008). The myths of this couple are replete with philandering, jealousy, and revenge. As gods of marriage, their relationship likely reflected the culture that worshipped them. More recently, psychologist Sigmund Freud (1940/1970) wrote that erotic dreams and imaginings usually do not involve one's spouse. Today, 50 percent of all relationships involve infidelity by one or both partners (Glass, 2009). In fact, DNA testing has enabled scientists to discover polyamory in animal species they long thought to be monogamous (Barash & Lipton, 2002). “The situation has reached the point where *failure* to find extra-pair copulations in ostensibly monogamous species—that is, cases in which monogamous species *really* turn out to be monogamous—is itself reportable” (p. 10). Clearly, polyamory is a reality of life. Monogamy is the myth.

Biological evidence overwhelmingly suggests that humans are a naturally polyamorous species. “*Use it or lose it* is one of the basic tenets of natural selection. With its relentless economizing, evolution rarely equips an organism for a task not performed” (Ryan & Jetha, 2011, p. 238). As discussed below, both male and female reproductive

systems accommodate widespread polyamory. This suggests that our human ancestors evolved in an environment in which polyamory was the norm.

The male reproductive system facilitates sperm competition with other males. Sperm competition is exactly as it sounds: “If the sperm of more than one male are present in the reproductive tract of an ovulating female, the spermatozoa themselves compete to fertilize the ovum” (Ryan & Jetha, 2011, p. 220). One weapon in sperm competition is testicle size. Larger testicles produce more sperm, and the man who injects the most sperm into a polyamorous female has the greatest likelihood of fertilizing her egg. Human males have large testicles, relative to body size, compared with other primate species (Barash & Lipton, 2002). Human testicle size is similar to that of the highly polyamorous bonobo, suggesting that humans are polyamorous as well.

The chemical composition of human semen also facilitates sperm competition. Human males typically ejaculate in three to nine spurts (Lindholmer, 1973). The final spurts contain spermicide that attacks the sperm of later males. The first spurts contain chemicals that protect against the spermicide of previous males. “In other words, competing sperm from other men seems to be anticipated in the chemistry of men’s semen, both in the early spurts (protective) and in the latter spurts (attacking)” (Ryan & Jetha, 2011, p. 228). Even the human penis itself acts as a weapon in sperm competition. Human males have the longest, thickest penis of any primate today. When thrust repeatedly into an orifice, the mushroom-shaped head of the penis creates a vacuum that sucks out previously-deposited semen. Upon ejaculation, the head is the first part of the penis to shrink, which helps prevent a man from displacing his own semen. The human male’s testicle size, sperm content, and penis size and shape all suggest that ancestral

humans evolved in an environment in which females had multiple sexual partners simultaneously.

The female reproductive system also facilitates sperm competition. Women make a symphony of noises during sex. Female copulatory vocalization is the scientific name for these cries of sexual ecstasy (Ryan & Jetha, 2011). In order for female copulatory vocalization to make evolutionary sense, it would need to have brought about a benefit to our female ancestors that outweighed the increased risk of attracting predators during sex. The likely benefit was attracting more sex partners:

They say women can hear a baby crying from a great distance, but gentleman, we ask you, is there any sound easier to pick out of the cacophony of an apartment block—and harder to ignore—than that of a woman lost in passion? (p. 256)

Female copulatory vocalizations arouse heterosexual men and promote sperm competition by enticing additional males to join in the fun. Heterosexual men are themselves excited by the idea of sharing a female with other men. The website “Adult Video Universe” offers 1000 videos in the “gangbang” genre—in which multiple men attend to a single woman—but only 52 videos in the “reverse gangbang” genre—in which women outnumber the men (Adult Video Universe, n.d.). This phenomenon is not likely a mere marketing trend. Heterosexual men masturbating to pornography depicting two men with one woman produce a higher percentage of mobile sperm than do men masturbating to pornography depicting three women (Kilgallon & Simmons, 2005). Cuckolding, in which a man observes his female partner having sex with another man, also ranks among the top of married men’s sexual fantasies according to sex experts Alfred Kinsey and Dan Savage (as cited in Ryan & Jetha, 2011). Female copulatory

vocalizations and their unconscious invitations for polyamory excite heterosexual men and facilitate sperm competition.

The human female reproductive tract has also adapted to facilitate sperm competition. The female reproductive tract can be hostile to sperm. Not only is about 35 percent of sperm discharged from the vagina within 30 minutes of sex, but the female reproductive tract also contains anti-sperm leucocytes that attack and outnumber sperm 100 to one (Baker & Bellis, 1995). However, evidence suggests that a woman's body is not equally hostile to all sperm. "There is striking evidence that the female reproductive system is capable of making subtle judgments based upon the chemical signature of different men's sperm cells. These assessments may go well beyond general health to the subtleties of immunological compatibility" (Ryan & Jetha, 2011, p. 264). The human cervix filters some sperm while favoring others, and a woman's orgasm changes her vaginal acidity in a way that favors the sperm of the man who produced the orgasm. Therefore, women's bodies are "*equipped with mechanisms for choosing among potential fathers at a cellular level*" (p. 265). Female copulatory vocalizations and sperm filtration mechanisms suggest that the environment in which our female ancestors evolved was highly polyamorous.

Some readers might argue that, although polyamory may have been the norm for our human ancestors, monogamy is the norm now. A look across cultures reveals that this is not true:

The renowned anthropologist G. P. Murdoch, in his classic study *Social Structure*, found that of 238 different human societies around the globe, monogamy was enforced as the only acceptable marriage system in a mere 43. Thus, before contact with the West, on average more than 80 percent of human societies were preferentially polygynous, meaning that male harem-keeping was something that

most men sought to attain. It is safe to say that institutionalized monogamy was very rare. (Barash & Lipton, 2002, p. 147)

It is not merely men who have a penchant for polyamory. The Mosuo are a matrilineal society of about 56,000 people living in the mountainous area around China's Lugo Lake (Ryan & Jetha, 2011).

When a [Mosuo] girl reaches maturity at about thirteen or fourteen, she receives her own bedroom that opens both to the inner courtyard of the house and to the street through a private door. A Mosuo girl has complete autonomy as to who steps through this private door into her *babahuago* (flower room). The only strict rule is that her guest must be gone by sunrise. She can have a different lover the following night—or later that same night—if she chooses. There is no expectation of commitment, and any child she conceives is raised in her mother's house, with the help of the girl's brothers and the rest of the community. (p. 128)

Polyamory is even common in ostensibly monogamous societies. In the United States of America, where monogamy arguably dominates, infidelity is the leading cause of divorce. Even psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology Carl G. Jung wrote, in a letter to Sigmund Freud, "The prerequisite for a good marriage, it seems to me, is the license to be unfaithful" (as cited in Ryan & Jetha, p. 293). It therefore appears that, even now, the majority of humans live polyamorously.

Evolutionary Psychology

Evolutionary psychology offered the Western world its first scientific exploration of monogamy and polyamory. Its findings lay some of the groundwork for understanding the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. As its name suggests, evolutionary psychology applies evolutionary theory to psychology and human behavior (Tooby & Cosmides, 2005). Evolutionary psychologists believe that just as the body is filled with organs that perform specific physical functions, the human psyche contains mechanisms that perform specific psychological functions. Evolutionary psychologists

believe these mechanisms exist because they helped our human ancestors survive and reproduce.

Doctor and biologist Charles Darwin (1859) set the precursor for evolutionary psychology by developing the theory of evolution in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. In this work, Darwin observed that individuals in a species compete for limited resources and that inheritable variations among these individuals make them more or less competitive in their particular environment. Darwin theorized that individuals with favorable genetic variations would reproduce at greater rates and thereby populate the next generation with favorable genes. He called this process natural selection. Over time, Darwin theorized that natural selection would cause species to adapt to their environments and eventually form new species altogether.

In 1975, biologist Edward Wilson applied evolutionary theory to social behaviors and coined the term “sociobiology” to describe “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior” (p. 4). Wilson argued that humans are not born as psychological blank slates. Instead, he theorized that evolution influences behavioral traits to maximize reproductive success just like it influences physical traits. Ethologist Richard Dawkins popularized sociobiology in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. In it, Dawkins argued that evolution works at the level of the gene, not at the level of the individual organism. Therefore, a behavioral trait can be evolutionary adaptive even if it harms the organism hosting that trait. For example, altruism might cause humans to act against their individual interests. However, evolution could still favor altruistic behavior because it increases the survival and reproductive success of others close to the altruist, who were historically likely to be the altruist’s kin and therefore share similar genes.

In 1979, anthropologist Donald Symons launched the study of human sexuality from an evolutionary perspective in his book *The Evolution of Human Sexuality*. Symons refined the sociobiological perspective to what is now evolutionary psychology by arguing that specific psychological mechanisms evolved to influence behavior and not merely general instincts or drives. Symons's work was controversial. Although he offered a new theoretical lens through which psychologists could study human sexuality, he concluded that human sexuality is inherently a war between the sexes to maximize reproductive success. Particularly controversial was his statement that "among all peoples sexual intercourse is understood to be a service or favor that females render to males" (p. vi). Some scientists have argued that Symons's conclusions erroneously project current power structures into the human genome (Ryan & Jetha, 2011). However, even if Symons's ultimate conclusions prove incorrect, he did provide the first scientific framework for exploring monogamy and polyamory.

Evolutionary psychology suggests that monogamy and polyamory each serve one primary function: maximizing reproductive success (Symons, 1979). It further suggests that these forces will differ between men and women due to differences in parental investment. "Parental investment is simply anything costly—time, energy, risk—that a parent spends or endures on behalf of its offspring" (Barash & Lipton, 2002, p. 17). A woman's parental investment is necessarily greater than a man's. Women produce a finite number of nutrient-rich eggs whereas men produce millions of biologically cheap sperm every day. Women also must carry and nourish the embryo and fetus and deliver the baby. Even after birth, women produce the milk that feeds the infant until it is old enough to consume solid food. Because the difference in parental investment between

men and women is so vast, evolutionary psychologists believe that human sexuality evolved as a war between the sexes to minimize one's parental investment while maximizing one's reproductive success. If sex is a war, then monogamy and polyamory are its weapons.

Reproductive success means maximizing one's number of offspring, avoiding investments in offspring not one's own, and enhancing the success of one's own offspring as much as possible with the least parental investment (Barash & Lipton, 2002). With regard to men, polyamory helps them produce more offspring because it provides more sex partners to impregnate. Imposing monogamy helps men avoid investing in another man's offspring because it provides paternal certainty by eliminating other possible fathers. A balance of monogamous and polyamorous forces helps men enhance the success of their offspring with the least parental investment. This balance depends on external factors. When there are few alternate mating partners, or when offspring need greater paternal investment, then monogamy is the evolutionarily advantageous mating strategy. However, as available mating partners increase, and as paternal investment becomes less necessary, then polyamory becomes the path to evolutionary success.

For women, neither monogamy nor polyamory are relevant for maximizing the number of offspring or avoiding investments in another woman's offspring (Barash & Lipton, 2002). A woman with one sex partner can produce as many offspring as one with 50. Further, because the mother witnesses her child emerge from her body, maternal certainty does not require monogamy. However, a balance of monogamy and polyamory helps women enhance the success of their offspring as much as possible with the least parental investment. On one hand, female monogamy facilitates parental investments

from a child's father. "When males have indications that their mates have been unfaithful, they seem particularly unlikely to act as devoted fathers" (p. 46). On the other hand, female polyamory facilitates parental investments from partners other than the child's father, usually in the form of material support. "There is . . . a long cross-cultural history of men, whether married or not, using money to obtain sex from women, who also may or may not be married" (p. 92). Female polyamory also enables women to shop around for the best possible DNA for their children, which helps enhance their children's success.

Some readers might take offense to the conclusions of evolutionary psychology with regard to human sexuality. Indeed, evolutionary psychology does have legitimate flaws. First, its arguments are circular. "The evolutionary psychologist observes some characteristic of the social world and then constructs an explanation for it based on its supposed contribution to genetic fitness" (DeLamater & Myers, 2010, p. 18). Second, evolutionary psychologists project current social structures onto our human ancestors and assume that life back then resembled life today (Ryan & Jetha, 2011). Two such assumptions are that humans are fundamentally competitive and that the female libido is choosy and reserved. These assumptions reinforce the status quo.

Notwithstanding these critiques, evolutionary psychology lays groundwork for investigating the phenomenology of attachment in polyamorous relationships. First, it helps normalize monogamous and polyamorous desires by reframing them as inherent to human biology. Second, the contention that humans evolved to seek mixed mating strategies suggests that monogamy and polyamory exist on a dynamic continuum rather than as mutually exclusive opposites. This could mean that all humans hold a tension

between monogamous and polyamorous desires. Perhaps this tension plays a role in the phenomenology of attachment in polyamory.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is the backbone of an inquiry into the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. Attachment theory suggests that interactions with one's primary caregiver, usually the mother, fundamentally affect a person's emotional stability and interpersonal bonds later in life (Finn, 2012). Psychologist John Bowlby helped develop the foundations of attachment theory. By observing the distressful effects of separating young children from their mothers for extended periods, Bowlby theorized that children have an instinctual desire to be close to their mothers (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In fact, he contended that "being alone is one of the great fears in human life" (Crain, 2010, p. 58). Bowlby discovered that by the end of a child's 1st year of life, it instinctually establishes a primary attachment figure and forms a working model of its reliability:

That is, the child has begun to build up, on the basis of day-to-day interactions, a general idea of the caretaker's accessibility and responsiveness. So, for example, a 1-year-old girl who has developed some general doubts about her mother's availability will tend to be anxious about exploring new situations at any distance from her. If, in contrast, the girl has basically concluded that "my mother loves me and will always be there when I really need her," she will explore the world with more courage and enthusiasm. (Crain, 2010, p. 55)

Bowlby identified three primary features of the early attachment figure (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Infants (1) seek proximity to this figure and turn to it for (2) a secure base and (3) a safe haven. "'Secure base' referred to the utilization of an attachment figure as a platform from which to explore one's environment, and 'safe haven' was seen as the reliance on this same figure for comfort against threat and isolation" (Finn, 2012, p. 611).

Bowlby went on to identify attachment as “an integral part of human behavior ‘from the cradle to the grave’” (as cited in Hazan & Shaver, 1994, p. 7). He claimed that humans instinctually form attachment relationships with close others that share the same three features of infant attachment with the mother.

Psychologist Mary Ainsworth supplemented Bowlby’s work by identifying a discrete set of attachment styles that young children exhibit (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In her famous “Strange Situation” study, Ainsworth observed infants and their mothers at home every 3 weeks throughout the 1st year of the infant’s life. When the infants were 12 months old, Ainsworth brought them and their mothers to a playroom at John’s Hopkins University. She then separated the infants from their mothers for periods of 3 minutes by first leaving them with a female graduate student and then leaving them alone. Ainsworth observed three primary sets of responses from the infants and discovered that these responses correlated with the quality of their attachments to their mothers during their 1st year of life.

One set of infants used their mothers as a secure base from which to explore the playroom (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). When their mothers left, these infants stopped exploring and often became upset. When their mothers returned, they sought comfort and then continued their exploratory play. Ainsworth named this pattern *secure attachment* and noticed that the mothers of securely attached infants were consistently available and responsive at home. A second set of infants ignored their mothers when they entered the playroom, did not become upset when left alone, and did not seek comfort when their mothers returned. Ainsworth named this pattern *anxious/avoidant attachment* and noticed that these mothers were insensitive and unresponsive to their babies’ needs at home. A

third set of infants clung to their mothers and barely explored the playroom at all. They became extremely upset when left alone. However, these infants were ambivalent toward their mothers upon their return. “At one moment they reached out for her; at the next moment they angrily pushed her away” (Crain, 2010, p. 62). Ainsworth named this pattern *anxious/ambivalent attachment* and noticed that these mothers responded inconsistently to their children at home (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Sometimes these mothers were available, but at other times they were unresponsive or intrusive. Although Ainsworth observed three main categories of attachment behavior, some infants responded in idiosyncratic ways that did not fit neatly into any category:

For example, they walked toward the mother, but with their faces averted, or they froze in a trance-like state. It seemed that the children were at a loss as to how to act because they wanted to approach their mother but were afraid to do so. (Crain, p. 62)

Psychologists later named this fourth set *disorganized/disoriented attachment*. Research suggests this fearful behavior might result from having a depressed, disturbed, or abusive caregiver (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied Bowlby and Ainsworth’s work to adult romantic relationships. In a series of studies, Hazan and Shaver gave participants questionnaires to measure their attachment history during childhood, their current attachment style, and their most important love relationship. The results

indicated that (a) relative prevalence of the three attachment styles is roughly the same in adulthood as in infancy, (b) the three kinds of adults differ predictably in the way they experience romantic love, and (c) attachment style is related in theoretically meaningful ways to mental modes of self and social relationships and to relationship experiences with parents. (p. 511)

For example, “secure respondents characterized their love experiences as friendly, happy, and trusting, whereas avoidant subjects reported fear of closeness, and anxious

ambivalent subjects described relationships marked by jealousy, emotional highs and lows, and desire for reciprocation” (p. 518). Hazan and Shaver emphasized that attachment-related feelings in relationships are likely “products of unique person-situation interactions” rather than fixed traits (p. 522). However, decades of research confirm the connection between romantic love and early childhood attachment:

For example, anxiously attached adults seem to experience separation from their attachment figure as a catastrophe that parallels death, while more secure adults are more open to new information and able to revise beliefs in relationships, as well as being able to seek reassurance more effectively. Anxious partners are more prone to strong anger, whereas avoidants seem to experience intense hostility and to also attribute this hostility to their partners. Moreover, avoidant partners tend to feel hostile when the other partner expresses distress or seeks support. Research suggests that avoidant partners can be socially skilled in general but avoid seeking or giving support when attachment needs arise within them or their partner. Avoidant partners also tend to be more prone to promiscuous sexuality. (Johnson, 2004, pp. 29-30)

The lineage of research on attachment and adult romantic relationships prioritizes monogamy by assuming *one* primary romantic attachment figure (Johnson, 2004). Although this model replicates the early mother-child attachment bond, it ignores the reality that at least half of all adult romantic relationships in the United States are polyamorous to some degree (Glass, 2009). It also ignores other possible social configurations, like that of the Mosuo people discussed earlier in this chapter, for which the adult attachment figure is an entire group. The notion that childhood attachment involves only one primary attachment figure is questionable. For the vast majority of human history, humans lived in small hunter-gatherer tribes in which children were jointly raised by the tribe and women breastfed one another’s babies (Ryan & Jetha, 2011).

A Depth Perspective

The attachment research discussed above has contributed to understanding attachment primarily by looking outwardly into the world, examining interpersonal relationships and behaviors. With so much to explore, one might neglect the wisdom of the inner world. It is therefore important to consider what perspectives depth psychology brings to understanding the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. Properly introducing the fundamentals of depth psychology is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, depth psychologist Stephen Aizenstat (n.d.) summarized its core principles thusly:

First, it's that which lies and lives below the surface of things . . . the material of the deep psyche, or what's popularized as the unconscious. So depth psychology has, as its first task, the capacity to explore what lives at the depth of our experience. . . . Depth psychology really takes, as its second move, the exploration and the encouragement of the imagination. Last, I would say. . . . depth psychology really is way of seeing, a mode of being as much as an academic discipline. A way of seeing into that which lives underneath the institutions, the structures, and the behavior from which we're all part of and which we all grow out of. (lecture)

Jung (1939/1983) believed that one of the key processes of depth psychotherapy, and indeed of the human experience, is the process of individuation. Jung defined individuation as the process of becoming psychologically whole. It involves uniting the conscious and unconscious aspects of one's psyche. Jung wrote:

Conscious and unconscious do not make a whole when one of them is suppressed and injured by the other. If they must contend, let it at least be a fair fight with equal rights on both sides. Both are aspects of life. Consciousness should defend its reason and protect itself, and the chaotic life of the unconscious should be given the chance of having its way too—as much of it as we can stand. This means open conflict and open collaboration at once. That, evidently, is the way human life should be. It is the old game of hammer and anvil: between them the patient iron is forged into an indestructible whole, an “individual.”

This, roughly, is what I mean by the individuation process. (p. 225)

The process of individuation is not always pleasant, as Jung's imagery of hammer and anvil suggest. Jung believed individuation necessarily involves encounters with death, destruction, and darkness. However, like a lotus flower emerging from muddy waters, these encounters facilitate transformation and transcendence. Jung (1928/1983) wrote:

What the regression brings to the surface certainly seems at first sight to be slime from the depths; but if one does not stop short at a superficial evaluation and refrains from passing judgment on the basis of a preconceived dogma, it will be found that this "slime" contains not merely incompatible and rejected remnants of everyday life, or inconvenient and objectionable animal tendencies, but also germs of new life and vital possibilities for the future. (pp. 61-62)

Jung believed the outcome of individuation, which is a continuous journey and not an obtainable end state, is a total experience of wholeness and the emergence of deep meaning.

Psychiatrist Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig (1977/2008) examined romantic relationships from a depth perspective in his book *Marriage is Dead—Long Live Marriage!*. In it, he emphasized the distinction between well-being and salvation:

Well-being has to do with the avoidance of unpleasant tensions, with striving for a physical sense of comfort, to be relaxed and pleasant. . . . In the context of religious language, salvation means seeking and finding contact with God. . . . Salvation involves the question of life's meaning—one that ultimately can never be answered. . . . I know of no path to salvation that does not necessitate a confrontation with suffering and death. (pp. 22-23)

In this way, well-being and salvation often oppose each other. On a path toward happiness, suffering is a problem to be solved in order to achieve comfort. On a path toward salvation, however, "not every difficulty in life should be fixed. There are some difficulties that need to be lived with and experienced more and more consciously" (Needleman, 1994, p. 117) in order to obtain greater awareness, wholeness, and existential satisfaction. Therefore, although paths toward salvation can contain happiness,

paths prioritizing happiness will not lead to salvation. Because both salvation and individuation involve meaning making and transcendence through confrontations with the soul or psyche, including its unconscious aspects, these concepts are functionally identical for the purposes of this thesis. In fact, Guggenbühl-Craig identified that “individuation and salvation are closely related concepts. The goal of individuation, one could say, is the salvation of the soul” (1977/2008, p. 31).

Guggenbühl-Craig (1977/2008) proposed that well-being and salvation are two primary psychological functions of romantic relationships. Romantic relationships can help increase happiness by providing, among myriad other benefits, emotional support, sex, wealth, social advancement, love, caretaking, and political power. Romantic relationships can facilitate salvation by forcing partners to confront aspects of themselves that they would prefer to hide, repress, or deny. Guggenbühl-Craig suggested that marriage is primarily a path prioritizing salvation, not happiness, because it locks partners together for a lifetime and thereby forces them to confront, tolerate, accept, and ultimately integrate each other’s peculiarities and neuroticisms even when the relationship becomes unpleasant.

Marriage is not comfortable and harmonious. Rather, it is a place of individuation where a person rubs up against oneself and against the other, bumps up against the other in love and in rejection, and in this fashion learns to know oneself, the world, good and evil, the high and low ground. (p. 55)

Although Guggenbühl-Craig focused his discussion on marriage, his ideas could theoretically apply to all romantic relationships, even polyamorous ones. In every romantic relationship, fundamental and unresolvable problems will inevitably arise that diminish one’s sense of well-being (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1977/2008). Partners in these relationships have two options. They can prioritize well-being by disengaging from the

problem or the relationship, or they can prioritize individuation by turning toward the problem as a catalyst for growth and meaning. With regard to the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context, one could apply Guggenbühl-Craig's theories to predict a confrontation with one's deepest attachment wounds that could ultimately facilitate individuation.

Summary

The lineage of research on polyamory is rich. Biological, anthropological, and cross-cultural evidence reveals that polyamory is natural despite cultural injunctions to imagine otherwise (Barash & Lipton, 2002). Further, evolutionary psychologists have applied evolutionary theory to conclude that drives for both monogamy and polyamory are innate and function to maximize reproductive success (Dawkins, 1976; Symons, 1979; Tooby & Cosmides, 2005; Wilson, 1975). These findings could suggest that monogamy and polyamory exist on a dynamic continuum within the psyche and that all humans hold a tension between monogamous and polyamorous desires.

Research on human attachment is also abundant. Psychologists discovered that humans instinctively seek proximity to attachment figures and turn to them as secure bases and safe havens (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Early in life, at least in contemporary Western cultures, a child's primary attachment figure is its mother. Psychologists also discovered that interactions with one's childhood attachment figure fundamentally affect a person's emotional stability in relationships later in life (Finn, 2012). Adults whose primary caregivers were unavailable and unresponsive tended to fear emotional closeness in romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Alternatively, adults whose primary

caregivers were inconsistently available or intrusive tended to experience frequent jealousy and emotional highs and lows with their romantic partners.

Notwithstanding the bounty of research on polyamory and on human attachment, there is little to no research on the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. Instead, attachment researchers return to the early mother-child bond to assume only one primary adult attachment figure (Johnson, 2004). This assumption ignores the prevalence of polyamory in romantic relationships. The universality of polyamory throughout time and across cultures suggests that attachment is possible in a polyamorous context. To the extent that attachment in polyamory is not fundamentally different than attachment in monogamy, then it will likely involve an experience of a secure base and a safe haven to which one seeks proximity (Hazan & Shaver, 1994).

From a depth perspective, Jung (1939/1983) introduced into the popular lexicon the concept of individuation, which is the continuous process of confrontations with the self that enkindles psychological wholeness. Guggenbühl-Craig (1977/2008) explored romantic relationships from an individuation perspective. He suggested romantic relationships can serve two, sometimes conflicting, purposes. Relationships serve well-being when they increase one's sense of ease and happiness and help solve the problems of life. Relationships serve individuation when they force partners to confront and wrestle with aspects of themselves in a way that facilitates growth. With regard to the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context, Guggenbühl-Craig's theories suggest a possible confrontation with one's deepest attachment wounds that could help facilitate individuation.

This review of the literature developed a theory about the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. If humans are naturally polyamorous (Barash & Lipton, 2002), then maybe polyamorous attachment is possible and feels similar to monogamous attachment. Polyamorous contexts may activate one's early attachment wounds more intensely than monogamous romance because of the tension between innate drives for both monogamy and polyamory. In the following chapter, the author tests this theory by exploring his inner experiences in two contexts. The first is participating in the polyamory-friendly subculture of Burning Man. The second is navigating a polyamorous romantic relationship.

Chapter III

Findings and Clinical Applications

Introduction

There is insufficient research and literature in psychology on attachment in a polyamorous context. Instead, psychologists have tended to explore romantic attachment through the lens of childhood attachment, for which it has been generally assumed there is one primary attachment figure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This perspective is biased toward monogamy and excludes other relationship styles. Psychologists' understanding of attachment is incomplete without exploring it in a polyamorous context.

In this chapter, I explore the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. What is the attachment experience of polyamory? As a reminder, monogamy is operationally defined as any situation in which there is no sexual activity of any kind with anyone other than one's relationship partner. Polyamory is operationally defined as any situation in which a person is not strictly monogamous.

The lineage of research in the foregoing "Literature Review" suggests a theory regarding the experience of attachment in a polyamorous context. Because humans are naturally polyamorous (Barash & Lipton, 2002), perhaps one can form romantic attachment relationships with a group just as one can form them with an individual. However, because of the tension between innate drives for both monogamy and polyamory and Western cultural bias against polyamory, polyamorous romance might activate one's early attachment wounds more intensely than monogamous romance. I will

test this theory by exploring my inner experiences in two polyamorous contexts: the polyamory-friendly subculture of Burning Man, and a polyamorous romantic relationship.

Findings: Burning Man

Polyamory in a culture of inclusion and connectedness. Burning Man is an annual, week-long festival gathering that currently takes place in Black Rock City, a temporary city in Nevada's otherwise barren Black Rock Desert that exists only for the purpose of the festival. Its popularity is explosive. Burning Man began in 1986 with only 20 participants (Burning Man, n.d.a), and attendance in 2012 exceeded 52,000 (Griffith, 2012). There are likely as many descriptions of what Burning Man is as there are Burners—the name for one who frequents Burning Man. However, one can rightly describe its ethos through its 10 core principles (Burning Man, n.d.b). I know this because I have attended Burning Man four times within the past 7 years.

The first principle is radical inclusion (Burning Man, n.d.b). “Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community” (p. 1). Although the majority of Burners are Caucasian, I have encountered children, the elderly, sober people, people with disabilities, houseless people, executives of Fortune 500 companies, families, members of the kink community, and a vast spectrum of other social minorities. At Burning Man, I find myself making eye contact with almost everyone I pass and engaging with souls rather than labels. There are no barriers to approaching any individual or group and starting a conversation.

The second principle is gifting (Burning Man, n.d.b). “Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a

return or an exchange of something of equal value” (p. 1). Burning Man culture prohibits cash transactions except for buying ice and non-alcoholic beverages from event volunteers at only four locations throughout the event. The result is that people give for the joy of giving in a way that expresses their authentic selves. Some people gift tangible objects like alcohol, jewelry, or warm curry on a cold desert night. Others gift services like massages, workshops, or setting up a post office to deliver vintage postcards to friends anywhere in Black Rock City. Some gifts are experiences, like flame-thrower firing ranges, all-night dance parties, or a smile. In 2009, I gifted my services by traveling to Black Rock City a week early to help build a five-story, interactive art installation. In 2012, strangers set up my tent for me because I was weary after my 13-hour drive. Regardless of the gift, the experience enriches both the giver and the recipient with emotional wealth.

The third principle is decommodification:

In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience. (Burning Man, n.d.b, p. 1)

In Black Rock City, corporations are not people. Burners prohibit advertisers and sponsors and even cover up the logos on their rented recreational vehicles and U-Haul trailers. In my experience, this principle supports Burning Man’s gifting economy and helps strengthen the container of the festival from outside influence. Black Rock City feels like another world.

The fourth principle is radical self-reliance (Burning Man, n.d.b). “Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources”

(p. 1). Black Rock City is in a desert, and no parent entity is in charge of providing the experience for anyone or even building the city itself. If I want a shower, I plan ahead with my camp mates to build a shower. The community will always support a Burner in need, but the culture frowns upon people who burden the system unnecessarily without giving back in some way. Radical self-reliance challenges me to push my boundaries, discover new capabilities, and prove to myself that I have what it takes to survive.

The fifth principle is radical self-expression:

Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient. (Burning Man, n.d.b, p. 1)

Burners let their colors fly in Black Rock City. They eschew street clothing for whimsical and creative costumes, or perhaps they wear nothing at all. They offer hugs and conversation to strangers and ideally expect nothing in return. In an atmosphere of play and acceptance, Burners feel safe to put down their defenses and personas and allow their authentic selves to emerge and engage with others. Alternatively, one might choose to try a new persona on for size and give it a chance to play. For example, Burners commonly eschew their given names for a Burning Man name of their own creation. Mine is Poundcake. All elements of psyche find expression at Burning Man. There are myriad spaces for sex, spirituality, art, love, anger, learning, revelry, solitude, whimsy, and every other facet of the human experience.

The sixth principle is participation:

Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart. (Burning Man, n.d.b, p. 1)

Burning Man is not a spectator sport. The culture requires Burners to show up, play big, and engage with themselves, each other, and the environment. In fact, on the rare occurrences when I have witnessed or experienced judgment, it has usually been for a failure to participate. “Shirtcocking” is a common pejorative Burners use to describe wearing a shirt without pants or underwear. A shirtcocker is neither nude nor wearing expressive clothing and is therefore not fully participating. “Tourists” are people who join Burning Man only for the final weekend of the event and have therefore not participated in building the community. “Darkwads” are people who walk around at night without colorful lights on their bodies.

The next three principles involve community. They are communal effort, civic responsibility, and leaving no trace (Burning Man, n.d.b). Together, these principles ask Burners to cooperate and collaborate with each other; “assume responsibility for public welfare” (p. 1); and “clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them” (p. 1). That three of the 10 principles involve community suggests that community is the cornerstone of Burning Man. Indeed, the Burning Man experience has helped me enlarge my idea of me and mine to include the society and planet that support me. The Burning Man experience is intensely oriented toward community. I have not yet met anyone who entered Black Rock City alone. Most Burners live in camps whose participants have spent hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars preparing together for the week-long event. Further, the Burning Man workforce, from safety rangers to greeters to people scouring the desert floor for stray bits of trash, consists almost entirely of Burners volunteering their time. Burning Man’s focus on community might seem at first to contradict the principle of radical self-

reliance. However, these principles are related. The community will catch you if you fall, but you cannot support others if you cannot first support yourself.

The 10th and final principle is immediacy:

Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience. (Burning Man, n.d.b, p. 1)

In my experience, immediacy is a way of being. It is being fully present and making contact with the here-and-now. Black Rock City is not an antidote to suffering. People die at Burning Man, and I have experienced physical and emotional pain within its borders. However, the immediacy that permeates Burning Man helps give the suffering a numinous quality that deepens my contact with the experience of living.

Burning Man's 10 official core principles capture the general ethos of the festival. However, a vast segment of Burners follow an unofficial 11th principle: polyamory. Burners are significantly more accepting of polyamory than is the general U.S. population. In fact, they celebrate it. For example, in 2012, the Burning Man activities guidebook listed 1,410 community-sponsored activities (Gazetas, Eggchairsteve, Jason1969, & Throne, 2012). Over nine percent of these activities involved polyamory either theoretically through discussion or practically through group erotic interaction. For example, a camp called the Bonobo Lounge advertised a "primate-inspired community where unclothed interactions play a vital role and shape positive social bonds. Grooming and toning. Open 3x daily" (p. 1). The PolyParadise camp advertised a daily "Poly High Tea" at which "all you polyamorous, poly-curious, and poly-friendly folks are invited to join us for a discussion about practical issues of loving more than one" (p. 14). If

community events reflect community proclivities, then polyamory is part of the Burning Man culture.

My own experiences confirm Burners' polyamorous leanings. It is common for Burners to form relationships while at Burning Man. However, because the festival lasts only a week, these relationships are frequently non-exclusive. For example, in 2007, I formed romantic and sexual relationships with two other men in my camp. We were all aware of each other, and the two other men were also sexual with each other. On the rare occasion when I felt jealousy, it was mild, fleeting, and quickly replaced with a feeling of abundance. In 2012, I formed only one romantic relationship. Although I was not sexual with anyone else that year, we had an understanding that we were both free to explore. Burners' acceptance of polyamory is not limited to the temporary relationships of the festival. In 2009, I had a boyfriend who did not join me at Burning Man and has never been. He forbade me from having any erotic experiences. I felt like a lonely outcast, disconnected from the experience. I spoke with dozens of Burners—gay and straight, young and old—about my imposed monogamy, and all were aghast. Several were morally outraged. I heard an especially telling story from a married, heterosexual couple I camped near in 2009. The husband told me he had tried in vain for years to introduce polyamory into his marriage. His wife was adamantly against it until her first trip to Burning Man. She then changed her mind. The couple identified themselves to me as happily polyamorous. One anecdote is not statistically significant data, but it does suggest that the Burning Man ethos might actually foster polyamorous inclinations.

Fostering polyamorous attachment. Phenomenologically, Burning Man provides me with a feeling of secure attachment. First, the 10 core principles and

prevalent polyamory create for me a safe haven. Black Rock City feels like a womb. My feeling of safety is grounded in the depth of authentic interconnection among Burners that I have not found to commonly exist in today's mainstream U.S. culture. Burners exclude the isolating hierarchy and competition of the outside world and replace them with community participation, loving friendship, joyful support, and a deep level of interconnectedness in which authentic selves emerge from slumber and engage with each other.

The result is a content-rich reality that features a high density of quality interactions. These are typically intensely co-created affairs. . . . Participants are active co-creators in the actual experience. And what we find, what we witness is that there's this real and deep human need to contribute to community. (Leung, 2011, lecture)

Even the gifting economy of Burning Man facilitates deep interconnection:

There have always been communities in which some wealth circulates through the exchange of gifts, rather than through purchase and sale. Tribal groups are the typical case; in many tribes it is thought improper to buy and sell food, for example; instead of a market, an elaborate system of gift exchanges assures that every mouth has food to eat. Such a circulation of gifts is an agent of social cohesion; it can even be argued that a group doesn't become a group until its members have an ongoing sense of mutual indebtedness, gratitude, obligation—all the social feelings that bind human beings together and that follow automatically in the wake of a system of gift exchanges. (Hyde, 2010, p. 204)

Second, Burning Man's ethos creates a secure base for me. The Burning Man experience is not always physically or emotionally comfortable. The desert is hot, the voyage is long, and radical self-reliance and self-expression force me to test my mettle and take off the armor that protects me in the outside world. However, the community's interconnectedness and support make me feel safe to push my limits because I know I will always have the physical and emotional resources I need. As with the securely-attached children in Ainsworth's playroom (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), this secure base

allows me to explore the wonderland of Black Rock City. My exploration is not mere entertainment. The experience of meeting and pushing my limits at Burning Man shifts my perspective on the world and feels like emotional growth. This growth stays with me even after I leave Black Rock City. For example, in 2009, I found the strength while at Burning Man to end a relationship that was not serving me but that I did not yet have the courage to end. Each journey to Burning Man has been deeply transformative and healing, and I have never left the same man as I was when I arrived.

The safe haven and secure base Burning Man provides gives me the experience of secure attachment. Polyamory is a fundamental component of my attachment experience. Whether it manifests sexually or not, Burning Man's polyamory facilitates an erotic connection among Burners that feels free, joyous, and abundant. It ties me with others in loving friendship, interconnectedness, and mutual indebtedness. In some ways, the group itself becomes an attachment figure. Burning Man feels like a lover. I long for her and delight with her, and I seek proximity with her by returning to her embrace again and again. My relationship with Burning Man fills me with feelings of life and connection. Moreover, because the group itself provides much of the secure attachment experience, it feels more robust than attachment with just one individual. In this polyamorous context, I do not rely solely on one person to meet all my emotional needs. Further, when there is a rupture with one member of the group, the attachment object does not shatter. I can turn to other Burners for support and repair.

Conversely, I experienced imposed monogamy as anathema to secure attachment at Burning Man. In 2009, when my then boyfriend forbade me from connecting freely and fully with others, I felt like an outcast. I felt separated both from other individuals

and from Burning Man herself. The experience was lonely and isolating. I felt rage throughout the festival toward my then boyfriend for demanding that I sacrifice such a sacred component of my being. We broke up shortly thereafter.

Findings: My Polyamorous Relationship

Synchronously, I entered a polyamorous relationship the very week I began writing this thesis. I have changed the name of my partner as well as his identifying information to protect his privacy. Chuck is a health worker and competitive bodybuilder. We met on Scruff, a smart phone application that allows gay men to see and communicate with other gay men nearby. Although one can use Scruff for dating and friendship, my experience is that men predominantly use it to find local sex partners. After a brief exchange on Scruff, Chuck and I planned an encounter. The 4-month relationship that followed was deeply healing.

Growing up without any stable father figures, I always longed for a strong, masculine guardian to keep me safe and initiate me into manhood. Chuck grew up in a physically abusive household. He survived by building an armor of muscles and projecting his weaknesses onto others, whom he fiercely protected physically and emotionally. He identifies as an Alpha, which he described as a physically and sexually dominant protector of a pack. We were perfect vessels for each other's shadow projections. We enacted these projections through sexual role play in which I was the little brother and he was the big brother who initiated me into my sexuality and helped bring out my inner Alpha. Our sexual relationship was explicitly polyamorous. In fact, we would share the details of our sexual exploits together, and Chuck would send me pictures and videos of him having sex with other men. These conversations and images

aroused me. They felt like sexual and emotional bonding. For our third sexual encounter, we brought in another man for a threeway. Chuck delighted as he watched me enact a dominant role with this other man, and I felt proud to showcase my skills for Chuck. Although we were polyamorous, Chuck told me that his attention would be on me when we were out in public, and he would not flirt with or engage other men sexually unless we were “hunting” together—his phrase.

Our sex was so bonding that the relationship quickly became emotional. We started enacting our projections outside the bedroom. Chuck would bring me soup when I got sick, come over just to hold me when I felt sad, and take me to the gym so I could become stronger. In return, I became his safe place. He would take off his armor with me and become vulnerable in a way he could not with others. He told me I protected his core. I called him “Big Bro,” and he called me, “Little Bro.” We checked in with each other at least once a day and expressed deep love for each other. The intensity of my projections onto Chuck regressed me and activated deep childhood wounds. My parents divorced when I was 6 years old, and my father moved across the country when I was 8 to start a new life with a new family. Physically and emotionally, he disappeared from my life. As Chuck and I became closer, my abandonment fears sprang to life. I could feel the little boy in me awaken who was terrified that my protector would disappear. Once, I sent Chuck a text that he did not notice until the next day. Until he responded, I was convinced that Chuck no longer wanted me as his little bro. Fortunately, my fears only made me a better container for Chuck’s projected weakness. Chuck appeared to find deep healing and meaning in soothing my fears and proving that he would always be there for me when I needed him. He told me constantly that he loved me and that I was his best

friend. He made me a beneficiary of his life insurance policy. He gave me a sacred object to acknowledge that I was officially part of his pack and would be for as long as I wished to be. He made time for me. The day my grandfather died, Chuck called in sick to work and held me. I could feel my abandonment fears fade away. I trusted that Chuck would not disappear.

My abandonment fears reemerged when I started feeling a desire to have Chuck as my boyfriend. For reasons that are not relevant to this thesis, the rational part of me did not really want Chuck as my boyfriend. My rational mind knew that the relationship was between Chuck and the little boy in me who never received the love he needed from a strong, male guardian. However, experientially, I longed to merge with the malnourished Alpha in me that I projected into Chuck. I longed for wholeness. Chuck did not want to be my boyfriend, although he doggedly sought out a boyfriend of his own throughout our relationship together. Chuck's need for a boyfriend was powerful. He had just broken up with his boyfriend of 3 years a mere month before we met, but within weeks of our first meeting, he was already spending weekends with a man in a neighboring city and discussing plans to raise children with him. When that relationship ended, Chuck replaced him within a few weeks. I became jealous of these other men. When Chuck told me about these men or shared his joy with me, I felt agony. I felt like a piece of me was dying. When I examined my jealousy and pain, I realized that the underlying feeling was fear that Chuck would disappear and no longer be there for me when I needed him. My attachment wounds were bleeding.

I wanted to cauterize my attachment wounds by preventing him from seeing other men, but our relationship was explicitly polyamorous, and he would not be my boyfriend.

I could only bleed. I could only turn toward my suffering and experience it more deeply and fully. Thankfully, I was able to share my bleeding heart with Chuck. Whenever attachment fears arose, Chuck was there to hold me, kiss my tears away, and promise that he would always be there for me as long as I needed him. He said that, in some ways, our relationship was even more intimate than if we were boyfriends. He promised that when he found a boyfriend, I would be his only other sexual outlet. Chuck told these potential boyfriends about me and even sent me pictures of text conversations with them in which he spoke of me lovingly and described me as his best friend and safe place. Chuck proved to me time and time again that he would not disappear and that my heart was safe. As I felt increasingly secure that Chuck would always be there when I needed him, I noticed my jealousy, fears, and agony fade away.

Over time, I could feel myself becoming more securely attached to Chuck. The little boy in me started quieting down, and inner resources started replacing my regression. I felt like myself again. I no longer needed constant reassurance of Chuck's love, and I had no more tears of insecurity for him to kiss away. Concurrently, Chuck started to rely on me more and more. He turned to me for relationship advice, needed me next to him in order to sleep soundly, and told me I was his only real friend. I still longed for Chuck, but now the longing was primarily sexual. Our sex had significantly diminished. Perhaps because I was no longer an adequate container for Chuck's projected weaknesses, he began expressing frustration when I communicated my sexual needs. Perhaps I had only just started asking for what I wanted. He also started suggesting I spend more time in the gym and shave my beard. I started feeling invisible and unwanted in Chuck's presence. I felt that my needs only mattered when they were the needs he

wanted me to have—the needs of a little boy. However, instead of the fear or anguish I had felt previously, I started feeling angry. It was during this stage in our relationship that Chuck revealed, minutes after I had declined sex, that he had intercourse with another man while we were both attending a party I had invited him to. I was less than 20 feet away and unaware the whole time. Moreover, Chuck had previously denied having sex with this man when I asked. He defended himself with a semantic loophole. I felt that Chuck had broken his promise that he would only have eyes for me when we were together.

I was furious. My anger focused on Chuck's sexual betrayal. Looking back, I believe the anger was a reaction to feeling invisible and unwanted. Additionally, Chuck's commitment to focus his erotic attention on me when we were together provided the secure container I needed to feel safe in a polyamorous relationship. He shattered that container of safety when he broke his commitment. He also crystalized a feeling that had been gestating in me for a while, which was that he was no longer able to embody the guardian I wanted to project onto him. My feelings took me in two directions. Part of me, a small part, felt the anguish of abandonment. Chuck would not be there for me every time I needed him. However, my primary feeling was an energetic call to action. I wanted to reclaim my inner guardian and fire Chuck from that role. It took a great deal of courage in the face of fear for me to confront Chuck with my feelings of betrayal and invisibility. His response was denial and defensive anger, but it no longer mattered. I felt alive. I felt powerful. I could feel my own guardian surging through my veins. Not a controlling Alpha, but a compassionate protector.

My relationship with Chuck healed me deeply, and I told him that my heart was full of love and gratitude for him. However, I also asked for space. When we are together, my longing to merge with him as my personified guardian is too painfully strong, and it is a longing that he could never satisfy. I choose to become my own guardian. That is part of my inner work. I am grateful that Chuck and I found healing together. By projecting his own little boy into me and keeping it loved and safe, Chuck helped heal some of my attachment wounds. In return, he was able to take off his armor with me and experience tenderness and vulnerability. The ending of our polyamorous romance was healing and loving. We stayed in contact for a while as friends, but our connection faded over time.

Analysis of Findings

Forming a romantic attachment to a group. My experiences at Burning Man and in a polyamorous relationship partially confirmed my theory about the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context. However, they also showed me that my theory was too limited. Foundationally, I theorized that individuals could form romantic attachment relationships with a group. My findings support this theory. In the polyamorous context of Burning Man, I experienced attachment both with individuals and with the collective itself. My attachment with individuals felt like a network of intimate, interdependent friendships. I was part of a tribe. Sex and other erotic interactions within this context functioned as a connective tissue that linked me to others emotionally and energetically. Any jealousy I felt was mild and fleeting because sex, intimacy, and support were abundant, and I was not relying solely on one individual to meet all of my emotional or erotic needs. Similarly, I did not feel emotionally suffocated because I was not the sole person responsible for anyone else's needs. With regard to my

attachment with Burning Man itself, I experience her as an ethereal lover. My relationship with her gives me emotional strength, and I yearn to return to her embrace. Moreover, elements of my love for Burning Man exist in my relationships with other Burners. I feel a special kind of bond with them, as if sharing a lover makes us spiritually related. I believe others share this experience. Burners who use Scruff, for example, commonly include the Burning Man symbol in their user names. Burners also commonly put Black Rock City bumper stickers on their car. My heart flutters when I see these identifiers.

Activation of attachment wounds. I further theorized that polyamory will activate one's early attachment wounds more intensely than in monogamous romance. I found that such activation is possible but not inevitable in polyamorous contexts. At Burning Man, polyamory facilitated secure attachments both to individuals and the group itself. It was imposed monogamy that felt isolating and lonely. With Chuck, however, I felt old attachment wounds emerge more intensely than with a monogamous partner. I experienced intense agony and jealousy rooted in fears of abandonment when Chuck involved himself emotionally with other men. I was able to engage those abandonment fears because of the safe container Chuck created for me. He soothed my fears, showed me that he would be there for me when I needed him, and promised that I would be the sole object of his affections when we were together. I felt a deep healing as my attachment wounds mended. I experienced Chuck's infidelity as a shattering of the container I needed to feel securely attached in our polyamory. However, by that point, I had already withdrawn much of the inner guardian that I had projected onto Chuck. I no longer needed him the way I once did. I was sufficiently healed.

Secure attachment and the containing context. My original theory did not capture the fullness of my experience of attachment in a polyamorous context. Specifically, I did not predict two salient elements. First, I discovered that I regress in romantic relationships, especially in the beginning. Old wounds resurfaced, and dormant pieces of my psyche awakened. My regressed state required containment before attachment felt secure. At Burning Man, the ethos of the collective itself provided the containment I needed. Chuck offered containment primarily by promising to forever reserve a piece of his heart exclusively for me. At the end of our relationship, I was able to contain myself through my own inner resources. Therefore, I propose that experiencing secure attachment in a polyamorous context requires a container to replace the container of monogamy. That container can take many forms.

Attachment and the tension between polyamory and monogamy. The second element of my attachment experience that I did not adequately predict was the power of the tension between conflicting monogamous and polyamorous desires. I anticipated that such tension would exist, but I did not appreciate its magnitude. Indeed, this tension of opposites was central to my experience of attachment in a polyamorous context. At Burning Man, polyamorous sexuality helped connect me in intimate friendship with others in my community. When I attended burning man as one half of a monogamous couple, I felt like an outcast. I felt an excruciating longing to connect and experienced monogamy as a shackle preventing attachment. With Chuck, polyamory breathed excitement into our relationship and facilitated our attachment experience when it was on my terms. However, when Chuck's outside relationships triggered my abandonment fears, I yearned to be his one and only even as I continued to explore relationships with

other men. Indeed, both monogamy and polyamory are enjoyable as long as they exist on *my* terms. The tensions arose only when my need for monogamous security collided with my partner's need for polyamorous freedom, and vice versa.

Clinical Applications

The above findings on the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context can benefit psychotherapists in their clinical work. First, understanding monogamy as a cultural institution and not an inherent good can help therapists avoid imposing their cultural values on clients. Culturally competent psychotherapists will examine their own relationships with monogamy and polyamory and treat clients' attitudes toward them as diversity issues worthy of respect, curiosity, and exploration. This is especially important during couple's therapy because partners might have entered the relationship with different attitudes and beliefs about monogamy and polyamory. Therapy can become a safe place to explore those attitudes and beliefs. Further, clients might themselves struggle with dissonance between their urges and society's mandate of monogamy. Culturally competent psychotherapists can help normalize these clients' experiences and help them better understand their own experiences of monogamy and polyamory. Second, psychotherapists can benefit from the conclusion that secure attachment in a polyamorous context requires a container. To the extent that clients seek to honor their polyamorous desires within a relationship, psychotherapists can help them form containers that work for them.

Summary

Building on the review of the literature, a theoretical framework was developed suggesting that one could form romantic attachment relationships with a group and that

attachments in a polyamorous context will activate early attachment wounds more intensely than monogamous attachment. My experiences at Burning Man and in a polyamorous relationship confirmed some aspects of that theory but also showed that it was too narrow. Although I was indeed able to form secure attachment with a group, I did not necessarily experience attachment wounds arising more intensely in a polyamorous context. Monogamy triggered my attachment longings at Burning Man whereas with Chuck, it was his polyamory. Further, I did not anticipate my need for a safe container in order to achieve secure attachment in a polyamorous context, nor did I foresee the intensity of the tension between conflicting monogamous and polyamorous desires.

These findings can still help psychotherapists in clinical practice. They can help psychotherapists become more culturally competent by normalizing polyamorous desires and other forms of relationship. They can also help give clients better tools to navigate their own polyamorous relationships. The next chapter will tie this thesis together by offering a summary and concluding remarks.

Chapter IV

Summary and Conclusions

Summary

The goal of this thesis was to fill in some of the gaps in attachment research, particularly as it pertains to adult romantic relationships. Psychologists have predominantly explored romantic attachment through the lens of childhood attachment, for which there is presumed to be one primary attachment figure (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Such a monopoly of inquiry normalizes monogamy and excludes other relationship styles. To help balance the research, this thesis sought to discover the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context.

There is already a large body of work related to this research question. Foundationally, biological, anthropological, and cross-cultural evidence reveals that humans evolved in a polyamorous environment (Barash & Lipton, 2002). Evolutionary psychologists applied evolutionary theory to conclude that combined drives for both monogamy and polyamory help maximize reproductive success (Dawkins, 1976; Symons, 1979; Tooby & Cosmides, 2005; Wilson, 1975). These findings suggest that the human psyche holds a tension between monogamous and polyamorous desires.

Psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth formed attachment theory by observing that humans instinctively seek proximity to attachment figures and turn to them as secure bases and safe havens (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Moreover, interactions with one's early attachment figure fundamentally affect a person's emotional stability and

interpersonal bonds later in life (Finn, 2012). Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied attachment theory to adult romantic relationships. They discovered that people whose primary caregivers were unavailable and unresponsive tended to fear emotional closeness in romantic relationships. Alternatively, people whose primary caregivers were inconsistently available or intrusive tended to experience frequent jealousy and emotional highs and lows with their romantic partners.

Finally, from a depth perspective, Jung (1939/1983) introduced the Western world to the concept of individuation, which is the continuous process of confrontations with unconscious aspects of the self that develops psychological wholeness. Guggenbühl-Craig (1977/2008) explored romantic relationships from an individuation perspective. He suggested romantic relationships can serve two purposes. Relationships serve well-being when they make life easier and happier. Relationships serve individuation when they force partners to confront, tolerate, accept, and integrate aspects of themselves and their partners in a way that facilitates growth. With regard to attachment in a polyamorous context, Guggenbühl-Craig's theories suggest a confrontation with early attachment wounds that could help facilitate individuation.

A review of the literature suggested that one could form romantic attachment relationships with a group just as one can form them with an individual. It further suggested that polyamorous romance might activate one's early attachment wounds more intensely than monogamous romance, and that one could engage these wounds in a way that fosters individuation. I tested those theories by observing my inner experiences at Burning Man and in a polyamorous relationship. I found that I could indeed form secure romantic attachments with groups of individuals and with the personification of the group

itself. However, I also found that attachment wounds do not necessarily arise more intensely in a polyamorous context. Although Chuck's polyamory intensified my abandonment fears, it was imposed monogamy that triggered my attachment longings while at Burning Man. I concluded that both monogamy and polyamory can intensify my attachment wounds when they are not on my terms. Further, I did not anticipate my need for a safe container in order to achieve secure attachment in a polyamorous context, nor did I foresee the intensity of the tension between conflicting monogamous and polyamorous desires.

Conclusions

Ramifications. This exploration of attachment in a polyamorous context offers three primary takeaways. The first takeaway is that there is no clear, fixed distinction between monogamous and polyamorous contexts. My relationship with Chuck was polyamorous in that we each sought sexual and emotional relationships with other men. However, there were also elements that felt monogamous. I was Chuck's best friend, little bro, and safe place. He told me there was a piece of his heart forever reserved exclusively for me. Similarly, Chuck was my only big bro; no other men in my life filled that role. Monogamy is also present at Burning Man. Not only are there monogamous Burners, but on a practical level, one cannot continue adding sex partners *ad infinitum*. The festival lasts only a week, so some erotic exclusion must take place. Even ostensibly monogamous relationships contain polyamorous forces when partners exchange eros outside the relationship through fantasy and flirtation. Therefore, the idea that a relationship is either monogamous or polyamorous is an illusion.

The second takeaway is that polyamory is not exclusively responsible for intensifying attachment wounds. This thesis originally proposed that monogamy functions to preserve secure attachment whereas polyamory acts as a threat to that security. With Chuck, this was indeed the case. However, at Burning Man, it was imposed monogamy that triggered feelings of exclusion, isolation, and rage toward my partner. Therefore, this thesis concludes that monogamy and polyamory each have the capacity to both threaten and strengthen attachment experiences depending on the context and the individual. For example, perhaps anxious/avoidant individuals experience monogamy as threatening confinement whereas anxious/ambivalent individuals experience it as safe containment.

The final takeaway is that the tension of the pull between monogamous and polyamorous forces feels primal. It is as though these drives and their struggle connect to deeper, more fundamental forces within the psyche. My experience of the struggle between monogamous and polyamorous forces resembles Freud's (1995) description of the struggle between the eros and death drives. For the ancient Greeks, Eros was the god of love (Hamilton, 1942). Freud described eros as life instinct, which "seeks to force together and hold together the portions of living substance" (Freud, 1920/1989, p. 624).

Eros is

the creative principle which is the source of all being, all life. . . . Eros is . . . an energy directed outward, toward real, particular others. . . . To an ever widening, more inclusive circle of others. His Eros is one of the parents of civilization, . . . the "builder of cities." Freud sees civilization, communal existence, as dependent on libidinal attachments. (Downing, 2004, pp. 64-65)

At Burning Man, I experienced Eros as the force that connected me with others in deep, interdependent friendship. I also believe my secure, romantic attachment with the idea of

Burning Man is actually romantic attachment with a personification of the eros that the Burning Man ethos cultivates. With Chuck, eros felt like a longing to connect and relate to my projected guardian as an entity outside myself. I wanted to constantly move energetically toward him. I felt safe as long nothing inhibited that forward momentum.

In contrast to Eros, Freud's concept of the death drive

is associated with all in us that is pulled towards repetition, inertia, regression; all that longs for a tension-free existence, for Nirvana resolution, completion; the voices in us that cry "leave me alone, let me have my way, don't make me change; let me stay a child, let me return to the womb." Death wish shows itself in our longing to be immortal, to be remembered, our longing not to die. . . . the wish not to die is itself a death wish, as is all resistance to change, to movement, that is, to life. (Downing, 2004, p. 65)

In the polyamorous context of Burning Man, the monogamy that my then boyfriend imposed on me felt like forced inertia in my longing to move toward and connect with others. I had nothing to move toward, no object to which I could attach, so I felt like a lonely outcast. With Chuck, I craved a monogamous merger once my attachment fears arose amid the polyamory. I wanted to obtain the projection and never let go. I wanted to be complete so that I could finally rest instead of forever seeking to move closer toward a mirage I could never reach. However, when I finally reclaimed and merged with my projected guardian, the eros died. I no longer longed for Chuck the way I once did.

Clinical implications. This thesis contributes to the field of counseling psychology because it explores the attachment experience in a context that has been largely ignored—polyamory. As previously discussed, psychotherapists can use this information in myriad ways. They can increase their cultural competency by understanding that monogamy is not an inherent virtue and by examining their own values, judgments, and experiences with regard to monogamy and polyamory. Such an

inquiry can help psychotherapists avoid imposing their values onto their clients.

Psychotherapists can also apply the information in this thesis to help clients process their own tension between monogamous and polyamorous attachment desires.

This thesis contributes to depth psychology by understanding attachment in a polyamorous context as a potential path toward individuation. As previously discussed, a person can prioritize well-being or individuation in romantic relationships (Guggenbühl-Craig, 1977/2008). Well-being is not a bad thing. Indeed, “one would not want to miss it. . . . Well-being only then becomes a danger to our psychological development when it is the sole content and goal of life” (p. 123). As I discovered with Chuck and at Burning Man, polyamory can trigger agonizing attachment wounds. Of course, so too can monogamy. Although these wounds might cause a temporary decrease in well-being, not all problems should be solved in a path toward individuation. Some problems need to be wrestled with and experienced more deeply to obtain greater awareness, wholeness, and meaning. The depth perspective invites one to live into these realities instead of avoiding or denying them. With Chuck, I could have ended our relationship or tried to impose monogamy on him when my abandonment fears arose. These strategies might certainly have eased my pain. However, because I turned into my wound, I was able to transform it into healing. Depth psychotherapists can similarly help clients turn into their attachment pains if they so choose.

Suggested research. This exploration into the phenomenology of attachment in a polyamorous context involved a variety of settings. However, I was the only subject. As discussed above, one’s attachment style likely influences the way one experiences attachment in a polyamorous context. Another area of suggested research therefore

involves conducting the same exploration with subjects of varying attachment styles to see if there are different experiences. Similarly, individuals with personality typologies that differ from my own might also have different experiences of attachment in a polyamorous context. Therefore, similar investigations could be conducted with subjects of varying personality typologies. Exploring the attachment experiences of diverse individuals could uncover interesting similarities and differences.

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