THE COUNSELING EXPERIENCES OF CLIENTS WHO ARE POLYAMOUROUS:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Polyamory is an identity that describes the ability to experience romantic love with more than one romantic partner at a time. Polyamory is often perceived as being perverse, amoral, and relationally broken or deficient; however, people who identify as polyamorous are found to be as mentally healthy and happy as people who are monogamous. Clients who identify as polyamorous may experience their counselor as lacking familiarity with and knowledge of polyamory or as actively working against their identity. This study was a phenomenological inquiry designed to illuminate the counseling experiences of polyamorous people. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with eight participants and analyzed with a modified van Kaam method with relational-cultural theory as the framework. The three major findings that constitute the essence of this inquiry were: (a) participants experienced disappointment and disrespect in the counselor’s ignorance of their vital identities, (b) the necessities of trust and connection between participant and counselor for empowerment and growth, and (c) the complementary nature of relationality in polyamory and counseling. These findings indicated counselors should seek a baseline of education on polyamory. The implications for counselor educators were to strive to envelope counselors-in-training in a culture that supports developing multicultural competency and to create continuing education on marginalized populations to best support in-practice counselors. These efforts increase the likelihood that polyamorists are able to receive effective counseling that supports them holistically.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank Lisa who served as my major professor during this process. The paperwork has to say otherwise; but, we know that you did the work.

Next, a thank you to Sara and Emily and all the other lovely people I worked with at Heartful Editor. I cannot even imagine what this process would have been like without an editor. Reader, please know that all appropriate use of em dashes and semicolons can be attributed to them.

Last, for Tyko. I hope that being done with this means we can find more time to play fetch and go for walks. I love you the most.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE COUNSELING EXPERIENCES OF CLIENTS WHO ARE POLYAMOUROUS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Team</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling and Participants</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Procedures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence 1: Disappointment and Disrespect in Ignorance of Vital Identities</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence 2: The Necessities of Trust and Connection for Empowerment and Growth</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essence 3: The Complementary Nature of Relationality in Polyamory and Counseling</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B. DETAILED METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX C. UNABRIDGED ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX D. EXPANDED DISCUSSION</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX E. SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE LIST</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE COUNSELING EXPERIENCES OF CLIENTS WHO ARE POLYAMOUROUS

Polyamory is a form of consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) that describes the ability to experience romantic love with more than one partner at a time (Sheff, 2014). The prevalence of this concealable, stigmatized identity is difficult to determine given reticence to report; however, best estimates for the number of people identifying as polyamorous in the United States range from 1.2 million to 9.8 million people. The dominant cultural standard is mononormative where monogamy is viewed as normal (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Rothschild, 2018). Polyamory is often seen as being perverse, amoral, and relationally broken or deficient (Séguin, 2019); but, people who identify as polyamorous are found to be as mentally healthy and happy as people who are monogamous (Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Weitzman et al., 2009).

The need to recognize and advocate for polyamorous people is already covered in the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) Code of Ethics. Specifically, C.5 of the ACA Code of Ethics states counselors are professionally responsible for the nondiscrimination of clients and students based on their marital or partnership status, which could include having multiple partners. Polyamorists were mentioned in the society for sexual, affectional, intersex, and gender expansive identities 2013 competencies, both in explicit mention and by the definition of affectional orientation, including possible connection to multiple people at one time (Harper et al., 2013). Although this recognition exists, polyamorous clients were experiencing their counselors as lacking familiarity with, and knowledge of, polyamory (Kisler & Lock, 2019), or actively working against their identity (Graham, 2014). There are an increasing number of resources for counselors serving the polyamorous community; however, it is not in general knowledge for many clinicians.

I determined the best course of action was to connect with polyamorists who have
received counseling and create an understanding of their experiences through a phenomenological inquiry to center their voices. It was vital to explore whether clients who were polyamorous were receiving just and multiculturally responsive counseling services. Using research to amplify the voices of minority groups provided a clear direction and value to this research.

Methods

I approached this study from a relational-cultural theory (RCT) perspective. I selected this framework due to the goodness of fit with the subject material given the emphasis on how participants experienced their relationships, both with their counselors and also as polyamorists (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Additionally, the RCT focus on multicultural concerns connected with the identification of polyamorists as an unrecognized multicultural group known to experience bias.

A phenomenological inquiry was the best means of addressing the research question due to the inherently relational nature of the research. A phenomenological inquiry is a qualitative research approach that supports a researcher in cultivating epoché, where previous judgments are set aside to then allow for full engagement with the essence of the phenomenon as conveyed by those who experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of a phenomenology is to generate knowledge about how people experience phenomena that are difficult to share with others, such as bodily sensations, feelings, and the nature of relationships (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Phenomenology provided the structure to uncover the meaning my participants made about their experiences as counseling clients who identified as polyamorists with an “emphasis on the universal and divergent aspects of [the] experience” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 45). Additionally, a phenomenological approach was appropriate due to the concealable nature of a polyamorous

2
identity. This design supports drawing out underlying meaning from a relatively small number of people (Grbich, 2013).

The Research Team

In this phenomenology, I was the tool that collected data by conducting semistructured interviews. The research team initially consisted of three individuals who distilled the essence of what was revealed through the analysis process. As such, it was important to disclose the identities of the research team; values, biases, and judgment of the researcher must be known to support the creation of epoché (Creswell, 2013).

Self of the Lead Researcher

I discovered polyamory as a concept when I was 18 years old. I read The Ethical Slut by Easton and Liszt (1997) and I was aware it had vastly changed the way I perceived relationships and myself in those relationships. I have identified as polyamorous since that time and have grown into adulthood with that identity. Professionally, I am a licensed mental health counselor working in a private practice setting providing service by telehealth from my home office. I am openly polyamorous in my work.

Other impactful identities for this research included that I am a White, queer, agender woman from an upper-middle class background with a professional career and a college education. I additionally identify as a disabled person. My counseling experience as an openly polyamorous person has been generally positive; I have had counselors who have either been supportive of my polyamory and with prior knowledge of the polyamorous community or have been ready to educate themselves.
Team Members

There were two additional members of the research team, Megan and Ashley. Both were selected to join the team as master’s students with the University of North Texas who had graduated and were working as mental health professionals. At the time of the study, Megan identified as a White, cisgender woman. She was polyamorous, worked in private practice, and ran support groups for a suicide prevention nonprofit when we last spoke. At the time of the study, Ashley identified as a White ciswoman. She was polyamorous, but reported she was not fully open in that identity.

These team members were selected for their interest in the project and for their perspectives as clinicians. They were also selected for their in-group perspective as polyamorists. They were involved in all stages of analysis to provide an additional perspective on the participants. Additionally, the supervising researcher reviewed all the descriptive analyses for precision of message and to support constructing an effective analysis.

Sampling and Participants

The procedures of a phenomenology require the use of criterion-based sampling (Heppner et al., 2016). The criteria for participants for this study were they: (a) self-identified as polyamorous and (b) had engaged in counseling in the last 3 years, including participants who were currently in counseling. At the time of the interviews, all participants were 18 years of age or older and were local to the North and Central Texas area, which allowed for in-person interviews within driving distance of my location.

Given the inherently concealable nature of the polyamorous community, I relied on word-of-mouth recruitment by known members of the polyamorous community, facilitated by a recruitment flyer. The flyer had a link to the informed consent information and a short eligibility
survey to ensure goodness of fit for the research. All survey respondents met the key three participant criteria: (a) self-identified as polyamorous, (b) were over 18 years old, and (c) were currently in counseling or had been in counseling in the last 3 years. I received 24 responses to my recruitment survey and I excluded three respondents from participation. Two respondents were excluded due to familiarity with the researcher and I excluded another due to living outside of the research area at the time of the interviews. I notified these three respondents they would not be eligible to complete the study. I contacted all other respondents to schedule interviews. Nine respondents scheduled interviews and all others failed to respond when contacted for scheduling. Only one initial interviewee did not complete the study, giving eight participants in total. For additional participant demographics, see Table 1.

Table 1

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mia Kensington</td>
<td>Ciswoman/Questioning</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha Gleason</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn Wright</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Black/mixed race</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Ledbetter</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Moore</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
<td>Some college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue D. Nym</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>$31,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marty McFly</td>
<td>Cisman</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$116,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dub Elle</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
<td>They/Them</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Data collection involved in-person, semistructured interviews, which is a typical approach for phenomenological research (Heppner et al., 2016). I conducted three distinct
interviews with each participant while concurrently completing data analysis. Interviews began in May 2018 and concluded by August 2018. The initial interview was structured around the following questions:

- How did you come to identify as polyamorous?
- Did you ever share how you came to identify as polyamorous with your counselor?
- What brought you to counseling initially?
- Describe your counseling experience.
- What did you most appreciate about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory, if anything?
- What would you choose to change about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory, if anything?

The second and third interviews were variations of these questions, with specific inquiries if there had been any additional thoughts concerning these questions in the time between interviews. Follow-up questions probed for additional data and emerged naturally in the interviews as part of the semistructured interview process.

After completion of the initial draft of the data analysis, I conducted individual member checks to confirm findings of the study and provide credibility to those findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I completed member checks in March 2020. During the member checks, I presented participants with initial findings, including (a) how findings specifically related to their provided experiences, (b) how they would be represented in the final results, and (c) how the general composite findings of the study would disclose the shared experiences of all participants. This process allowed me to add any additional considerations participants had in response to the findings presented. The member check also demonstrated I had reached the appropriate sample size (Hays & Singh, 2011) because participants all reported a resonance and connection with the final composite findings.
Data Analysis Procedures

In part, the analysis process was woven into the collection process; even though these steps are presented in order, all steps prior to the textual descriptions were repeated between interviews to help guide questions in subsequent interviews and to help steep the researchers in the data as they were available. I used a variant of the van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). I chose this approach because it emphasized the individual participant experience before discerning the greater experience of participants as a group.

I completed data analysis on all participant data. My research team each completed analysis on four participant’s interview data. They specifically completed horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing, and validation. We compared their results from these steps with mine to ensure quality of analysis and to reduce any potential bias I might have held. Any conflicting or mismatched findings were resolved collaboratively, without clear preference to their or my suggested language. Additionally, the research team members reviewed initial drafts of individual textural, structural, and textural-structural descriptions to ensure what they experienced of their participants was accurately captured. They also reviewed the initial draft of the composite textural-structural description to ensure the lived experiences of participants were present in the final analysis.

Data analysis began with horizontalization. Horizontalization winnows the data with the primary researcher and research team selecting what is relevant to the experience, leaving data more manageable in scale (Moustakas, 1994). I completed this step by using the research questions to guide the separation of statements relevant to the phenomenon being explored, which was completed practically by reading through transcripts and highlighting all statements.
which might be related to the research question.

The next step of analysis was reduction and elimination. This step tested all expressions deemed relevant during horizontalization with two questions: “(a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it? [and] (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Any expressions not meeting the outlined requirements were eliminated from further analysis. Any remaining data were an invariant constituent of the experience, or something inherent to the essence of the phenomenon.

The next step was to cluster and thematize invariant constituents into core themes. This step was completed with a card sorting task. I wrote all invariant constituents on sticky notes or index cards and compared them to see if apparent groups or patterns arose. I moved sticky notes or index cards freely between groups to determine how invariant constituents would best be clustered, allowing for a visual assessment of groups and emerging themes. After creating a cluster, I determined a core theme for that cluster describing the invariant constituents clustered in it.

Next, I completed validation, which is the “final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Validation required researchers to revisit the original transcript to ensure the created themes were present, either implicitly or explicitly expressed. If themes were not explicitly expressed or found to be compatible, I deleted them.

I adjourned the analysis at this point after the first interview. For the second and third interviews, the research team discerned horizons and used previously generated themes as a guide for naming these newly captured experiences. If the horizon could not be captured, I
repeated a card sort to determine new clusters or themes. All new invariant constituents and themes were validated across all three interviews. This analysis was completed between each interview to allow for themes to be observed and inquired about in the following interviews to ensure clarity in the completion of the analysis process.

After completing final interviews, I constructed an individual textural description of each participant using validated invariant constituents and themes to guide my thinking. This phase consisted of creating a descriptive integration of participant bringing together validated invariant constituents and themes with examples from that participant’s transcripts. As the word textural implies, this is intended to be a tactile, but more surface exploration of the participant’s experience.

I next developed an individual structural description for each participant drawing from individual textural description and imaginative variation to draw out the structure of the experience. Imaginative variation required researchers to think dynamically and creatively about all possible meanings that could be created (Moustakas, 1994). The four steps of imaginative variation are: (a) systematically varying underlying structures that could support individual textural description, (b) recognizing themes and context for emergent phenomenon, (c) considering universal thoughts and feelings precipitating the phenomenon, and (d) searching for examples that epitomize themes and aid in a clearer understanding of any underlying structures. In practice, this process felt like an exploration of what would have had to occur in the participant’s life, and their counseling specifically, to create the answer at the textural level to best describe how the participant experienced what was captured in the textural description.

I then constructed an individual textural-structural description for each participant. These descriptions required me to intuitively and reflectively integrate the “meanings and essences of
the experience, incorporating [validated] invariant constituents and themes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The challenge at this step was the development of a seamless integration of participant experiences and my structural postulations. This continuous revisiting of data invited immersion in the material, and I believe I engaged with this process as described by Moustakas because I regularly returned to interview data and individual texturals and structurals during writing and revision. This process involved weaving together participant’s spoken experiences and my expertise as a clinician to create a more unified whole that worked to encompass their experiences holistically with the intention to illuminate the why of what they experienced.

After each participant had an individual textural-structural description, I then generated a composite description for participants as a group unified in their shared experience. I developed composite textural-structural descriptions using guidelines developed for individual textural-structural description, with a focus on narratives or experiences shared across most participants. This composite description was the final research finding, and it conveyed the meaning and essence of the phenomenon as experienced by participants. The resulting product was as complete an answer as possible to the initial research question.

Trustworthiness

By cultivating trustworthiness, I endeavored to manage the limitations of my study and generate research of high quality. The development of trustworthiness included a focus on credibility, transferability, confirmability, and authenticity through various means, such as simultaneous data collection and analysis, member checks, and thick description. Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research (Hays & Singh, 2011), collecting and analyzing data simultaneously allowed me to adjust my questions and seek clarification during the research process. This choice was present in my decision to complete three interviews over the course of
several months to allow for a return to the creation of horizons and themes as the interview process continued. Simultaneous data collection and analysis also added to the credibility of the study, which made it more confirmable by ensuring I adhered to the initial intent of understanding the polyamorist experience of counseling by creating space for ongoing adjustment in the research process. This choice increased authenticity by creating opportunity for me to pose clarifying questions to participants and creating points where I could assess data saturation to ensure sampling adequacy.

I conducted final member checks to ensure participants were empowered in the research process by being given power over the findings intended to represent their experiences and to ensure a goodness of fit with the findings (Hays & Singh, 2011). Member checks also ensured participants were satisfied with findings after delays in the analysis process. For this study, member checks added confirmability and authenticity, ensuring findings were focused on our initial research question and the study was representing the voices of the participants. The process also ensured sampling adequacy was reached by allowing participants to determine if they experienced a sense of unity and clarity in the final findings (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Additionally, I provided as much thick description as possible, including demographics of the participants, direct quotations, timing for interviews and member checks, and information on the research team to ensure transferability could be clearly discerned by any reader. The maximization of trustworthiness cannot negate limitations; but, these techniques allowed my research to be rigorous. Therefore, it was of greater value to the counseling community.

Findings

Developing the composite textural-structural analysis produced three overarching essences capturing lived experiences of being a polyamorist in counseling. Those essences were:
(a) disappointment and disrespect in ignorance of vital identities, (b) the necessities of trust and connection for empowerment and growth, and (c) the complementary nature of relationality in polyamory and counseling.

Essence 1: Disappointment and Disrespect in Ignorance of Vital Identities

Although all participants had positive experiences in counseling, they all described moments of disappointment, disconnection, or harm connected to their counseling experience. Most of those incidences occurred directly as the result of their counselor having ignorance of one of their key identities with a perceived unwillingness or apathy about educating themselves. Participants felt misunderstood or felt parts of their identity were not important to their counselor. The intensity of this messaging even impacted those who had yet to begin counseling, as observed with Dub. Dub’s peers had counseling experiences disconfirming of their identities as polyamorists, which was part of Dub’s reasoning to delay beginning counseling to avoid a similar experience. Although polyamory was an identity frequently misconstrued by participants’ counselors, participants also navigated discourtesy connected to being bisexual, being a rape survivor, and being an adolescent. Some of these counseling relationships were able to recover from this disconnection, reaching a place where the work of counseling could occur; but, not all of the relationships recovered, resulting in fraught endings to the counseling relationship.

As a result of polyamory being an integral part of their lives, participants experienced pressure to provide education about those identities to support their counselors through their ignorance. Some counselors were able to meet that demand and others were not. Samantha described that she “felt like [she] had to educate them.” Mia also shared her frustration with the experience by stating, “Don’t rely on your clients to educate you.” The experience was one of compulsion and obligation. Their experience was, if they waited for the counselor to take action
to educate themselves, there would be no change in the counselors’ comprehension. Feeling required to provide that knowledge created a sense their minority status was unimportant to their counselor.

For participants who did not feel able to provide education to their counselor, the counseling experience felt like a trap. Sue’s time of disconnection occurred around her experience of being an adolescent. The nature of her adolescence was not something she was developmentally able to elucidate for her counselor. As a result, Sue shared, “I felt like there was something wrong with me because it wasn’t working.” Evelyn had congruent experiences and described her counselor “just made [her] out to be a very bad person.” Additionally, Evelyn shared, “That’s some shame I carried around for a while.” Evelyn was only 19 years old at the time; she did not have the tools to stand up to her counselor’s assessment that it was somehow Evelyn’s responsibility as a woman to keep her husband engaged and sexually faithful. As a result, these participants believed they were caught in a counseling experience that left them feeling they were deeply flawed and seemingly unable to improve or grow, especially given a professional was informing them this was the truth of their existence. Shame provoked by ineffective counseling limited potential growth and self-awareness because participants were unable to be in the vulnerable state of connection that counseling required.

This perceived lack of counselor effort left participants feeling frustrated and unable to connect with their counselors. This frustration stemmed from a paralleling process of their cultural experience of being othered or misunderstood. As a result, participants felt disconnected from the counselor to an extent participants were unable to form relationships with mutual connection because that type of connection included a deepening knowledge of the self. If the self they had previously known was rejected, the work of the relationship became a matter of
defense of that self-knowledge, making the working alliance adverse to the type of connection that yields a beneficial counseling relationship. Thus, participants described friction and disconnection, which centered on being unable to address the goals they sought counseling to achieve.

For six participants, they experienced an increase in carefulness or wariness when selecting future counselors. Emily shared:

I don’t want to feel like every time I have to talk about an issue, I have to educate my therapist on what polyamory means cause that would detract away from the time I could talk about what was going on.

Similarly, Samantha shared, “I spend enough time advocating for myself outside of counseling; counseling is about me time. So, didn’t want to have to do that in counseling.” Samantha highlighted an important piece of living with a stigmatized identity, which was that much of her life included having to teach others about her polyamory and her way of being in the world. Counseling needed to be a space where Samantha did not have to defend her existence as she was often expected to do. Participants were less able to trust that counselors would be willing to seek out the knowledge participants needed them to have, as evidenced by the counselor’s failure to do so. Participants invested more effort and carefulness when seeking their new counselors because they were unwilling to tolerate ignorance in a counselor again.

Essence 2: The Necessities of Trust and Connection for Empowerment and Growth

All participants were able to find connected and empowering counseling, and all found effective counselors while they identified as polyamorous. Connection in this context describes psychological contact with another person as a nonjudgmental understanding and embracing of the holistic self of the participant that facilitated vulnerability, while still experiencing counseling as practical and egalitarian. Participants were able to find counselors who were
skilled at creating safety and growth-fostering relationships that included the ability to support participants in creating an overall increased sense of worth and increased knowledge of themselves. Participants sought counseling for different concerns, such as managing anxiety, living with chronic mental health concerns, or navigating situational stress. They sought counseling with different goals in mind. Mia shared, “I just needed somebody to keep venting to when [a crisis with my metamour] kept being terrible.” Samantha described her counseling experience, sharing, “[It is] a point in my life where I get to completely just be. And pick apart my life with somebody that it doesn’t impact.” Dub described receiving tools from their counseling when they were more depressed. As Dub started to improve, they shared, “I finally reached points of, ‘Hey, this [tool] I’ve been given, I can finally find a way to utilize this.’ Those moments of feeling like, okay, [counseling] is working out.” Reasons why counseling was growth fostering for participants were as varied as they were; but, participants all benefited from feeling understood and safe in their connection with their counselor. To vent or pull life apart required vulnerability that their counselors were able to support.

All participants were able to reach a point in their counseling experiences where counseling was something that helped them live their life more ably. Counseling was affirming of them holistically. Heather described counseling, sharing, “[It was] an external person telling me that I am just fine. I am perfect. . . . This is a very Mr. Rogers thing to say, but you are perfect just the way you are.” Sue echoed that sense of being seen in her entirety, sharing, “[My counselor] was a guide and almost a mentor on my journey with me. I didn’t feel separated. I didn’t feel like I was being judged.” To try new ways of being in a relationship was threatening for those who had not experienced growth-fostering relationships in the past. The security of the relationship was necessary to be open to the novel experience of a mutually connected
relationship. For participants who had already experienced a growth-fostering relationship, the
need for that type of connection became crucial for greater depth of vulnerability.

Effective counselors were able to help participants build growth-fostering relationships,
which then supported greater self-knowledge through increased vulnerability, an increased
capacity to engage in self-exploration, and the increased confidence to attempt new problem-
solving in their life. Even though the effective counselors were not always described as soft-
headed or gentle, they were all trustworthy. Emily shared her best counseling experience, stating,
“I really respected [the counselor]. I really trusted her and I trusted she was trying to tell me the
right thing and, deep down, I knew it was the right thing.” Samantha shared a similar assessment
of her experiences, stating, “I figure that counseling isn’t always supposed to be comfortable
because then it wouldn’t be really growth.” Marty echoed a similar sentiment, sharing:

The place that [my counselor] held when I was going through the breakup in terms of just
being a fixed, very positive place, and making herself available too, where when I was
having really, really hard times, I could reach out and she was very open and honest
about, you know, remind me that yeah, it’s gonna suck.

These counselors were trusted to say hard things in ways that communicated caring and
connection with their honesty. The discomfort of growth Samantha voiced was survivable with a
trusted and supportive counselor. The counselors’ unwillingness to sugarcoat the experience was
tolerated, and even prized, because it supported participants in making changes they desired in
their lives. As experienced by these participants, trust and connection were necessary to be on a
path to growth and change that counseling could provide uniquely.

Essence 3: The Complementary Nature of Relationality in Polyamory and Counseling

When observing the unifying essence of what brought participants to counseling, there
was not a singular cause; but, all participants valued connection and shared a belief their lives
could be improved. Many experienced trauma or abuse and continued to seek relational
connection, both in and out of counseling. This relational drive was shared across participants. Many participants had their first counseling experiences as children or adolescents, setting a precedent that counseling was acceptable and, at times, expected in their family of origin. Others described counseling was encouraged and openly discussed in their social community. Most of them experienced some disconnection or harm in counseling; but, they chose to come back to the experience to try again. This willingness to return to the process demonstrated a readiness to not judge the experience of counseling by a single relationship and a trust in their community who supported the counseling process.

Participants had been existing outside of the social hegemony through an acknowledgment that they desired relationships other than those sanctioned in the current mononormative cultural standard. This capacity for additional romantic attachments denotes an increased desire for intimacy. As a result, participants were ready to consider and address emotional complexity to achieve their desired outcomes, and a readiness to believe their life could be made into something different. In counseling, participants were supported in creating growth-fostering relationships, which was a model for building further empowering and mutual connections, both in and out of counseling. Emily shared, “[Polyamory is] such a big part of my life; but, it is especially important in my counseling. Like, I can’t see myself developing a fulfilling relationship with a counselor and holding that back and about myself.” There was a need to be fully present in the counseling relationship that did not support compartmentalization of the self. Participants were people who were open to the counseling experience as a relational vector for change, which required an acknowledgment of their inherently holistic nature. Their experiences as polyamorists could not be removed from their experience as clients. The counseling experience was relational, their capacity for polyamory was relational, and those
experiences were inextricably linked. From this understanding, there was a merging of personal responsibility to address their emotional needs through counseling, and then providing those increased emotional resources to their partners and their community.

To further emphasize their orientation to community, many participants were not just attending counseling; they were also actively espousing for the benefits of counseling with their peers and in their community. Many participants described their advocacy and support for others to start their own counseling, including Sue, who stated, “I recommend therapy to anybody who’s going through stuff.” They experienced connection and growth in counseling and wanted others to be able to experience it. Dub shared:

I’m friends with a lot of people that are going into counseling and are more open to these ideas, and that makes me feel happy. So, there’s like a new generation of people who have the right tools and an open mindset to things. They’ll be able to help other people.

Dub wanted that type of change and care to exist in their community. These experiences reinforced the normalization of the counseling process in their communities. Counseling supported an active relational way of being, from Heather, who stated she was using her time in counseling “to be a better ally, both towards [her] partner and her therapy and just in general in life,” to Evelyn, who shared, “I think I know myself better and so therefore I’m able to communicate it better to other people.” The way participants were in their relationships, both personal and professional, was changed through how they experienced relationships in counseling, through the depth of connection and increased knowledge of self they found in that process.

Discussion

For the remainder of this article, I discuss findings of the three essences in relation to existing literature, limitations of the study, implications for counselors and counselor educators,
future research, and a final conclusion. When considering the essence of disappointment and
disrespect in ignorance of vital identities, one of the most important findings corroborated in this
study was people who are polyamorous are not specifically seeking counseling to address
care. Concerns about being polyamorous (Peabody, 1982). Although their polyamory provided
important context or background for concerns in their lives, none of the participants reported
presenting to counseling to address their polyamory as an independent concern. Participants
believed their polyamory was not inherently disordered and was experienced as a healthy way of
being (Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Weitzman et al., 2009); therefore, it did not require specific
treatment.

As participants experienced counseling, being required to provide education to their
counselor to have the structure of their relationships understood continued the feelings of
marginalization, delegitimization, and relative invisibility (Barker & Langdriddle, 2010; McLean,
2004; Rothschild, 2018). Feeling required to educate your counselor, a trained and educated
professional, further perpetuated the experience of stigma concerning polyamorous identities in
counseling (Kisler & Lock, 2019) and discrimination against polyamorists (Graham, 2014;
Weber, 2002), despite the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics, including nondiscrimination of relational
orientations such as polyamory. This preferencing of monogamy additionally matched with the
understanding that an unexamined implicit bias will be perceived by clients in counseling
sessions (Boysen, 2010). This bias can result in counselors who appear rejecting and neglectful
in the process of counseling (Asay & Lambert, 1999), which participants experienced when
encountering moments that clearly indicated a lack of counselor investment. This stigma
participants experienced also echoed experiences of participants in the Kisler and Lock (2019)
study.
Participants also experienced pockets of ignorance with their counselors for matters other than their polyamory; but, these were matters directly connected with their other vital identities, such as being bisexual or being a rape survivor. Multiculturally competent counseling is knowledgeable counseling (Ratts et al., 2016) wherein participants would not have experienced gaps in their counselors’ experience in such a detrimental manner. Participants needed counselors who were ready to identify their own places of inexperience and lack of knowledge; however, many counselors failed to do so, resulting in participants wary of future counseling.

The necessities of trust and connection for empowerment and growth was observed through the framework of RCT used in this study. Effective counseling occurs when a counselor is able to establish a growth-fostering relationship with their client that has mutual empathy (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Participants described experiences capturing the mutual growth-fostering model; through those experiences, they were also learning how they wanted to structure their relationships as part of the counseling process. This type of relationship combats internalized narratives that the client is somehow inherently unlovable or unworthy, which then perpetuates mental unwellness by creating relationships that repeat this messaging of unlovability or unworthiness, or both (Miller & Stiver, 1997). All movement toward a new type of relational connection requires vulnerability and “trust enlarges as the client takes small steps toward more connection” (Jordan, 2018, p. 58). As a result, creating trust and connection is unique as the nature of holistically experiencing another person. Although the growth-fostering relationship can be specifically cultivated in the counseling relationship, it can occur in any part of the client’s life, giving benefits to that type of relationship model (Miller & Stiver, 1997). After being developed, the relationship model is frequently repeated by the client in other areas of their life. This repetition was also observed in participant experiences in this study.
Finally, the complementary nature of relationality in polyamory and counseling highlighted how all participants were able to create and sustain the mutual growth-fostering relationship needed for successful counseling (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Their ability to form a robust and healthy relationship with their counselor as a polyamorist reinforced the knowledge that polyamory is a healthy way of being (Fern, 2020; Knapp, 1976; Peabody, 1982; Weitzman et al., 2009). Polyamorous clients benefitted from having a counselor who was able to confront bias concerning polyamory as part of the therapeutic process (Jordan et al., 2017). This previous research frames the finding that the relational nature of polyamory and counseling are connected in the counseling process, especially when facilitated by a knowledgeable counselor.

Counseling and polyamory are further connected as processes when considering most participants were reading about polyamory. Much of the polyamory literature includes the suggestion to seek counseling to build further tools and to address concerns such as jealousy, communication, and time management (Fern, 2020; Hardy & Easton, 2017; Veaux & Rickert, 2014), which would mirror topics and skills that could arise in the work of counseling. Polyamorists seek counseling for mental health concerns; but, they also receive messages from their communal literature to (a) seek counseling for attachment concerns (Fern, 2020), (b) develop robust personal boundaries (Veaux & Rickert, 2014), and (c) work through concerns that might arise in the transition to polyamory while in an existing relationship (Hardy & Easton, 2017). None of these reasons are criteria that correspond to a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The desired role of counseling in such situations serves to develop new ways of being in relationships, such as learning how to be in a mutually growth-fostering relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997), or learning how to navigate having multiple attachment figures (Fern, 2020).
Limitations

This study contained several limitations, including limited diversity in both participants and research team. Polyamory research has failed to capture a more diverse experience for people who are polyamorous (Sheff & Hammers, 2011) Although this study strove to attract a diverse background of participants, most participants identified as White women. There may be several factors related to this result. The first possibility may be that more people who are White (Dobalian & Rivers, 2008) and women (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) are open to seeking counseling services, resulting in a group that is preselected in its homogeneity. Additionally, the demographics of people who self-identify as polyamorous are more likely to be White (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Lastly, demographic data of polyamorous communities of North and Central Texas do not exist; thus, the predominant Whiteness of study participants may simply be a reflection of the polyamorous communities of North and Central Texas. Regardless of these explanatory factors, the experiences of polyamorists who are people of color are a necessary part of describing the polyamorous experience at large; thus, an increased presence of those voices would have been preferred in the scope of this research.

Sheff and Hammers (2011) suggested cultivating a more diverse participant base by attempting to capture greater diversity in research team member backgrounds. Although the research team initially contained two Latinx team members, both members had scheduling conflicts at the beginning of the study and decided to exit the research team for their well-being. As a result, the research team ended up consisting of just myself. Thus, recruitment was driven and shaped by Whiteness, which is inherently less able to attract Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) experiences due to a perception of potential tokenization (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).
Implications

The findings of this study support an increased use and awareness of the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) with counselors-in-training and in-practice counselors. These findings further supported the understanding that polyamory is a relatively healthy way of being that does not have a direct, negative impact on the ability to form the growth-fostering relationship necessary for the counseling process. Participants were able to find effective and supportive counseling services; but, this was not a consistent experience because half of participants had a negative counseling experience specifically related to their identity as polyamorists. In the subsequent sections, I provide implications for counselors and counselor educators to help support future polyamorous clients in receiving effective counseling services from their professionals.

Implications for Counselors

It is important to highlight that all research participants found and received quality counseling that supported their desired counseling goals while they were out as polyamorists; therefore, there are clinicians who are providing knowledgeable and supportive services. Still, the polyamorous community has been sustaining othering and harm, which was experienced by participants of this study and is captured in the literature (Graham, 2014, Kisler & Lock, 2019).

Polyamorists are receiving counseling that is either insufficient, ineffective (Kisler & Lock, 2019), or, at times, harmful (Graham, 2014). From the findings of this study, the primary delineating factor between ineffective and effective counseling was the counselor having knowledge, or a willingness to seek knowledge, about communities participants were part of or identities they claimed. Polyamorists are concerned the counseling they receive will be ineffective; being guided by polyamorist books to prescreen counselors by reviewing
information posted on their websites (Hardy & Easton, 2017) and using directories developed in
the community of polyamory aware counselors (Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Providing competent
and sensitive counseling requires ongoing growth and development through education and self-
awareness (Ratts et al., 2016; Toporek & Daniels, 2018), and both take time and concerted effort.

**Implications for Counselor Educators**

It is essential counselor educators find paths to increase counselor understanding of
multicultural populations they might not otherwise consider or encounter. These areas need to be
further explored to prevent ongoing impacts of ignorance and stigma on marginalized groups.
Given the finding that many participants experienced their counselors as ignorant of vital
identities in their life, it may be counselors are not effectively recognizing a need to receive
varied education that would broaden their understanding of unfamiliar groups.

For counselors-in-training, it is crucial for counselor educators to instill a drive for
diverse education when serving as in-practice counselors. Early and regular exposure to material
such as the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) and a
continuous integration of multicultural identities throughout course work can emphasize the
importance of such identities (Odegard & Vereen, 2011). Trainees and students should feel
enveloped by a culture that supports seeking awareness on diverse populations as part of a
counselor’s way of being.

For in-practice counseling, creating access and interest in diverse education will be more
complex than it might initially appear. Embracing the reality of how continued education is
sought must be part of this process. Although practicing mental health counselors are required to
receive continuing education to maintain licensure, the depth and breadth of that continuing
education is impacted by personal interests (Neimeyer et al., 2010). As such, counselors may
avoid unfamiliar topics that might not be immediately apparent as relevant to their client base. Additionally, cost will impact willingness to engage with continuing education materials, preferring low-cost or no-cost options. Ensuring that quality research and education on diverse populations is reaching in-practice counseling should be a concern for all counselor educators.

Future Research

There are many valuable future paths for research revealed in the process of completing this inquiry. This study shows a limited and ungeneralizable snapshot of experiences of polyamorists in North and Central Texas. A first line of further research might be to repeat this study in other regions of the United States. The prevalence and acceptance of polyamory in different geographic regions might impact client experiences in counseling. This repeated research could also focus on capturing experiences of Black and BIPOC polyamorists who are present in the polyamorous community, but continue to be underrepresented in the research (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Another important detail that arose while completing this research was hearing from two different participants that they selected their counselor from people they had prior social associations with, which could include risk for dual relationships. Future research on how clients who hold a concealable minority identity and are stigmatized with perceived sexual deviancy, such as being a polyamorist, kinkster, or a furry, are finding supportive counselors who they believe will meet their needs without a need to be educated. Having a better understanding of this process would help support minority populations in receiving quality services with clinicians who are educated and ready to provide informed support to clients by being better able to know what clients may seek and how they seek out those professionals.
Additionally, given the observed impacts of ignorance on participants of this research, future research could be done to examine how practicing mental health professionals are seeking education about populations with whom they are unfamiliar. Although there is research on how mental health professionals seek out continuing education (Neimeyer et al., 2010), further exploration of how practicing counselors recognize, seek education, and support a minority population previously unfamiliar to them would be illuminating.

Conclusion

Based on findings of this study, polyamorists are receiving counseling of mixed quality and are not being viewed as a multicultural population worthy of being supported as such by counselors and counselor education programs. Although this study did reveal how polyamorists are receiving effective counseling and how they are using the counseling space to explore how they would like to build relationships, participants also encountered concerning ignorance. This ignorance was not only connected with their polyamory; it was connected with other vital identities, highlighting a general failing to view multicultural identities with flexibility and appropriate action as outlined in the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016). Additional research to explore how practicing mental health professionals are seeking additional education and knowledge concerning populations unfamiliar to them is recommended based on these findings. To ensure support for people of stigmatized identities, like polyamory, counseling as a field needs to continue to strive for a more inclusive definition of multicultural identities. This level of inclusivity needs to accompany action and education about those populations to address biases and erroneous beliefs about those communities. Without this active support, clients will continue to fall through the cracks with ineffective or
harmful counseling that will, in turn, cultivate community narratives that counseling is not intended to serve those who are most vulnerable.

References


APPENDIX A

EXTENDED LITERATURE REVIEW
Miller (1976) asserted being in a relationship is a healing and connecting force. When relationships are growth fostering and mutually empowering, they provide people with five good things: (a) a sense of zest or energy, (b) an increased knowledge of oneself and the other(s) in the relationship, (c) a desire to create more relationships, (d) a desire to act in life, and (e) an overall increased sense of worth (Miller & Stiver, 1997). These components enable people to grow into their authentic and empathic selves. Based on this precept that certain types of interpersonal connections lead to emotionally strong and healthy people, it is both understandable and necessary that humans are drawn into relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

The Evolution of Relationships

The typical romantic and sexual relationship structure varies widely across cultures. Anatomically modern humans have existed for 200,000 years; in that time span, humans have engaged in innumerable relationship configurations (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). For hundreds of thousands of years, humans were predominantly “fierce egalitarians” (Ryan & Jethá, 2010, p. 9), sharing resources such as food, shelter, and equality of labor and social roles as a means for survival. Human to human connection was required for survival in that time because no human could survive alone. There followed a major shift in the way humans were in relationships with the advent of standardized agricultural practices approximately 8,000 years before the common era (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). The definition of survival shifted in modernity to include increasingly more complex social, economic, and political constructs.

Romantic and Sexual Distinction

Romantic love and sexual attraction do frequently exist as a cooccurring phenomenon. Diamond (2003) described how romantic love and sexual desire can emerge as part of a relationship when members spend large amounts of time together, especially in physical contact.
Although Diamond does not explore this topic in depth, their work suggests a person who experiences romantic attraction without sexual attraction (or vice versa) may develop the other feeling with enough exposure, such as in a marriage; however, the development of those feelings is not guaranteed. Romantic attraction and sexual attraction may have become entangled with the enforced closeness of marriage with development of monogamous and polygynous (i.e., one man with multiple wives) relationship structures during the agrarian revolution (Ryan & Jethá, 2010), which began approximately 10,000 years before the common era.

Social historians found evidence during the time of fierce egalitarianism most adult members of a social group would have multiple, simultaneous, and ongoing sexual relationships that were often casual; however, they served as bonds for the group (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). In contrast, in the contemporary dominant culture, sexual desire and romantic love are considered intrinsically connected. However, historians and cross-cultural researchers have found in the past and in other cultures, the two have been functionally independent (Diamond, 2003). Galupo et al. (2017) found people believed their sexual orientation was more accurately measured when romantic attraction and sexual attraction were disaggregated. A wider variety of identities become possible when romantic love and sexual desire were disentangled. Diamond (2003) provided examples of people who experienced intense same-gender romantic attraction without same-gender sexual desire or same-gender sexual desire without same-gender romantic attraction. People who are asexual sometimes report romantic attraction (Scherrer, 2010), further highlighting the disconnection between sexuality and romance.

Monogamy and polygyny developed with the advent of agriculture due to the creation of, and desire to protect, private property. With the development of property, and subsequently inheritance, the matter of paternity became crucial; therefore, creating sexually exclusive
relationships with women was in high demand (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). This time also shifted the role of women; women were required to barter their reproductive capacity to receive life-rendering supports such as food and shelter. This changing role for women may be linked to the tendency of patriarchal cultures to be warlike; in a warlike culture, there is a need for more warriors (Hite, 1994). These needs emphasized the importance of women for breeding and deemphasized them as companions or partners.

Christian Underpinnings

The advent of agriculture heralded a shift from men and women standing as relative equals in a social unit to a patriarchal marriage with the husband as subject and the wife as property (Lano, 1995), with an emphasis on the ownership of women among the followers of Abrahamic religions (Hite, 1994). This shift can be seen in the Ten Commandments of Abrahamic religions whereby followers of those sects are commanded not to covet their neighbor’s house, livestock, or wife (New King James Version Bible, 1975, Exodus 20:17). Although polygynous marriages are described in the Old Testament such as the households of Solomon (New King James Version Bible, 1975, 1 Kings 11:1–3) and Moses (New King James Version Bible, 1975, Exodus 2:21, Numbers 10:29, Numbers 12:1), most Christian religious practice supports monogamous pairing (Hite, 1994).

Christianity spread quickly when the Roman Catholic Church could spread to any part of the known world that had Roman roads (Blank, 2008). In medieval times, monogamy had become standard practice due to laws concerning the census and taxing (Lano, 1995). At that time, women were used as bartering material for political and social gain without the guise of romance and with the social and legal mandate that the wife would be submissive to the husband in all things (Blank, 2008). Indeed, to become a nun and wed Christ was the only socially
acceptable means of avoiding marriage. It is significant that Blank (2008) described even at this relatively early point in the history of monogamy, there was social pressure to abide by these culturally pervasive expectations. This cultural pervasion is Christonormativity, which protects Christian privilege and also naturalizes the Christian experience, enforcing Christianity as the norm and non-Christian spirituality as marginalized or unnatural (Ferber, 2012). The dominant cultural value was a woman must marry either a man or God, with little thought to the romantic portion of current monogamous relationships, under these Christian guidelines.

**Monogamy, Mononormativity, and Monogamism**

Monogamy is viewed as the default statement of relational orientation in the social hegemony (Emens, 2004; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Rothschild, 2018; Sheff, 2014), where monogamy is viewed as normal (Fern, 2020; Hardy & Easton, 2017; Taormino, 2008). The concept of being paired with one person at a time has been expanded into the concepts of monamory or “love of one,” whereby a person actively desires romantic attachment to one person at a time (Sheff, 2014). Serial monogamy occurs when one person is paired with one other for a limited period instead of for the lifespan (Ben-Zeév, 2008). Serial monogamy is sometimes practiced with the intention of finding the culturally expected monogamous life partner (Heinlein & Heinlein, 2004).

The dominant culture functions from a mononormative paradigm where monogamy is viewed as normal (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Rothschild, 2018). Privileges are afforded to monogamous couples, and all other relational orientations are marginalized (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Rothschild, 2018), delegitimized, and rendered invisible (McLean, 2004). Monogamism is the active bias against people who engage in nonmonogamy, including
polyamory. This bias and expectation of monogamy can be viewed in both laws and social pressures with which polyamorists must contend.

Emens (2004) outlined, “Law contributes to that pressure [to be monogamous] . . . namely criminal adultery laws, bigamy laws, marriage law, custody cases, legal workplace discrimination, and zoning laws” (p. 284). Lano (1995) added many monogamous marriage laws appeared to streamline taxation. As a result, legal protection and social acceptance can be relatively nonexistent, especially for polyamorists with children. Cloud (1999) recounted a legal incident whereby a family of three adults lost custody of their child when the grandmother discovered the nature of the family’s polyamorous relationship, even though the child was assessed as being mentally healthy and experiencing no abuse. The grounds for the loss of custody were the caregivers were unfit due to the potential for their depravity to harm the child; the mother of the child was required to ask one of her partners to move out so she could continue as the child’s guardian (Cloud, 1999).

The social prevalence of mononormativity and monogamism is so pervasive and consistent that many popular texts related to polyamory include a discussion that works to dismantle myths the reader may have about consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) generally and polyamory specifically. Chapter 2 of Taormino’s (2008) Opening Up is titled Myths About Non-monogamy, and Chapter 2 of The Ethical Slut is titled Myths and Realities (Hardy & Easton, 2017). These myths include (a) the perception monogamous relationships are the only healthy relationships, (b) the differentiation of polyamory from patriarchal polygamy, and (c) the perception that jealousy is inevitable. The lay perception of polyamory includes themes that polyamory is unsustainable, perverse, amoral, and unappealing (Séguin, 2019). Additionally, it can be perceived as an indication there is something amiss with a polyamorous person for not
desiring monogamy or “‘real’ love” (Séguin, 2019, p. 23). Polyamorous people are also assumed to have inherently disordered attachment styles as an explanation for their desire for nonmonogamy (Fern, 2020). The point is clear that even people who may be interested in CNM and polyamory are subjected to these cultural messages.

The impact of mononormativity can also be observed in popular and classic literature, and by extension, the media at large. Nonmonogamy is frequently used as a foil for monogamy. In Saxey’s (2010) *Non-monogamy and Fiction*, the author explored how a character in a state of nonmonogamy may experience a greater sense of chaos and the chaos is resolved when the character transitions to monogamy. An example provided by Saxey is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (1813) where Elizabeth Bennet finds resolution and happiness when she definitively chooses one of her two potential suitors. This narrative structure still occurs in recent popular literature. The *Twilight* series of novels by Meyer (2009) and related movies use the same structure where Bella Swan experiences chaos until she resolved her state of having two suitors and she gained manifest power because of that choice of monogamy.

Although Saxey (2010) focused on the use of monogamy as a foil, they did not discuss texts where it is used as an indication of a characterological defect. In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s (1887) *A Study in Scarlet*, containing the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes, polygamist Mormons appear as murderers and conspirators who force a young woman into unwanted wedlock that is so traumatic, she dies. Polygamists are framed as being so deviant that their use in the tale is to help the reader to empathize with the murderer being tracked by Sherlock Holmes. This is an example of monogamism, where nonmonogamy was evidence given for the deviance of the Mormons, as a tacit explanation of their perversity. Although there are examples where nonmonogamy is the preferred way of being for a main character at the conclusion of a
story, I am able to provide only examples from science fiction literature, such as *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Heinlein, 1961), *Woman on the Edge of Time* (Piercy, 1979), and the more recent *Iron Widow* (Zhao, 2021).

Patriarchal monogamy emerged with the described shift around 8,000 years before the common era. At that time, women were commodified for their ability to produce offspring and objectified sexually (Ryan & Jethá, 2010). In this system of patriarchal monogamy, men were ascribed more social power (Lano, 1995), which limited a woman’s ability to choose a relationship.

Some authors have argued monogamy as it currently exists in modernity is not a choice; rather, a cultural compulsion (Barker, 2018; Emens, 2004; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Taormino, 2008). Rothschild (2018) proposed compulsory monogamy exists in much the same manner of compulsory heterosexuality, or comphet (pronounced comp-het). Compulsory heterosexuality is the concept wherein heterosexuality is experienced as so required by society that all indications of same-gender attraction are rendered invisible (Rich, 1980). Feeling required to comply with monogamy, active consent is rendered nonexistent without a clear path where one might say no. From an anthropological perspective, monogamy is a relatively new structure in human history that emerged to meet social needs and pressures rather than a biological way of being (Barash & Lipton, 2001; Ryan & Jethá, 2010). Some authors have argued society has been built in such a way as to encourage the choice that is monogamy over the anthropological, prehistory default that was nonmonogamy (Barash & Lipton, 2001; Ryan & Jethá, 2010; Taormino, 2008) or the choice of singledom. This is a colonized mindset that attempts to force monogamy by enforcing the dominant culture (Wilbur & Keene, 2019).
Polyamorist Identity Development

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, led by Black women and Martin Luther King, Jr., created much of the freedom allowing new identities to flourish (Hite, 1994). Queen and Schmiel (1997) identified an explosion in subidentities in the queer community beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. The queer community had a vested interest in creating identities due to cultural constraints and desire to shed stigma.

With the continued increase in openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the United States (Twenge et al., 2016), there continues to be a specialization in identities due to the desire for an identity that provides a perfect fit and “the problem [that] any ascribed and adopted identity is not what it includes, but what it leaves out” (Queen & Schmiel, 1997, p. 21). It appears this desire for specific, perfect fit identities continued to grow. The word polyamory first appeared in print in 1990 (Zell, 1990, as cited by Ravenscroft, 2004). Polyamory is a relational orientation for people who desire multiple concurrent romantic relationships.

Identity Development Frameworks

There is currently no theory explaining how people may come to an awareness of their relational orientations and develop relational orientation. Because polyamory is a concealable, stigmatized identity, frameworks for other concealable identities, such as the development of a gay or lesbian experience, are offered as potential grounding to explore the development of participants’ identity as polyamorists. Relational cultural theory (RCT) is offered as a form of general identity development informed by both feminism and multiculturalism and includes a perspective that being entirely separated from others is a myth which renders support invisible (Jordan, 2018). These general concepts are offered as frameworks that were found to fit participants of the study and were utilized throughout the research.
In Fassinger’s model of lesbian identity formation, there are four phases of identity development: (a) awareness, (b) exploration, (c) deepening/commitment, and (d) internalization/synthesis (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). These phases can be repeated due to a change in life circumstance, may not be completed at all, or can be completed individually and in relationship to a group. There is potential for this model to apply to any emergent and concealable identity due to its validation with lesbians and gay men as distinct identities (Fassinger & Miller, 1997; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996).

The Cass identity model was proposed in 1979. This model has six stages and functions under the assumption that people developing this concealable identity can view their identity in a positive light. The six stages are: (a) identity confusion, (b) identity comparison, (c) identity tolerance, (d) identity acceptance, (e) identity pride, and (f) identity synthesis. The time progressing to identity synthesis and the appearance of every stage is determined by the person developing the identity. Cass (1979) also proposed a person may undergo identity foreclosure at any time and cease identity development. Like Fassinger’s model (1996), a private and public identity will be developed over time. The goal is to reach a point where homosexuality is so integrated with the identity that it is simply another trait among many in a person who also identifies as homosexual.

From an RCT perspective, identities are created in the forge that is relationships, and growth is halted when a piece of the self is found to be unacceptable in relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997). There is a boldness in being the first to accept others for something new. What emerges is a loop in relational orientation development because relationships are also created by those individuals and individuals by their relationships. This view can be expanded to include that people shape and are shaped by their cultural surroundings, highlighting the reason for
placing importance on the multicultural perspective in RCT (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Thus, identity is developed or suppressed based on whether a person is able to find relationships that are accepting or rejecting, respectively.

Relational Orientation Rather than Sexual Orientation

For greater specificity, this study referenced polyamory as a relational orientation. Polyamory and other nonmonogamies are frequently referred to as a sexual minority or grouped with sexual orientations (Tweedy, 2011). Sexual orientation concerns who someone chooses to be sexual with and how they desire to express their sexuality (Klesse, 2014); a relational orientation concerns how someone chooses to be in relationships and how they desire to structure those relationships. These phenomena are described separately when spoken about (Klesse, 2014) and, as such, it is possible to have any sexual orientation and be polyamorous. This includes, but is not limited to, being straight (i.e., heterosexual) and polyamorous (Hardy & Easton, 2017; Sheff, 2014), gay and polyamorous (Klesse, 2006), bisexual and polyamorous (McLean, 2004; Robinson, 2013), or asexual and polyamorous (Scherrer, 2010). Those who are polyamorous might identify even when not currently in a relationship (Sheff, 2014).

Klesse (2014) argued allowing polyamory to continue to be categorized as a sexual orientation is damaging to the polyamorous community due to the ambiguity it creates. Nevertheless, there are also those who believe polyamory is a sexual orientation. Tweedy (2011) argued the definition of sexual orientations needs to be expanded to include a desire for different relationship structures. This change would then include relational orientation in this study into sexual orientation.

It seems noteworthy that Sheff and Hammers (2011) grouped the polyamorous community with the kink community—people who engage in practices such as
bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and/or sadism/masochism, also referred to as BDSM—rather than the queer community. They made this choice due to similarities in practice and culture perspective in both the polyamorous community and the kink community, which may argue a whole separate identity group that has not been widely considered. These points indicated there is little agreed upon in nonmonogamous identities; but, there are many potential theories, groupings, identities, and frameworks that may or may not fit as a way to provide structure and meaning to the following identities.

Nonmonogamy

Nonmonogamy is a relationship structure outside of, or other than, monogamy. Nonmonogamy could include people who are aromantic and choose not to be pair bonded because romantic coupling does not appeal to them. Nonmonogamy also includes infidelity or nonconsensual nonmonogamy (NNM) and CNM, such as swinging, open relationships, and polyamory.

Nonconsensual Nonmonogamy

NNM occurs when there is extrarelational contact that fills a need that is assumed or stated to be met in the additional relationship and not all parties consented to the nonmonogamy. What qualifies as infidelity, adultery, or extrarelational involvement may vary from relationship to relationship, although there are cultural standards that can define some of what counts as infidelity (Frank & DeLamater, 2010). Infidelity can include being sexual outside of the monogamous bond or having an emotional tie outside the monogamous bond. Examples can include behaviors that may seem obvious, such as the giving or receiving of various sexual acts; but, it could also include looking at pornography, fantasizing about others as sexual partners, or masturbation. Emotional infidelity consists of nonsexual betrayal of the relationship. These
activities share the theme of typically being secretive, containing some amount of shame, and withholding information or energy from the spouse or partner (Frank & DeLamater, 2010).

There is difficulty in tracking rates of NNM due to a conflation of extrarelational or extramarital sexual contact with true acts of NNM (Frank & DeLamater, 2010). Studies that aim to explore NNM with survey questions such as, “Have you ever had sex with someone other than your husband or wife while you were married?” (Greeley, 1991) might more accurately report extradyadic sexual activity; but, it might incidentally capture CNM behavior. Current estimates of NNM are placed between 20%–25% of Americans, with higher rates reported by men than women.

Consensual Nonmonogamy

CNM encompasses a variety of relational and/or sexual interactions outside of, or other than, a monogamous relationship. This term applies to any relational orientation where all parties consent to at least some members being nonmonogamous. Consent between all involved parties is the cornerstone that makes these relationships different from NNM (Frank & DeLamater, 2010; Williams & Prior, 2015). Some people choose to identify as nonmonogamous or consensually nonmonogamous for their relational orientation, such as Amanda from Our Bodies, Ourselves (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, 2011), who identified her and her primary partner’s relationship as simply nonmonogamous. Frank and DeLamater (2010) included a report of Kevin and Kira, who identified as consensually nonmonogamous.

Although consensually nonmonogamous relationships allow for more romantic or sexual variety than a monogamous relationship, infidelity is still possible in a CNM relationship. This is possible due to potential rules or boundaries in a CNM relationship that would be decided on by all consenting parties and the ability to then break those rules (Barker, 2018; Veaux & Rickert,
Approximately 4%–5% of people in the United States are engaged in CNM of some type (Conley et al., 2013), and as many as 20% of American single adults have engaged in CNM at some point in their life (Haupert et al., 2017).

**Swinging**

Swinging, which is sometimes referred to as the lifestyle (Taormino, 2008), is a relational structure that can have emotional or romantic monogamy if a romantic relationship is present, but allows for a variety of sexual partners. Swinging, or having emotionally unattached sex with someone other than a primary partner, also constitutes CNM; however, in swinging, the desire to form an emotional or romantic attachment is usually seen as undesirable, which makes it clearly different from polyamory (Klesse, 2006).

**Open Relationships**

An open relationship is when a couple who is usually in a long-term, committed relationship, frequently a marriage, opens their relationship up to new romantic partners for one or both members (Sheff, 2014). Open relationships tend to use the initial pairing as a source of stability where a person might venture out for other sexual or romantic connections. Relationships can open and close as needed for exploration and safety both inside and outside of the relationship (Johnson & Chrisman, 2015; Taormino, 2008). A couple in this type of relationship may identity as both open and with another CNM identity, such as polyamory or swinging, depending on how the couple chooses to describe their relationship.

**Polygamy**

Polygamy is the act of having multiple marriages, wherein *poly* means many and *gamy* means marriage (Sheff, 2014). Polygamy includes multiple partners of a mix of genders.
marrying; but, it also includes polygyny (i.e., having multiple wives), or as polyandry (i.e., having multiple husbands; Sheff, 2014). Polygyny is more common, having occurred in 193 of 250 societies surveyed by Lano and Parry (1995). Polyandry has existed in some of the cultures of South Asia and of South America (Lano, 1995).

Typically, polygamy is envisioned as strict polygyny, where the wives are romantically and sexually exclusive with the husband, including having no romantic or sexual relationships in the wife group. This model occurred in the Church of Latter-Day Saints (Taormino, 2008) and occurs for fundamentalist Mormons (Solomon, 2021). This is not simply polygamy; it is patriarchal polygamy. Patriarchal polygamy has similar concerns as patriarchal monogamy in that women are treated as objects who are expected to live in compliance with a society constructed by men. Taormino (2008) reported many people who are Mormon ex-polygamist reported “coercion, kidnapping, brainwashing, incest, and abuse” (p. 15) of young women by older men. These actions served to manifest the objectification of women and remove their consent; thus, it reinforced patriarchal ideals and created patriarchal polygamy with concerns stemming from a lack of choice and not from the state of plural marriage. It is important to note the Church of Latter-Day Saints formally removed polygamy from their doctrine in 1890, and polygamy is now only practiced in Mormon fundamentalist sects (Taormino, 2008).

**Polyamory vs Polygamy**

Much like how all squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares, any polyamorous marriage is technically polygamous; but, not every polygamous marriage is polyamorous. Polyamorists, with their conspicuous emphasis on ethics (Anapol, 2010; Benson, 2008; Hardy & Easton, 2017; Sheff, 2014), work to maintain the active consent and consideration of all members involved. A polygamous marriage that occurs because of a cultural
mandate, rather than the consent of all parties involved, would not be polyamorous. Consent and the ability to choose, which includes the option of saying no, differentiates polyamory and patriarchal polygamy.

Polyamory

Polyamory is relational CNM sometimes called ethical nonmonogamy (Easton & Hardy, 2009) or responsible nonmonogamy (Klesse, 2006). Polyamory is a hybrid Greek and Latin word from poly meaning many and amory meaning love; thus, it means many loves (Ravenscroft, 2004). People who have this relational orientation are frequently referred to as poly (Anapol, 2010; Hardy & Easton, 2017) or as polyamorists (Sheff, 2014). Exactly what polyamory looks like tends to be as flexible and as fluid as the people who identify with it (Hardy & Easton, 2017; Williams & Prior, 2015). Easton and Hardy (2009) stated there may be as many definitions of polyamory as there are people who identify as polyamorous.

With the definition of polyamory being so flexible, there are people who could identify as such, but chose not to, for personal reasons. Frank and DeLamater (2010) included the example of Claude and Candance who might be seen as polyamorous in their practices; but, they do not identify with the identity label because they believe their love should not have a set template. Frank and DeLamater continued to another example of Kevin and Kira, who are married to each other; but, were partnered with two women for a time. Kevin admitted although the word polyamory might be the best fit for his relational orientation, he rejected the identity because it sounded “kooky” (Frank & DeLamater, 2010, p. 18) to him. There may be others who do not identify as polyamorous simply from a lack of awareness that a polyamorous identity is an available or legitimate option.

There are social concerns for polyamorists outside of legal impacts. Polyamorists are
sometimes viewed as living a deviant lifestyle, which can impact their ability to continue employment and find housing (Emens, 2004). These impacts of perceived deviance may also impact relationships with family and with children (Cloud, 1999; Hardy & Easton, 2017). Sheff (2014) reported that coming out to children is not uncommon and it is generally positive; however, Weber (2002) reported 45% of polyamorists had not told their children about their polyamorous identity. Although there is clear stigma about parenting while polyamorous (Cloud, 1999), the outcomes for children in openly polyamorous households are comparable to outcomes in monogamous homes (Sheff, 2014).

Benson (2008) and Taormino (2008) both have entire chapters devoted to legal concerns that a polyamorist might face in life, which is also noted by Sheff (2016), including custody concerns described by Cloud (1999) or selectively enforced adultery laws (Sheff, 2016). Emens’s (2004) article centers on ways monogamy is enforced in the law. They described difficulties with wills and inheritance and with being hassled and being discriminated against concerning child custody, marriage privileges, and housing and zoning difficulties, among other difficulties.

These social impacts are so marked that even activists in the polyamorous community work to negate some perceived risks of being out as a polyamorist. *The Ethical Slut* (Easton & Hardy, 2009; Easton & Liszt, 1997; Hardy & Easton, 2017), now in its third edition, is one of the most heavily cited texts in the polyamorous community. In the first edition, Janet W. Hardy published under the pseudonym Catherine A. Liszt. In the second edition of *The Ethical Slut* (2009), Hardy used a pseudonym when her children were minors as a means of giving her children choice when being associated with someone publishing openly sex positive texts and she returned to publishing under her real name now they are over 18 years old. She used a pseudonym to manage the stigma for those she cared about.
Prevalence of Polyamory

Sheff and Hammers (2011) described the stigmatized nature of polyamory as an identity, describing reasons why people would remain covert about their polyamorous nature. As such, knowing exactly how many people identify as polyamorous is difficult to determine (Anapol, 2010; Sheff, 2014), especially because not all people who might be considered polyamorous identify with that label (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). The best estimates of the number of people in the United States who identify as polyamory could range from 0.3%–3% based on traffic to polyamorist websites and online communities (Sheff, 2014).

Diversity within Polyamory

Sheff and Hammers (2011) explored some reasoning behind why polyamorists who participate in research are primarily White, middle- to upper-class people. They outlined why people with lower socioeconomic status and people of color may choose to avoid or be inaccessible to researchers for recruitment. One reason is the nature of the creation of the mainstream polyamorous community online. Internet use, computer access, and computer ownership vary across races and classes, which may impact accessing online communities where researchers are likely to recruit.

Next, Sheff and Hammers (2011) acknowledged the protection of privilege provided to people who are White and with higher socioeconomic status, where such privilege can be used to reduce the potential negative impacts of taking on roles outside of what is typically deemed culturally acceptable. Those privileges include greater job security and insulation from potential legal impacts while openly adopting this stigmatized identity. In this way, polyamory becomes a luxury available only to those with the power to sample it (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Sheff and Hammers (2011) also explored why people of color or of lower socioeconomic
status might choose to avoid participating in the polyamorous community that seem to converge on the cultural experience of having oppressed identities such as being Black or less affluent. They described how there is a fear of tokenism, discrimination, and rejection. One participant described arriving at parties in the community and being the only person of color in a gathering of over 75 people (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). With experiences like this comes the fear any actions will be judged as the intentions of every person of color or worry that any person who wishes to engage in a relationship is simply hoping to have sex with the Black girl, a tokenized identity. This fear of being tokenized was also repeated in the most recent edition of *The Ethical Slut* (Hardy & Easton, 2017) and has been a regular theme in the online community, *Black & Poly* (Black & Poly, n.d.). This is the experience of intersectionality, which describes the complexity of living with multiple stigmatized identities (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Having one stigmatized identity might make claiming an identity with additional stigma feel burdensome or undesirable, even if the actions of the person may match what that identity describes. These compounded identities can be particularly undesirable when it compounds detrimental stereotypes, such as the hypersexualization of Black women with the perceived promiscuity of polyamorous women (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Lastly, Sheff and Hammers (2011) also acknowledged a limiting factor in the presence of people of color in polyamorous research is the prevalence of White researchers. Given stated concerns about being asked to represent an entire community or being reduced to a token, it seems reasonable that someone with a stigmatized identity might be less likely to open up to researchers who have an identity that carries more societal privilege.

**Polyamorous and Nonmonogamous Identity**

It is important to remember polyamory fits under the umbrella of CNM (Frank &
Like many identities, types of CNM can blend together, forming less distinct subidentities. According to Sheff (2014), being in an open relationship is the most common form of polyamory. Taormino (2008) and Hardy and Easton (2017) implied, and Weitzman (2006) stated, the term polyamory and open relationship are interchangeable. Hardy and Easton (2017) described the struggle in the larger nonmonogamist community that comes from defining their identity in terms that centralize the experience of monogamy as normal. Nonmonogamy is the most widely accepted term that gains traction by defining itself by what it is not (Hardy & Easton, 2017), or defining itself against the perceived norm (Barker & Langdriddle, 2010; Rothschild, 2018). Ravenscroft (2004) described swinging and polyamory exist on two different ends of the nonmonogamy spectrum, where one group emphasizes sexual experimentation without a romantic emotional attachment and the other emphasizes romantic attachment that may involve sexual expression.

There are also other identities in polyamory such as poly-for-now, polyfidelitous, and polyaffective, which are all described by Sheff (2014). Poly-for-now describes people who are experimenting with polyamory, but intend to settle into a monogamous relationship when a suitable partner has been found. These people tend to enter the polyamorous community as young and single individuals. Sheff also described the typical poly-for-now individual as someone who has recently ended a serious relationship, which implies that this person is looking for less commitment and attachment when entering the polyamorous community.

Polyfidelity resembles what might be termed a group marriage. Polyfideles are sexually and romantically exclusive in their group (Sheff, 2014). Groups may expand or contract; but, any additions to the group are typically agreed on in the group as a whole, though larger polyfidelitous groups may include individuals who are not directly sexually or romantically tied.
The term polyaffective was coined by Sheff (2014) to describe nonsexual relationships between polyamorous people. These sexually platonic, but emotionally intimate, relationships emerged primarily as a relationship between metamours, or people who share a romantic partner (Sheff, 2016), and may function as a cospouse or quasisiblings (Sheff, 2014). This type of relationship may emerge as a means of continuing a relationship that was sexual but is nonsexual at this time (Sheff, 2015). Polyaffectivity may also serve as an identity that emphasizes chosen family, or what might be considered friendship plus.

Polyamory Choice vs Intrinsic Identity

When considering polyamory as an identity, one should be aware people who are polyamorists usually fall into 1 of 2 groups: (a) those who choose a polyamorous identity and (b) those who believe polyamory is part of who they are. In The Polyamorist Next Door, Sheff (2014) described how there are some polyamorists who believe they decided to become polyamorous; people who—when weighing out what they want in life—decided that polyamory would be a good fit for them, their loves, and their lifestyle. Sheff additionally described a specific subset in this group: the people who are poly-for-now. Polyamory can even be selected as a strategic identity by people who are bisexual because it may add visibility to their bisexuality if they are partnered with a man and a woman concurrently (Robinson, 2013), or for heterosexual men with a feminist mindset who do not want to limit their partner’s options in life generally, and in love and sex specifically (Sheff, 2006).

Conversely, there are polyamorous people who believe they have been polyamorous their whole lives, and that it is part of their intrinsic identity (Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Sheff (2014) included a small excerpt from one participant, who described feeling trapped or suffocated when in a monogamous relationship. The participant goes on to say as a result, she would engage in
NCM consistently in her relationships. Polyamory was part of how she saw herself. Sheff stated there are polyamorists who know from childhood they are polyamorous and being any other way would be a denial of the self.

Benefits and Burdens of Polyamory

Polyamorists enjoy many benefits; but, there are also burdens that result from the polyamorist identity. Polyamorists are released from the social pressure to meet all sexual, romantic, and life partner needs for another person and do not experience the pressure to find all those traits in one other person (Weitzman et al., 2009). People in polyamorous relationships, where all partners live together, report greater financial security and more energy to be shared across household tasks. Specifically, this security and energy can include greater positive support and investment into the lives of children in polyamorous households, which may lead to positive outcomes for the children (Sheff, 2014). It also allows married parents the freedom not to divorce a spouse when romantic love or sexual attraction ebbs (Sheff, 2014, 2015). Sheff (2014) reported that polyamorous households can be variable, with some adults potentially entering a child’s life and then leaving if caregiving adults end the relationship, which can be relationally disruptive to the child. There are also various impacts of legally enforced monogamy, which were previously identified.

Polyamorists find the emphasis on consent and honesty rewarding (Weitzman et al., 2009). This sense of freedom by being ethical and radically honest with your partner is also explored by Taormino (2008) and in The Ethical Slut (Hardy & Easton, 2017); it is described as having a positive impact on the self and the relationships of polyamorists. Polyamorists may have better communication with their partners (Jenks, 1985) and polyamorists reported having a stronger bond with spouses or partners (Jenks, 1985; Ramey, 1975, as cited in Weitzman et al.,
Polyamorists are also able to explore their attachment style in the support of multiple relationships (Fern, 2020). Polyamorists may also experience “increased personal freedom, better social connections, potential for sexual exploration-nonjudgmental, feeling desired, feeling belongingness, more companionship, increased self-awareness, intellectual variety, increased self-exploration” (Ramey, 1975, as cited in Weitzman et al., 2009, p. 9)

Women who identify as polyamorous reported an increased sense of sexual power, specifically reporting they perceived themselves as more than sexual subjects functioning as peers with their partners who were men (Sheff, 2005). Women also reported an increased sense of autonomy and self-ownership when they were living as a polyamorist versus living monogamously (Stelboum, 1999). Overall, honesty, autonomy, and connection are some of the overarching benefits that polyamorists experience as a result of their identity.

Still, there is a lack of relational models to draw from with a polyamorous relationship, which may result in difficulties problem solving in the relationship or creating robust communication (Weitzman et al., 2009). Most relationship-targeting self-help material is aimed at monogamous couples (Fern, 2020). There are also additional effects polyamorists might experience due to the stigmatized nature of polyamory, such as social isolation and experiencing disapproval from partners, peers, or family (Weitzman et al., 2009). The result is that, as with many identities, there are perks and hardships in the polyamorous identity.

Polyamorous People Seeking Counseling

The presenting concerns of polyamorists seeking counseling tend to be unrelated to their polyamory (Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Weitzman, 2006). Still, polyamorous people are pathologized (Davidson, 2002; Weitzman, 2006) and stigmatized (Sussman, 1975), with diagnoses concerning their polyamory where no diagnosis is warranted (Davidson, 2002).
Polyamorists may be particularly desirous of counseling. Polyamory is frequently built on the desire for improved communication and to explore feelings of possessiveness (Weitzman et al., 2009) and jealousy (Sheff, 2014). Hardy and Easton (2017) described a key piece of the ethicality of polyamory is responsibility for the self in relationships. Sheff (2014) reported being responsible for self-growth is a reasonable expectation in the polyamorous community. Many self-help styled texts used for polyamorists discuss the importance of dismantling jealousy when it arises and a need to address insecurities (Hardy & Easton, 2017; Labriola, 2013; Veaux & Rickert, 2014).

Intimate relationship counseling may also be beneficial in a polyamorous relationship due to the heightened need for quality communication between partners (Sheff, 2014; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). As described previously, the lack of models for polyamorous relationship and identity development means people in polyamorous relationships must determine for themselves how they want to communicate and problem solve in the relationship (Fern, 2020; Macklin, 1978). The counseling relationship could be a valuable part of establishing and managing guidelines and structures of a polyamorous relationship while preserving the distinctiveness of the client’s personal identity.

Social Justice and Polyamory

The importance of multicultural practices and social justice work is the current guiding force in the American Counseling Association (ACA). With emphasis on increased awareness of multicultural concerns for clients of a wide variety of identities and backgrounds, such as polyamorists, it is fitting there has also been an emphasis on social justice advocacy. If those in counseling are committed to the agenda of multiculturalism, then counselors must also be committed to social justice (Vera & Speight, 2003). Multicultural and social justice counseling
competencies include skilled counselors should be aware of stereotypes and discrimination experienced by marginalized groups, and how marginalization might impact their overall mental health (Ratts et al., 2016). With such competencies, it seems logical the step following awareness of oppressive societal practices and values clients experience, a counselor would become motivated to advocate for social change to support client success. Such success might be hoped for with increased awareness and acknowledgement of the discrimination of the polyamorous community.

The advocacy competencies were created by Lewis et al. (2003), were endorsed by the ACA in 2003, and were updated by Toporek and Daniels in 2018. The competencies outlined six different areas created through the interaction of working on the microlevel to the macrolevel, and then working with the client or on a client’s behalf (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). The creation and adoption of these competencies indicated a shift that emphasized the importance of social justice in the counseling profession and an increased awareness of the inherent impact of the cultural environment. Additionally, the promotion of social justice emphasized in the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics preamble and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards include it as an important part of the counselor way of being.

Multicultural Counseling

Clients have always had various cultural concerns, as seen through the development of concepts such as intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Although not handled in a way that would be considered tactful in the present, Freud’s awareness that women may have differing concerns from men in relation to their mental health, such as through the Oedipus complex that affected only men (Freud, 1949), is an acknowledgment that diverse groups will require different
types of services from their mental health professionals. This interest in cross-cultural
differences was primarily overlooked until the mid-1960s because most counselors served
dominant culture clients (i.e., White, straight, cisgendered, and monogamous) in the middle class
(Baruth & Manning, 2012; King, 1968). There was a marked shift at that time due to the impact
of the Civil Rights Movement (Baruth & Manning, 2012). There was an increased number of
studies examining effects of race on counseling in the 1970s (Baruth & Manning, 2012) and in
1972 the Association for Non-White Concerns in Personnel and Guidance, a division of the
American Personnel and Guidance Association, was founded (Parker & Myers, 1991). The
American Personnel and Guidance Association has since been renamed the American
Counseling Association (ACA, 2017) and the Association for Non-White Concerns in Personnel
renamed as the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development in 1985 (Parker &
Myers, 1991).

The impact and importance of multicultural counseling is pervasive and has continued to
grow in importance in the field of counseling. This is demonstrated in (a) the adoption of the
ACA preamble (ACA, 2014), (b) multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Sue
et al., 1992), and (c) the increasing presence of multicultural counseling in the CACREP
standards (CACREP, 2016). The current ACA (2014) Code of Ethics preamble states as part of
an ethical practice, counselors should live in alignment with some core professional values,
including “2. honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth,
dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts; [and] 3.
promoting social justice” (p. 3). These words state ethical counselors do not simply interact with
these concepts in their counseling practice; these words are their way of life and are a way of
being.
The multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Sue et al., 1992) were created by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, a division of the ACA, and were updated in 1996 (Arredondo et al., 1996) and again in 2016 (Ratts et al., 2016). When the competencies were originally published, the work was considered so important they were published jointly in both the *Journal for Multicultural Counseling and Development* and the *Journal of Counseling & Development* (Sue et al., 1992). The competencies were created to help White counselors cultivate an understanding of clients of a different racial background. The competencies are a structured approach to help counselors cultivate a deeper understanding of their clients by exploring their own cultural values and biases, exploring their client’s worldview, and then delving into culturally appropriate interventions for the client. These three areas are broken down into three constituent parts: (a) beliefs and attitudes, (b) knowledge, and (c) skills. Each part has sub criteria providing clear and structured suggestions for building and maintaining multicultural competence. The creation, reception, and adoption of these competencies indicates a desire to advance counselors who are more skilled with multicultural populations.

In consonance with the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, CACREP has the stated goal: “To promote the professional competence of counseling and related practitioners through the development of preparation standards; the encouragement of excellence in program development; and the accreditation of professional preparation programs” (CACREP, n.d., Mission section). CACREP is the current accrediting body for counseling master’s degrees and the current, most widely identified means of ensuring quality preservice training for counselors. CACREP currently requires social and cultural diversity to be taught as 1 of 8 core areas of education for preservice counseling, which specifically includes multicultural
competency and “theories and models of . . . social justice work and advocacy” (CACREP, 2016, Section 2.F.2.b). The need for multicultural awareness is addressed again in the competencies of career counseling and leadership. These ideas are so key, when program administrators hope to receive or continue their CACREP accreditation, they must demonstrate the objectives “reflect current knowledge and projected needs concerning counseling practice in a multicultural and pluralistic society” (CACREP, 2016, Section 2.B). The ubiquitous message from the document is multicultural competence and awareness is required of counselors and should be a part of the counselor’s way of being.

The Impact of Bias on Counseling

What is most crucial in multicultural counseling is both static in concept and continuously evolving in practice; counselors who adhere to multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) are challenged to continue cultivating their own personal insights and developing greater knowledge of the self. Baruth and Manning (2012) stated some of the importance with this drive for exploration is to help counselors determine what is typical in their culture and then to understand the difference in what is typical and what is healthy or normal for their clients. Arredondo and Toporek (2004) concluded multiculturally competent counseling is ethical counseling.

This need for ethical, multiculturally competent counseling has been explored with a wide variety of populations that lead to similar conclusions. Chou et al. (2012) and Zane et al. (1994) found counselors were more likely to provide a severe diagnosis to a person of minority status, and their perceived future success in treatment and in general life outcomes were viewed as being less favorable than a person with a majority privileged status. Chou et al. (2012) found a client who experienced discrimination is strongly correlated with a psychological diagnosis in
minority groups. Applying theories not culturally adapted to the client might convey a more insidious form of bias than a client might experience in other settings (Turner & Kramer, 1995). Turner and Kramer (1995) specifically described the use of mainstream theories, providing the same type of care to all people, with different racial groups as an active propagation of racism in the practice of counseling. Polyamorists reported counseling they were receiving was impacted by the lack of education by their counselors (Kisler & Lock, 2019). Without finding counselors who are striving to specifically adapt to their identity, there is a clear concern that polyamorist clients may be receiving care that is insidiously monogamist.

An additional compounding factor is explicit versus implicit bias. Explicit bias is one counselors can name, or biases of which they are aware (Sue, 2010). Implicit biases are unintended biases may be unconsciously held; thus, difficult to control (Boysen, 2010). Although people prefer to assume their explicit biases or thoughts inform their expressions of social bias (Boysen, 2010), Greenwald et al. (2009) determined implicit bias is a much more reliable predictor of subtle social bias. Therefore, if counselors explicitly state they have no racial biases, but they carry an implicit racial bias, they are more likely to act in a biased manner when interacting with people of color. Implicit bias covertly impacts the client such that the client can detect even when the counselor’s explicit beliefs are different from implicit bias (Boysen, 2010). This understanding of implicit bias is why the counselor way of being as explored in the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics preamble is so crucial—because these changes require more than checking boxes or low aspirational ethical practice to have noticeable impact in the counseling office.

Bias that leads a counselor to respond to a client in a “critical, attacking, rejecting, blaming, or neglectful [way]” (Asay & Lambert, 1999, p. 44) can damage the working alliance.
Stigma leads to a negative impact on the working alliance between client and clinician (Kondrat, 2012). Stigma can negatively impact the quality of the counseling relationship starting in an intake session (Nakash et al., 2015). Unconscious bias can negatively impact the counseling relationship from the first point of contact.

Polyamory as a Multicultural Identity

Baruth and Manning (2012) defined a multicultural population as a group of people who have a unifying characteristic they cannot change, which may lead to discrimination in their life. The unifying characteristic of polyamorists is their polyamory—wanting and having multiple romantic attachments at one time. When polyamorists have undergone internalization and synthesis of polyamory into their identity, whether or not they perceived entering into polyamory as a choice at the beginning, is a part of their identity at that point. As explored earlier, polyamorists experience discrimination both socially and legally as they move through the world. Therefore, according to Baruth and Manning’s definition, polyamorists are a multicultural population.

The need to recognize and advocate for polyamorous people or, more generally, consensually nonmonogamous people, is already covered in the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics. Specifically, section C.5 of the Code of Ethics states counselors are professionally responsible for the nondiscrimination of clients and students based on their marital/partnership status, which could include having multiple partners. There is similar wording in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (2015) Code of Ethics. Section I.1.1 states people seeking professional assistance from marriage and family therapists should not be discriminated against due to their relationship status.

Additionally, the Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive
Identities (SAIGE), which was previously known as the Association for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC), a division of the ACA, now identifies polyamorists as falling under their purview as a community for which to advocate. This update appears both on their general website, where they define the queer community initialism as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Transgender; & Two-Spirit [2S; Native Identity], Gender Expansive, Queer; & Questioning, Intersex, Agender; Asexual & Aromantic, Pansexual; Pan/Polygender; & Poly Relationship Systems, + future growth in the queer community (LGBTGEQIAP+), wherein poly relationship systems is a statement of inclusion of the polyamorous community (Ausloos, 2020). Polyamorists were mentioned in their 2013 competencies, both in explicit mention and by the definition of affectional orientation, including possible connection to multiple people at one time (Harper et al., 2013). With these additions to their literature, polyamory is now identified by SAIGE members, giving it recognition by a national counseling organization as a population worthy of note.

Even though polyamorists are included in codes of ethics as a group not to be discriminated against and recognized by SAIGE, they are regularly pathologized and subjected to inadvertent criticism in the counseling office (Graham, 2014). They also reported feeling their counselors lacked education on polyamory (Kisler & Lock, 2019). In Loving More Magazine, formerly a publication for those in the polyamorous community and now a nonprofit organization supporting awareness of polyamory, Weber (2002) shared that 38% of polyamorous people surveyed did not share their polyamorous identity with their therapist, and 10% of polyamorous people who did share their concealable, stigmatized identity with their therapist experienced a negative response.
Bias in Counseling and Polyamory

Adding to these worries, Knapp (1975) found 33% of counselors could not approve of sexually open marriages, and Rubin and Adams (1986) found 27% of counselors would not support people in sexually open marriages. Similarly, 9% of counselors would attempt to use their counseling skills to encourage clients to change their polyamorous ways (Knapp, 1975). One third of counselors surveyed stated they would believe any person engaging in nonmonogamy would have a personality disorder. These numbers are very dated, and it is concerning these are citations referenced in the literature. Literature searches through EBSCOhost and Google Scholar at the beginning of this study in 2018 showed these were the most recent data. Given how harmful bias can be in the counseling relationship, it is shocking there had been no follow up on this research after uncovering this bias.

The dated literature is particularly alarming when considering case examples such as the one presented by Graham (2014), which detailed the experiences of a client who was encouraged to abandon her polyamorous identity that removed her from her system of support in a time of high emotional need. Even though this is not generalizable data, it is a more recent data point that indicates at least some counselors may not be treating their polyamorous clients with appropriate multicultural sensitivity. More recent research, such as Kisler and Lock (2019), explored how polyamorists experienced their counselor as lacking familiarity with, and knowledge of, polyamory. This understanding should also be paired with the knowledge people who identify as polyamorous are found to be as mentally healthy and happy as people who are monogamous (Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Weitzman et al., 2009).

Knapp (1976) completed their research with a small sample size limiting generalizability. However, in the sample of people who were polyamorists, Knapp determined there was no
significant difference from those in the sample when compared with the general population.

Peabody (1982) concluded polyamorous people were seeking nonmonogamous relationships because they are no longer content with a monogamous relationship structure, rather than having a pathological need to be engaged with multiple sexual partners. The people seeking those relationships appear to be no more or less likely to have psychopathology than any other population. Rubin and Adams (1986) found polyamorists were just as likely to be happy, or unhappy, as their monogamous counterparts.

More recent research seems mixed when considering the experience of the polyamorous client in counseling. Jordan et al. (2017) found polyamorous clients can benefit from therapists who are able to help use the therapeutic process to create narratives of power to confront monogamism; however, this would require counselors who are knowledgeable about those concerns. This study captures an experience in counseling that is informed and empowering. Kisler and Lock (2019) conducted a qualitative exploration of the counseling experiences with 20 polyamorous participants on their struggles in the counseling setting and their suggestions for change. The major themes revealed these participants experienced stigma from their counselors and wished their counselors were better educated concerning polyamory, which is more concerning.

There is a recent increase in resources for clinicians who are hoping to support polyamorists in their counseling offices. *A Therapist’s Guide to Consensual Nonmonogamy* (Orion, 2018) is a text penned by a marriage and family therapist hoping to serve as a singular resource for this need; the text highlights CNM can be healthy and addresses specific needs for those in a CNM relationship, such as openly discussing jealousy issues. Weitzman (2017) was included in a text that hoped to provide updated perspectives for couple’s therapy with a full
chapter on meeting the needs of polyamorists in counseling. The same Weitzman was part of the Weitzman et al. (2009) who collaborated on the article titled, *What Psychology Professionals Should Know about Nonmonogamy*. Although these texts serve as primers in polyamory or CNM more generally, only the article by Weitzman et al. (2009) focused on a polyamorists’ needs as an individual in counseling. Much updated material for mental health professionals focuses on the work of polyamorists as part of a relationship in intimate relationship counseling, and there is less focus on the polyamorist as an individual.

To synthesize, polyamory is a healthy way of being (Knapp, 1976; Peabody, 1982; Weitzman et al., 2009) that is discriminated against (Graham, 2014; Weber, 2002), pathologized (Graham, 2014), and stigmatized (Kisler & Lock, 2019), despite being acknowledged as an identity that should be protected from discrimination in both the ACA (2014) and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (2015) Codes of Ethics. There are an increasing number of resources for counselors serving the polyamorous community; but, it is not in general knowledge for many clinicians. It is important for counselors to provide robust and just services inclusive to all communities, and it is less likely a counselor will be able to do that if voices of that community are not amplified by research. It was the intention of this study to explore experiences in counseling of self-identified polyamorists to consider if their needs are being met in the counseling setting by exploring the stated research question: What are the counseling experiences of adult clients who self-identify as polyamorous?
APPENDIX B

DETAILED METHODOLOGY
The purpose of this study was to examine lived experiences of polyamorists in counseling to amplify voices of this underrepresented population and support the future development of a best practice for working with polyamorous clients. In this section, I present the methodology and approaches used for the study, including the research question, framework, description of phenomenology, sampling and participants, data collection, data analysis procedures, establishing trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Reiteration of Statement of Problem and the Research Question

Based on the review of the literature, I determined the best course of action was to reach out to polyamorists who have received counseling and to provide an understanding of what their experiences were through their direct observations and encounters, centering their voices. It was vital to explore whether clients who are polyamorous are receiving just and multiculturally responsive counseling services. Using research to amplify the voices of minority groups provided a clear direction and value to this research.

I conducted this study as a phenomenology to best distill the lived experiences of participants. The guiding question was: What are the counseling experiences of adult clients who self-identify as polyamorous?

Framework

I approached this study from a relational-cultural theory (RCT) perspective. Jean Baker Miller and the women of the Stone Center initially developed RCT in the 1970s as a feminist and multicultural reaction to traditional types of therapy (Miller & Stiver, 1997), which coalesced in the book, Toward a New Psychology of Women (Miller, 1976). The theorists of RCT recognized the ubiquity of cultural stratification, which can result in differences appearing to be based in nature and self-evident (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997). The theorists also proposed all
changes to the self occurs in a relationship, proposing growth is stunted when people experience rejection or shame in a relationship, which is typically experienced as feeling unworthy or unlovable (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Therefore, growth is fully realized in mutually empowering relationships. I selected this framework due to the goodness of fit with the subject material given the emphasis on how participants experienced their relationships, both with their counselors and also as polyamorists. Additionally, the focus on multicultural concerns from the theory connected with the identification of polyamorists as an unrecognized multicultural group known to experience bias outside of counseling.

Phenomenology

Qualitative research seeks answers to questions that begin with words such as how, why, or what, in the pursuit of meaning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). A phenomenological inquiry is a qualitative research approach that embraces the subjective nature of reality and has roots as early as the 18th century. This systemic approach supports a researcher in cultivating epoché, where previous judgments are set aside to then allow for full engagement with the essence of the phenomenon as conveyed by those who experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché allows researchers to have a fresh perspective on the phenomenon being explored and aids in the avoidance of subjective interpretation of the provided data (Hays & Singh, 2011). The goal of a phenomenology is to generate knowledge about how people experience phenomena that are difficult to share with others, such as bodily sensations, feelings, and the nature of relationships (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Phenomenology was the best means of addressing the research question due to the inherently relational nature of the research question. Phenomenology provided the structure to uncover the meaning my participants made about their experiences as
counseling clients who identify as polyamorists with an “emphasis on the universal and divergent aspects of [the] experience” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 45).

There was an additional goodness of fit of the design, given the relatively concealed nature of the polyamorous identity. With a phenomenological approach, I drew out the meaning and underlying essence of the client–counselor interaction while interacting with a relatively small number of people, allowing for depth when breadth may be limited and tracking feelings and experiences over time (Grbich, 2013). Phenomenologies benefit from drawing directly and immediately from the participant’s experience (Hays & Singh, 2011). Grbich (2013) described the phenomenological approach as useful when there is little in-depth data, as was true in this case. I ruled out other approaches to ensure goodness of fit before beginning the research process.

Self of the Researcher

In this phenomenology, I was the tool that collected the data by conducting semistructured interviews. I was also the lead researcher in distilling the essence of what was revealed through the analysis process. As such, it was important to disclose my perspective on the topic and open any discussion on potential conflicts of interest to highlight places where particular attention should be paid to creating epoché. To create epoché or “freedom from suppositions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85), the values, biases, and judgment of the researcher must be known (Creswell, 2013). According to Moustakas (1994), “The challenge of the Epoché is to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” (p. 86). In the pursuit of creating the epoché and in allowing for transparency, I wrote the following brief narrative before the start of the research and then wrote an addendum at the end of the process. These narratives
included thoughts on my relationship with polyamory, counseling, and some other ways I believed I was potentially occluded in relationship to this research without an intentional effort to create naivete.

This Researcher: Initial

I discovered polyamory as a concept when I was 18 years old and in my undergraduate experience. I was introduced to the concept by my desired romantic and sexual partner at the time who currently had an established partner. When he explained to me that he was polyamorous, I was unsure; but, I was open to the experience in a way driven by boldness, naivete, and lust as is fitting the development of early adulthood. He recommended I read *The Ethical Slut* by Easton and Liszt (1997). It took me a few months to read the text; but, when I completed it, I was aware it had vastly changed the way I perceived relationships and myself in those relationships.

I have identified as polyamorous since that undergraduate experience and grown into adulthood with that identity. Although at times I have been content in relationships that were functionally monamorous by the design of my primary partner, I have never abandoned that identity. I am aware I conceptualize a willingness to be open in a relationship as an indication of health in the relationship and an indication of trust. My assumption is that, like myself, most people who identify as polyamorous will experience it as an innate part of their identity, not something that is consciously chosen, even if they were initially introduced to polyamory by an external experience. I am frequently quiet in my polyamorous identity due to concerns about stigma. I am aware I am much more likely to be closeted in professional environments where people who are uninformed about consensually nonmonogamous ideas might perceive deviance and unfitness for work or scholarship.
Professionally, I am a licensed mental health professional and a doctoral student in counselor education. I practice my counseling from a relational cultural perspective, which I believe coincides with my polyamorous identity in an affirming manner. Given my professional and personal identity, it might be assumed I am wanting to conduct this research for increased exploration of my own experiences to share them with my professional community. Although that might be a part of my motivation, sadly, my primary motivation comes from the narrative of a friend who is polyamorous. This friend believed it would be too much of a burden to justify her polyamory to her counselor; therefore, she kept her identity concealed. I then explored counseling best practices and other counseling research related to polyamory or consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) and found no research in an EBSCOhost search at that time.

I am aware as I have continued to pursue this topic, I have developed preconceptions about what may be revealed in the process of this phenomenological study. My friends have described counseling related to their polyamory to be frequently negative. Case studies found in the literature stated many polyamorous clients experience stigma in their counseling. Research indicated counselors would attempt to change their polyamorous clients (Knapp, 1975), and I carry the personal experience of needing to educate counselors at all levels of experience about what polyamory is. As such, I wanted to explore this topic out of concerns that polyamorists are not receiving just and multiculturally aware and responsive treatment in their counseling; however, I was open from the start to discovering this was not the case.

Other impactful identities for this research included that I am in the pool of people who are usually represented in the polyamorous research. I am a White, queer, cisgendered person from an upper-middle class background with a professional career and a college education. It is also important that I identify as a feminist and, as such, that perspective may have impacted how
I perceived the experiences of my participants. All of these assumptions and identities will be addressed in the development of epoché.

This Researcher: Addendum

Since the start of this process, I have become more open and affirmed in my polyamory. When I initially wrote about myself, I shared I was closeted in my polyamorous identity in professional settings; however, that is no longer the case. I even include it on my website for my private practice. I find there is strength in my openness and it is positive for my clients to be aware of my relational orientation before starting my work with them, especially for those who are CNM. Through continuing to see clients as a relational-cultural therapist, it became clear RCT had an inherent valuation on the importance of relationship, which required a level of vulnerability and transparency from the practitioner that I find was served in my openness.

I have also moved away from the North Texas area since beginning the dissertation process; I now live in Seattle, Washington, where I have found a higher concentration of polyamorists. I am aware, even here, people are anecdotally reporting it is hard to find mental health professionals who are able to provide sensitive services to polyamorists. My gender identity has changed since the beginning of this research. I describe my experience of gender as being an agender woman. I additionally identify as a disabled person as an evolution of my identity, providing recognition to my autoimmune disorder and my new experiences with episodic, multiday pain in the form of migraines.

Lastly, I realized my initial exploration did not include my own counseling history. I did not have my first foray with counseling until I was in my master’s program in my early 20s. I sought counseling through student services at St. Edwards to support the ending of a relationship, which was the last one where I strove for a monogamous-like connection. The counselor was
kind, and all I had really needed was someone to cry with who was not a friend. I had two
different counselors who were both previous University of North Texas graduates while I was
still in Texas during my time in the PhD program. I sought their support to explore relational
concerns, but also for support with the stresses of the PhD program. I am currently working with
a counselor in the Seattle area who is helping me manage the stress of being a private practice
counselor during a pandemic and who is a primary support for the strain I am experiencing as
part of the dissertation process. I have been lucky to have counselors who have all been
supportive of my polyamory and have all been ready to educate themselves.

The Research Team

There were two additional members of the research team, Megan and Ashley. Both
people were selected to join the team as master’s students with the University of North Texas
who had graduated and were working as mental health professionals. At the time of the study,
Megan identified as a White, cisgender woman. She was polyamorous, worked in private
practice, and ran support groups for a suicide prevention nonprofit when we last spoke. At the
time of the study, Ashely identified as a White ciswoman. She was polyamorous but reported she
was not fully open in that identity. She was working as a residential case manager at a
psychiatric hospital when we last spoke.

These team members were selected for their interest in the project and for their
perspectives as clinicians. They were also selected for their in-group perspective as polyamorists.
They were involved in all stages of analysis to provide an additional perspective on the
participants. Additionally, the supervising researcher reviewed all the descriptive analyses for
precision of message and to support constructing an effective analysis.
Sampling and Participants

The procedures of a phenomenology require the use of criterion-based sampling (Heppner et al., 2016). According to Creswell (2013), participants must have experienced the phenomenon of interest and must be able to articulate that experience to be included in the sample. The criteria for participants were self-identifying as polyamorous and having engaged in counseling in the last 3 years, including participants who were currently in counseling. All participants were 18 years or older and spoke English fluently because I only speak English. Clear spoken communication was an integral part of the interview process. I sought participants who were local to the North and Central Texas area to allow for in-person interviews in driving distance of my location at the time of interviews.

Because a phenomenological approach emphasizes the subjective nature of reality (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) and RCT highlights the impacts of cultural background (Miller & Stiver, 1997), I sought as diverse a population as possible in my participants. Given the focus on a subjective reality in a phenomenological approach, I determined it would not be prudent to attempt to identify polyamorous clients based on their reported behaviors. This choice was due to the added difficulty of having to accurately determine criteria for polyamory, the added difficulty of finding participants, and the ethical concerns about labeling participants with a stigmatized identity that might not fit their perceived self.

The goal in a phenomenology is to reach a point in data collection where new data become redundant (Wertz, 2005). This point is commonly referred to as data saturation, whereby no new insights are uncovered through continued exploration (Creswell, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2011). Although it was impossible to say how many participants were required to reach such a point, I hoped for six to nine participants to finish the data collection process. With some
expected attrition due to scheduling or loss of interest, I estimated I could initially recruit 12 to 15 participants. I received 24 responses to my recruitment survey and completed nine initial interviews. Only one participant did not complete the study, giving eight participants in total.

Given the inherently concealable nature of the polyamorous community, I relied on word-of-mouth recruitment in the polyamorous community to reach people who were polyamorous and had received counseling. I contacted known members of the polyamorous community in Dallas and in Austin who then provided my recruitment flyer (see Appendix E) to friends and acquaintances. The recruitment flyers were then primarily distributed via Facebook. I intentionally chose not to reach out to counselors who may have been working with clients who are polyamorous. This approach would have only drawn participants who have come out to their counselors and could ignore potential participants who did not feel comfortable discussing their polyamorous identity with their counselor. It also could have biased participants with a perception that I was collaborating with their counselors, which may have impacted the nature of their disclosures in the interview process.

The flyer had a link to a survey with a recruitment script that stated participants may not be selected, had the informed consent information, and had a short eligibility survey (see Appendix E) to ensure goodness of fit for the research, such as polyamorous self-identification, history with counseling, and demographic information. I provided all survey respondents an email notice that their survey responses had been received and were then contacted by the means on their preference of email, text, or phone call, to be informed they had been selected for the interview process.

All survey respondents met the key three participant criteria: (a) they self-identified as polyamorous, (b) they were over 18 years old, and (c) they were currently in counseling or had
been in counseling in the last 3 years. In the demographics section of the survey, many questions were fill-in-the-blank questions, allowing respondents to describe their own identities. The average age of survey respondents was 36 years old with the youngest respondent being 24 years old and the oldest being 53 years old. The average reported income was $53,000 a year with the highest earning reported at $116,000 a year and the lowest earning at $9,000 a year. Of the 24 respondents, 22 reported White identities, which was a significant majority. Additionally, 18 respondents self-identified as women, two reported being nonbinary, and one reported being gender queer.

Of the 24 survey respondents, I excluded two from participation due to familiarity with the researcher and excluded another due to living outside of the research area at the time of the interviews. I notified these three respondents they would not be able to complete the study. I contacted all other respondents to schedule interviews. Nine respondents were able to schedule interviews with me as the lead researcher. All others failed to respond when contacted for scheduling. Of the nine respondents who scheduled first interviews, eight completed the interview and member check process. The interviews began in May 2018 and were concluded by August 2018. The member checks were all completed in March 2020. The interviews were scheduled and conducted at locations where participants felt comfortable, so most participants chose to be interviewed in their home. One participant, Samantha, chose to be interviewed in public spaces, reporting anxiety about someone she was unfamiliar with in her private space. She chose a food court for the first two interviews and final member check and a coffee shop for the third interview.

Of the participants, five identified as ciswomen with she/her pronouns, one as a cisman with he/him pronouns, and one as gender queer with they/them pronouns. One participant began
the research process as a ciswoman and reported a shift in her gender identity by the time of completing the member checks; but, she reported ongoing comfort with she/her pronouns used in reference to herself. Seven of the eight participants reported having a bachelor’s degree and the eighth reported having some college background. Six of the completing participants were White, one was Black, and one was Black/mixed race. Their average ages were 35 years old, with the youngest being 27 years old and the oldest being 44 years old at the time of survey. The average reported annual participant income was $52,000 with the lowest income being $9,000 and the highest being $116,000. They were all located in Texas with five in the Austin area and three in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. For additional participant demographics, see Table B.1.

Table B.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mia Kensington</td>
<td>Ciswoman/Questioning</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Austin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha Gleason</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Austin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn Wright</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Black/mixed race</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Dallas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Ledbetter</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Austin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily Moore</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Austin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue D. Nym</td>
<td>Ciswoman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>$31,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Austin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marty McFly</td>
<td>Cisman</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>$116,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Dallas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dub Elle</td>
<td>Gender Queer</td>
<td>They/Them</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>Dallas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I had limited previous social contact with two participants, Dub and Evelyn. The supervising researcher reviewed the level of contact and we determined epoché could be
maintained. These participants were reminded of this contact before the first interview and were informed that, if past interactions impacted their comfort in the study, they could withdraw. Neither participant chose to withdraw from the study. These two participants were also split between the reviewing members of the research team to ensure additional insulation from bias from the lead researcher.

Data Collection

Data was collected via in-person, semistructured interviews, which is a typical approach for phenomenological research (Heppner et al., 2016). I used open-ended interview questions to allow participants to describe their experience of what it was like to be in counseling as a polyamorous person. I conducted three distinct interviews with each participant while concurrently completing data analysis. I completed the second and third interviews after an initial analysis of the previous interview, allowing for clearer credibility, authenticity, and a demonstration of sample adequacy by allowing new information to emerge during the interview process (Hays & Singh, 2011). The following data analysis procedures provide greater clarity on the steps and ordering of data analysis.

For the initial interview, my goal was to uncover priming information and to build rapport with participants to allow for greater depth of exploration in subsequent interviews. The initial interview was structured around the following questions:

1. How did you come to identify as polyamorous?
2. Did you ever share how you came to identify as polyamorous with your counselor?
3. What brought you to counseling initially?
4. Describe your counseling experience.
5. What did you most appreciate about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory, if anything?
6. What would you choose to change about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory, if anything?

These questions provided cursory data about participants without probing too deeply initially, and provided information key to the research question. The second and third interviews were variations of these questions, with specific inquiries if there had been any additional thoughts concerning these questions in the time between interviews. The complete interview protocols are present in Appendix E. Follow-up questions probed for additional data emerged naturally in the interviews as part of the semistructured interview process.

After completion of the initial draft of the data analysis, I conducted individual member checks to confirm findings of the study and provide credibility to those findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I also added member checks as an additional method of data collection to increase the trustworthiness of findings (Hays & Singh, 2011). During the member check, I presented participants with initial findings, including how findings specifically related to their provided experiences, how they would be represented in the final results, and how the general composite findings of the study would disclose the shared experiences of all participants. This process allowed me to add any additional considerations participants had in response to findings presented. It also allowed participants a chance to ask any final questions of the researcher, which mostly constituted curiosity about the remaining timeline for the lead researcher before graduation, and an opportunity to provide the promised financial compensation for participants in the form of a $20 Target gift card. The member check also demonstrated the appropriate sample size was reached (Hays & Singh, 2011) because participants all reported a resonance and connection with the final composite findings. All the methods of collecting data also included feeling and experience over time, a fundamental and desired component in a phenomenology (Grbich, 2013).
Data Analysis Procedures

The goal of a phenomenology is to reveal the essence of the phenomenon experienced through the analysis process (Moustakas, 1994). In part, the analysis process was woven into the collection process; even though these steps are presented in order, all steps prior to the textual descriptions were repeated between interviews to help guide questions in subsequent interviews and to help steep researchers in data as they were available. I used a variant of the van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis as modified and outlined by Moustakas (1994). I chose this approach because it emphasized the individual experience of participants before discerning the greater experience of participants as a group. I maintained the personhood and individuality of each participant as long as possible to preserve their experiences as people who may have had their experiences simplified or reduced in the past due to being members of a stigmatized group.

The research team was composed of myself and of two other members. I completed data analysis on all participants. My research team each completed analysis on four participants, with care to ensure participants for the Dallas area and the Austin area were divided among them and with care in checking to ensure there would be no deductive disclosure of identities with the team members. Their efforts specifically included completing horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing, and validation as described in this section. Their results from these steps were compared with mine to ensure quality of analysis and to reduce any potential bias I might have held. Any conflicting or mismatched findings were resolved collaboratively, without clear preference to their or my suggested language. This collaboration frequently resulted in the choice of a new word for an invariant constituent or theme. They also brought a perspective that was only impacted by how participants appeared in the transcripts of their interviews, allowing participants to exist without the impacts of their appearance. This
provided balance to my holistic experience. The research team members then reviewed initial drafts of individual textural, structural, and textural-structural descriptions to ensure what they experienced of their participants was accurately captured. They also reviewed the initial draft of essences of the composite textural-structural description to ensure lived experiences of their participants were present in the final analysis.

Participant interviews were transcribed through Rev.com, as approved by the University of North Texas Institutional Review Board, and the analysis process first began with me reading through the transcript to engage the content with an open mindset. Then, I proceeded to horizontalization of collected data. Horizontalization refers to the horizons that research is intending to describe and explore (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization winnows data with the primary researcher and research team selecting what is relevant to the experience, leaving data more manageable in scale. Because revisiting research question can aid researchers in maintaining focus on what is relevant to the experience, described by Moustakas as listing and preliminary grouping, I used the research questions to guide the separation of statements relevant to the phenomenon being explored. This was completed practically by reading through transcripts and highlighting all statements which might be related to the research question. An important delineation I made in this step was to separate participants’ lived experiences of counseling and what they wished their counseling may have been like, which arose in the interview process.

The next step of analysis was reduction and elimination. This step tested all expressions deemed relevant during horizontalization with two questions: “(a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it? [and] (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p.
Any expressions that did not meet outlined requirements were eliminated from further analysis. At this step, I also eliminated vague or repetitive expressions. This step streamlined remaining data into horizons of the experience with any remaining data as invariant constituents of the experience, something inherent to the essence of the phenomenon. I labeled invariant constituents by striving to capture the word or phrase that would best identify that moment if the research question were answered by the captured statement. I compared these invariant constituents between the lead researcher and team member to reach a consensus on how they could be described to fully capture the essence of the quoted portion of the transcript.

Figure B.1

*Example of In-Process Card Sort: July 2018*

The next step was to cluster and thematize the invariant constituents into core themes. I completed this step with a card sorting task. I wrote all invariant constituents on sticky notes or
index cards and compared them to see if apparent groups or patterns arouse. I moved sticky notes or index cards freely between groups to determine how invariant constituents would best be clustered, allowing for a visual assessment of groups and emerging themes (see Figure B.1). After I created a cluster, I determined a core theme for that cluster using similar conventions for naming initial horizons. This theme described invariant constituents clustered in it. I also repeated clustering with the research team member who was working with that participant. This clustering confirmed similar themes were created and similar emergent clusters were observed. If differing ideas emerged, we discussed the differences and created a unified theme. This allowed for validation to be completed with a best possible set of core themes.

Next, I engaged in validation, which is referred to as “final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Validation required the researcher revisit the original transcript to ensure created themes were present, either implicitly or explicitly expressed. If the invariant constituents and themes were not explicitly expressed or found to be compatible, I deleted them (Moustakas, 1994).

I adjourned the analysis at this point after the first interview. For the second and third interviews, I discerned horizons and the research team used the previously generated themes as a guide for naming these newly captured experiences. If the horizon could not be captured, I repeated a card sort to determine new clusters or themes. All new themes and invariant constituents were validated across all three interviews. This analysis was completed between each interview to allow for core themes and invariant constituents to be observed and inquired about in the following interviews to ensure clarity in the completion of the analysis process.

After completing final interviews, I constructed an individual textural description of each participant using the validated invariant constituents and themes to guide my thinking. This
phase consisted of creating a descriptive integration of the participant that would bring together the validated invariant constituents and themes with examples from that participant’s transcripts. As the word textural implies, this is intended to be a tactile, but more surface exploration of the participant’s experience. I wrote these descriptions as if my participant had been able to give their clearest, most concise answer to the research question. The result was a paraphrased first-person description of how the participant might have described their lived experience, including their phrasing and chosen vernacular. The textural descriptions were then provided to the relevant research team member to ensure the participants individual experience was fully captured. Then, I consulted my supervising researcher for clarity of the provided description and to ensure the necessary criteria for an individual textural description was met.

I next developed an individual structural description that would draw from the individual textural description and imaginative variation to draw out the structure of the experience. Imaginative variation required the researcher think dynamically and creatively about all possible meanings that could be created (Moustakas, 1994). The four steps of imaginative variation are: (a) systematically varying underlying structures that could support the individual textural description, (b) recognizing the themes and context for emergent phenomenon, (c) considering universal thoughts and feelings that would precipitate the phenomenon, and (d) searching for examples that epitomize the themes and aid in a clearer understanding of any underlying structures. This step was done with time and intentional contemplation with the goal of developing fresh and creative means of understanding the underlying how of the phenomenon. In practice, this felt like an exploration of what would have had to occur in the participant’s life, and their counseling specifically, to create the answer created at the textural level to best describe how the participant experienced what was captured in the textural description. Again, the
relevant research team member conferred on initial drafts and consulted the supervising researcher on later drafts to ensure clarity of the created content.

After coming to a clear individual structural description, I constructed an individual textural-structural description for each participant. These descriptions required the researcher to intuitively and reflectively integrate the “meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating [validated] invariant constituents and themes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The challenge at this step was development of a seamless integration of participant experiences and structural postulations of the researcher. This continuous revisiting of data invited immersion in the material, and I believe I engaged with this process as described by Moustakas (1994) because I regularly returned to data from the interviews and the individual texturals and structurals during writing and revision. This process involved weaving together participant’s spoken experience and my expertise as a clinician to create a more unified whole that worked to encompass their experiences holistically with the intention to illuminate the why of what they experienced. Again, I conferred with team members during initial drafting at this step to ensure they were in agreement with how information was captured and presented. I consulted the supervising researcher in later drafting to ensure a clear and complete textural-structural was present.

After each individual participant had an individual textural-structural description, I then generated a composite description for participants as a group unified in their shared experience. I developed the compositive textural-structural description using the preliminary guidelines developed for the individual textural-structural description, with a focus on narratives or experiences shared across most of the participants. This composite description was the final finding of the research, and it conveyed the meaning and essence of the phenomenon as experienced by participants. The resulting product was as complete an answer as possible to the
initial research question. I presented the initial draft to both the research team and to participants as part of the final member checks. I considered all clarifications and reactions from the member check and integrated them into the final composite, which was then reviewed for completeness by the supervising researcher.

Next, I completed a review of the self of the researcher to ensure I maintained bracketing and did not taint the findings. I additionally generated an addendum to the self of researcher to account for changes of self that occurred over the 5 years since it was initially developed. The final product of the analysis process is available in its completeness in Appendix C.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is how the quality and rigor of a qualitative study is created and maintained throughout the course of a study. By cultivating trustworthiness, I endeavored to manage limitations of my study and generate research of high quality.

Trustworthiness has many different criteria cultivated through various means: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) confirmability, (d) authenticity, (e) coherence, (f) sampling adequacy, (g) ethical validation, (h) substantive validation, and (i) creativity (Hays & Singh, 2011). Credibility adds believability to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is when a reader can effectively compare factors such as participants, location, and time to their own work environment (Hays & Singh, 2011). Confirmability is the degree to which findings reflect what researchers set out to study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Authenticity is the researcher’s ability to present an authentic representation of the participant’s perspective. Coherence is consistency of the epistemological perspective and research design where all steps follow a logical progression the reader can follow (Kline, 2008). Sampling adequacy is the ability to demonstrate an appropriate sample size was reached in relation to the research questions and the
tradition used (Hays & Singh, 2011). Ethical validation is the effective demonstration researchers approached the study as a “moral and ethical undertaking” (Angen, 2000, as cited in Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 202). Substantive validation is a demonstration research was meaningful and a worthwhile contribution to knowledge (Hays & Singh, 2011). Creativity shows flexibility in application of methods to the research, which is a sign of rigor. In this study, the simultaneous data collection and analysis, audit trail, thick description, and member checks were all means in ensuring trustworthiness in the study.

Due to the emergent nature of qualitative research (Hays & Singh, 2011), collecting and analyzing data simultaneously allowed me to adjust my questions and seek clarification during the research process. This choice was present in my decision to complete three interviews over the course of several months to allow for a return to the creation of horizons and themes as the interview process continued. Simultaneous data collection and analysis added to the credibility of the study, which made it more confirmable by ensuring the initial intent of understanding the polyamorist experience of counseling was adhered to by creating space for ongoing adjustment in the research process. This choice increased authenticity by creating opportunity for clarifying questions to be put to the participants, and creating points where I could assess data saturation to ensure sampling adequacy.

An audit trail is systematic, physical documentation of all steps taken in a qualitative study (Hays & Singh, 2011). Themes, pictures of card sorts, recordings of interviews, marked and highlighted transcripts, and digitally captured informed consents were all part of the audit trail. This comprehensive audit trail illuminates the complete research process and adds credibility to the study. It also created coherence for the research by indicating all the steps taken and why the research proceeded in the order it was completed.
A thick description is the use of vivid description to help provide context to the reader (Hays & Singh, 2011). With thick description, there was rich exploration of the lead researcher, participants, and data collection and analysis processes. The four components of effective thick description are:

(1) it gives context of an act; (2) it states the intentions and meanings that organize the action; (3) it traces the evolution and development of the act; [and] (4) it presents the action as a text that can be interpreted. (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 33)

Effective use of thick description can do a lot to maximize trustworthiness by adding credibility, transferability, confirmability, authenticity, coherence, and substantive validation (Hays & Singh, 2011). Of note, it adds transferability by clearly explaining the full context of the when, where, and how of the data collection, which enables a reader to determine if those states are related to the context in which they hope to apply the findings of the study. The thick description was present in the description of the self of the researcher in this appendix and the depth of description of steps for the analysis in this appendix. It is also present in the description of the participants, through the inclusion of their direct quotes, and through inclusion of the complete analysis in Appendix C.

I conducted final member checks in March 2020 to ensure participants were empowered in the research process by being given power over findings intended to represent their experiences and to ensure a goodness of fit with the finding (Hays & Singh, 2011). This member check also ensured participants were satisfied with findings after delays in the analysis process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as the foundation of trustworthiness in qualitative research. For this study, member checks added validity, confirmability, and authenticity. The process also ensured sampling adequacy was reached by allowing participants
to determine if they experienced a sense of unity and clarity in the final findings (Hays & Singh, 2011).

I maximized trustworthiness in this study by simultaneous data collection and analysis, an audit trail, a thick description, and member checks in concert. That maximization of trustworthiness cannot negate limitations; but, these techniques allowed my research to be rigorous and, thereby, of greater value to the counseling community.

Ethical Considerations

I had to consider ethical concerns during this study because participants revealed personal information about their experiences and their identity, both in the survey and in the intimacy of the interview process. It was important to remember this was a population that experienced social and legal discrimination. I was working with participants who were still actively concealing their polyamorous identity in some settings and, as such, they were especially vulnerable during this research or as a result of it. The University of North Texas’ Institutional Review Board approved the informed consent (see Appendix E). I also offered counseling and referral to counseling at no cost should my participants experience any emotional distress because of the interview or member checking process.

Measures to Ensure Confidentiality

First and foremost, I followed all confidentiality procedures requested by the Institutional Review Board. I used my training as a mental health professional to ensure participant confidentiality. These confidentiality measures included basic steps such as monitoring information I chose to intentionally share, ensuring participant information was not shared through negligence, and ensuring my research team was mindful of the potentially sensitive nature of the interview transcripts. Additionally, I did not release transcripts to my research team.
until they were appropriately redacted. I only shared transcripts with the research team, did not
discuss my participants with people outside of my research team, and encouraged my research
team to call my attention to any parts of the transcript that should have been redacted. I
additionally strove to ensure nothing remained in my transcripts that would allow for deductive
disclosure of participant identities to the research team members to provide additional protection
from incidental disclosure on their part. My team reported there was no deductive disclosure of
participant identities. I kept my physical copies secured in my home office and advised team
members that any printed copies must be destroyed after themes were finalized. I will also
comply with the Institutional Review Board requirement that all transcripts and recordings of
interviews will be destroyed 3 years after the analysis was completed in 2022.

Following the model of Sheff (2014), I allowed participants to select their own
pseudonym for the research. I hoped this selection would increase participants’ sense of
investment and autonomy in the process and increase their sense of security knowing that a
pseudonym was being used. Additionally, it appeared to create a moment of fun and creative
engagement on the part of my participants during the survey process. Participants were invited to
change their pseudonym at the first interview and the final member check to ensure it was
amenable to the participant as we moved through the research process. There was a single
document that attached a participant’s real name to their pseudonyms, which was not shared with
any other members of the research team and primarily served as a reminder to the lead researcher
to use participant’s real names when contacting them for scheduling.

Conclusion

I determined a phenomenology was the best method of exploring counseling experiences
of clients who identified as polyamorous. The steps included establishing the epoché through
self-exploration, then data collection, data analysis, establishing trustworthiness, and maintaining ethical considerations. I believed these steps resulted in a rigorous study that revealed the essence of the phenomenon explored and that this research serves to provide a deeper understanding of the impact mental health professionals have on the polyamorists they serve.
APPENDIX C

UNABRIDGED ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS
The purpose of this study was to illuminate lived experiences of polyamorists who had received counseling. This was accomplished through completing a phenomenological inquiry with a modified van Kaam method and the framework of relational-cultural therapy (RCT) to support how participants were conceptualized. Each participant will be presented individually in the chapter, followed by a final composite that distills the essence of the phenomenon of being a polyamorist in counseling in North and Central Texas. By presenting the completed analysis of each participant, the personhood and holistic sense of each participant was maintained, emphasizing the analysis does not create generalizable information; rather, it creates a depth of understanding of their lived experiences as polyamorous people who received counseling.

The textural descriptions are a paraphrasing from interviews that would be a concise answer to the research question: What are the counseling experiences of adult clients who self-identify as polyamorous? Or, it would be a concise answer as a participant would have been asked the question: What was your lived experience in counseling? The textural description was phrased as if participants had been able to give a direct answer to this question without any additional or superfluous content. The descriptions were written in the first-person perspective, paraphrasing ideas and observations they shared to better capture the voice of the participants and to facilitate a reader in being able to imagine what it would have been like to sit across from participants and receive their narratives. The structural descriptions serve as a concise answer to the how of their experiences and the textural-structural descriptions are the individual essences of their experiences as polyamorists in counseling. The final composite textural-structural description provides a culminating essence of what meaning these eight polyamorists found in their counseling. This description serves as the final findings of the study, rendering a distillation
of what is known about the unified experience of the participants when viewed as a whole. Additional details can be found in Appendix B under data analysis procedures.

Mia

When I met Mia, she was living in a quiet, suburban neighborhood. She was living in a home on her own with some cats and a few kittens she was fostering as well. She had a shorter, shaggy haircut and greeted me in some casual clothes. We completed our interviews on her couch under the watchful gaze of her cats. She was White and 37 years old when she completed the recruitment survey. When we first began the interview process, she identified herself as a queer ciswoman; but, in the final member check, she shared she had started questioning her gender identity and had not come to any new conclusions in that process.

When completing the initial analysis of Mia’s interview, several themes and invariant constituents emerged, including counseling was detrimental, supportive, effective, and objectified, and she was self-educated about counseling. In her textural description, Mia’s whole history with counseling is shared, taking us from college through divorce and abuse to her most recent time in counseling where she received services online. In the structural description, her interconnection with others and drive for self-efficacy come to the foreground. When explored, the underlying structures of Mia’s counseling experience also highlighted the detrimental aspects of her counseling through her experiences of othering and resultant objectification. The textural-structural description reveals a deep sense of independence from Mia and how counseling helped to reinforce and support that drive. It also illuminates her frustrations with the ignorance she experienced in counseling, which had brought her to a place where she was no longer as willing to trust counseling professionals; instead, she became more careful in who she trusted with the
role of counselor. This readiness to be particular in who she trusted further reinforced the independence that was so integral to who the analysis revealed Mia to be.

Textural Description

I am a very practical person. When I have problems, I seek out efficient means of solving them. I like adding to my tool box as I need so I can then address those problems effectively when they arise later, or to avoid those problems entirely. When I do counseling, I want to get in, get what I need, and then get out. I want my counseling to have an end goal so I can feel that I am really getting something out of it.

My first experiences with counseling were clumsy and mismatched; they were not bad, but just not for me. Then, I met the psychiatrist I worked with some in college. I had my own plans on how I wanted things to be solved; I didn’t want to take medications even though I was suicidally depressed. He was adaptable and willing to work with me. He was able to get me the skills that I needed so I could keep living my life with my depression. He showed me it was possible to manage a lot more in life by learning skills and new ways to manage concerns that showed up. I still use some of the tools he taught me back then.

The counselor’s approach really impacted the way I wanted my counseling to be. I wanted to be focused on solutions; but, there was also an awareness that I am a person with feelings. With the vulnerability of counseling, I need to feel my counselor’s trust and support. I don’t love that my emotionality is part of this process. I would just get support from friends if I could and I would rather be able to think my way to a new solution; but, that doesn’t always work. So, support and trust is a must. Otherwise, I could fix it on my own with tactics I found on the internet.
After seeing that guy in college, I didn’t need counseling for a while; but, then my relationship with my then husband was changing. There were problems and we went to counseling. That counselor got all snarled up in my libido being higher than my husband’s and my lack of sexual jealousy. He was so caught up in that idea that he ended up recommending polyamory to me, having no idea what it was, and neglected everything else. He was incompetent and I didn’t like that counselor much. I don’t think he ended my marriage; but, he certainly didn’t help save it. What a mess.

After that marriage ended, I started dating and I ended up having a traumatic relationship. I ended up receiving some time-limited counseling for free to support my recovery from the abuse. At that point I was polyamorous. Most of that counseling was pretty good; but, there was one whole session that was a waste when I look back on it. The counselor had started asking questions about polyamory and we both just descended into looking at polyamory. It was new and interesting and I wanted to talk about it so much; but, it was all stuff he could have Googled. It made sense for him to need to know about polyamory because we were talking about my relationships; but, I wish he would have just Googled it. We only had so much time together so it seemed irresponsible for him to have let us spend a whole session on it. Other than that, he was a good counselor and I got out of our time together what I needed.

My most recent experience with counseling was online with BetterHelp. I continued to return to counseling because I knew it had been helpful for me in the past and it was the best means for getting the kind of results I was hoping for. I knew this time to specifically ask for a counselor who was aware of polyamory already; it was a thing I had learned that I needed. My concerns that brought me to counseling only made sense if you understood polyamory. It was good to seek online counseling because it was cost effective; but, it also gave me a much larger
pool of counselors to draw from so I could get exactly what I knew I needed. That counseling was just right. I needed additional support for concerns happening with my meta; but, I was broke at the time due to being treated for cancer. So, online counseling meant I could interact with my counselor in a way that best fit my schedule, fit my budget, and brought me to a counselor who asked informed questions about polyamory. For example, they could ask, “How are these people connected to you?” rather than “What is polyamory anyways?” Those things combined relieved a lot of stress about my counseling and made it some of the most effective work I’ve done in a counseling setting. If I had to do counseling again, I would return to online counseling because it was so practical.

Structural Description

Mia was forthright and simply wanted things to work correctly. When things were broken, she wanted solutions, which stemmed from living a life where she had been able to find and implement solutions through her own self-efficacy. She could survive in unpredictability and hardship. If she thought situations were getting in the way of her relationships and her life, she actively strove to manage the circumstance. She sought support and found the means to make her life more manageable by relying on herself, her community, and her mental health professionals. This disposition indicated she could take action, had a sense of zest, and possessed a robust knowledge of herself that seemed to have been consistent throughout her life. She was also unwilling to tolerate disconnection in her relationships as she strove toward both social belonging and individual fortitude. Her need for genuineness in her relationships indicated a history of growth-fostering awareness that showed Mia as someone who wanted life to happen with care, connection, and some degree of personal responsibility from all parties.
Interconnection and Personal Awareness

Mia’s social awareness was exemplified in her understanding of what her core relationships were able to incorporate, indicating an awareness of when bending may lead to breaking if not monitored. Through counseling, she learned the conscientiousness she possessed was acquired through experiencing relationships end and striving to build healthier ones as a result. None of Mia’s efforts to take her emotional work outside of her relationships seemed to indicate feeling like her needs were burdensome to her community, as seen in her readiness to step into her relationships and be both in connection and in need. An example she provided was giving support to a partner whose cohabitating partner was having a mental health crisis. She did this while receiving support from that partner and from counseling during her recovery from lung cancer treatment. She described her counselor as an additional supportive outlet, sharing, “I just needed someone to vent to, basically, and that’s what she provided.” This example demonstrated Mia’s interconnection with her community because she could receive and give care while also seeking outside support as needed. Her social awareness demonstrated she was willing to be in her community while seeking help when life reached level of interconnection or complexity that felt unsustainable, such as a metamour in crisis.

Mia used counseling to find supplemental support for herself and, by extension, her community. Counseling supported Mia in developing a depth of self-knowledge. This knowledge was apparent in how she communicated with me as the interviewer, both with clarity and with an understanding of her needs and wants. Her knowledge of self was also evident in her internal knowledge of when to return to counseling. Her reasons were widely varied; but, they were all situational and outside of her control, such as wanting to support others manage complex relationships, managing struggles in her own marriage, experiencing abuse, and cancer in her
body. None of her presenting concerns demonstrated a resurgence of chronic disconnection and unwellness in her life. Mia knew herself, her needs, and the boundaries of her community through her connection with her friends and relationships. When she had struggles, she knew both how to share and how to seek additional care.

Being in counseling was a good way to have a person who was an emotionally uninvolved third party to Mia’s life to bolster her. It was important to her that counseling moved stress away from her main social groups, which revitalized interconnection in that group. To have her stress relieved but her community overly burdened did not foster the communal solution she wanted, especially given her goal of keeping her romantic relationships as “fun, light things,” even in her longer-term connections, such as her boyfriend of more than 6 years. From her mutual connections, she also had a robust knowledge of her friends and partners. The result was that she knew when her needs were more complex than her current community could handle. She sought counseling to meet those remaining needs for support. Mia was aware of the support available to her in her community because, in most situations, she could rely on herself, her friends, and her family. She felt confident forming new relationships to minimize stress in her group when needed, showing she felt reassured in her ability to take action outside of her relationships.

A Drive for Self-Efficacy

Mia described counseling as both a tool and an experience that creates tools. She spoke about psychoeducation and learning tactics for managing specific symptoms or situations, such as “tools to recognize a healthy relationship versus an unhealthy one.” She found these tools highly useful, especially in the context of learning to have a beneficial connection in relationships after exiting an abusive partnership. Even starting couples counseling demonstrated
Mia and her husband were not going to successfully save the relationship; thus, counseling supported the end of the relationship and provided greater clarity in her life. These experiences all highlight how Mia sought counseling for its overall practicality. It was an efficient process for Mia who wanted to resolve unpleasant circumstances and conflict and move into life with freedom and zest. She learned through repeated returns to counseling that counseling was a way to grow to better navigate tougher situations in her life.

Mia approached her counseling pragmatically. In situations where there was a clear desired result, she went for knowledge and tools to create those solutions. At other times, counseling was purely for support when “[the presenting concern] wasn’t the problem to be solved and there was not a way for a counselor to solve the problem.” Mia knew the kinds of relationships that would serve her because of prior growth-fostering relationships that allowed for an increased knowledge of herself and other people in her relationships. This degree of self-knowledge allowed Mia to seek out new relationships as she needed and wanted them.

After several counseling relationships, Mia felt able to request the kind of counseling that would suit her best. Her awareness was clearly present in her most recent counseling relationship through BetterHelp where she knew she needed to request a very specific kind of counseling relationship. She needed someone who understood polyamory and could help her strategize how she would care for herself as part of her physical and financial recovery after cancer, all while her metamour had a mental health crisis that caused a “ripple effect outward from her that touched people closer to her.” With Mia’s knowledge of self and energy to take action in her life, she knew what she needed and was able to specifically seek it.
Disconnection Through Othering

Mia needed to explain herself to some of her counselors due to their ignorance and failure to self-educate after starting their counseling relationship. In her couples counseling, Mia felt her counselor could not comprehend how a woman could desire more sexual contact than her husband. This sexism does not foster connection. Despite initially proposing the label of polyamory, the counselor seemed consistently unable to manage the idea that Mia was dating other people even though her relationship with her husband had previously been monogamous and he was not choosing to find other partners.

Mia also outlined feeling very othered and like an oddity in her polyamory during her time-limited counseling. Although Mia was aware monogamy is considered the norm, including the implications that non-norm relationship structures are somehow less than the dominant culture norm, it was still disconnecting to experience ignorance in her counseling. Mia shared, “He was just so fascinated by what I was telling him; he couldn’t help trying to find out more about it.” This fascination shifted focus away from the wholeness of her person to this isolated part of her life, which was reducing and objectifying. Mia might have been the first out polyamorous person the counselor knew, and the counselor did not manage this novelty well. As a result, Mia spent her limited time and energy explaining to her counselor her experiences with polyamory and generally what polyamory is.

Mia described this disconnection as the result of a lack of awareness or education among the counselors in question. Her understanding that they failed to perform their job to the best of their abilities indicated the presence of mutually growth-fostering tendencies in her life. Mia showed the inner strength her previously healthy relationships helped her develop, saw her worth, and had a good knowledge of self, which supported her self-advocacy in the face of their
unawareness. That inner strength allowed the option of resolving the disconnection that occurred in her counseling relationships. Mia’s time-limited counselor was able to reach a depth of connection. Although she voiced frustration that he used their limited time asking her to provide him with education, he was able to receive that education to better understand her and her life. She felt she had the space to advocate for herself and the counselor responded in a way that led to a new and better connection. In her couples counseling, the counselor never honored her self-knowledge as someone with a higher libido than he had initially expected. His inability to accept this truth about Mia left them stuck in disconnection.

Although Mia was able to cope with this stressor, the naivety of her counselor caused disconnection in the counseling relationship due to the othering inherent in being more of a curiosity to him rather than a person wanting therapy. Mia coped with the disruption due to her overall ego strength and well-being and moved forward in the counseling relationship fully with the repairs available in the time-limiting counseling; the disruption was enough for her to comment on it and the misuse of time. By the counselor not fully entering the relationship with Mia without judgment, the work of counseling was impeded. With the couples counseling, this judgment was part of her reasons for discontinuing counseling. Mia could not authentically enter the work of counseling, which included developing an empowering relationship with her counselor and her husband at the time.

Textural-Structural Description

Mia possessed a clear sense of independence and self-reliance while also cherishing her personal connections. She found benefit in the tools counseling provided and a space to speak freely about interpersonal conflict in her life with a third party. This work spurred growth from the mutual relationships she was cultivating in her personal life, resulting in a sense of greater
depth of independence and an enhanced sense of self-reliance. Counseling was not always as productive as Mia would have wanted, which she described as primarily stymied by the ignorance she experienced with some of her counselors. Their lack of knowledge resulted in wasted time and disconnection. Although she emerged from those counseling relationships without lasting emotional harm, Mia was no longer willing to trust counselors intrinsically. Mia desired counseling relationships where she did not have to provide education to her counselor for their work to be successful. Through a combination of growing self-reliance and disappointment with these periods of counselor incomprehension, Mia chose a new means of finding her counselors to protect herself from more near misses. She persevered in the search for a better fit counselor due to her experience that counseling could be of such clear benefit for her and her goal of being her own support.

*Reinforcing Independence with Skills and Space*

Counseling was a choice in Mia’s life that supported her self-efficacy by enriching her sense of self-worth and by deepening her self-knowledge. One of the clearest benefits of counseling for her was as a means of building tools. Mia spoke of lasting changes and continued use of counseling tools after the relationships were over, sharing, “You can just use those tools and I feel like I have done that several times in the years since then to stop myself from slipping back into depression, which was really effective.” Although the specific changes that arose in counseling, such as relieving her depression, would not remain intact for the rest of her life, Mia could continue to return to those tools to reduce the likelihood she would have the same concern; developing a toolset was empowering for Mia. She had means to actively address her concerns such as “to self soothe when [she] got really upset about [relationship fears after having an abusive ex and] how to calm down and just not be in that panic mode” with tactics she learned in
counseling. These tools provided strategies she could use to address undesired symptoms or feelings before her life felt out of control, enhancing her ability to be her own primary source of support as she desired.

Beyond tools, there were times Mia returned to counseling to have the space to openly explore her feelings without worrying how her process would impact those important to her. She shared, “I just needed somebody to keep venting to when [a crisis with my metamour] kept being terrible” because her partner was already managing the stress her metamour was creating. Having space to openly discuss what was happening for her emotionally was deeply valuable for Mia. Because the counseling process created a container to explore her responses with structure, her relationships could continue to grow. Mia was able to explore how she was being impacted by her metamour’s crisis while providing ongoing support to her partner who was directly navigating those stressors. Counseling provided a space where she could manage her concerns with professional support while still keeping her closest relationships as “fun” and “light” as she desired. Her personal relationships were not devoid of difficult moments; but, Mia was able to engage with most of the tedious and unpleasant parts of being in a relationship through counseling. The counseling relationship allowed her personal connections to become more organic and effortless. This effortlessness came through knowing she had a space to explore her internal landscape so work did not enter those personal relationships unless desired.

Through her social-emotional growth in her counseling and in her life more broadly, Mia developed a sense of personal responsibility and independence. If she desired change in her life, it was in her purview to make that happen, from divorcing her ex-husband and leaving an abusive relationship to seeking out polyamory and building the type of relationships she truly desired. This sense of accountability seemed strongly intermingled with her perception of
polyamory as something individual. She stated, “I think in the polyamory community, there’s this whole thing about what do words even mean, and it becomes really difficult because you can only define words by words, and everything means something slightly different to other people.” Thus, Mia was required to know what her words meant to her to share herself effectively. She had to determine these meanings for herself to be successful and be able to seek the type of relationships best for her. Counseling was one of the spaces where she could conduct that exploration of self. Counseling was effective for Mia as a process where she could build skills and know herself more intimately. The experience left her motivated to return when she needed because she was confident in her ability to build those growth-fostering relationships with her counselors and then take action outside of that bubble on her own.

Emerging Importance of Self-Advocacy

Mia was clear during our interviews that she had little patience for time wasting and dallying when there were important things to be accomplished. As a result, she experienced some frustrations in her time in counseling. Mia repeatedly spent time in sessions to educate her counselors so their work could proceed. The impacts of managing the ignorance of her counselors ranged from feeling annoyed that time was lost in time-limited counseling to feeling disconnected from a counselor who could not move past her experience of high libido. She did not have the expectation that counseling would always be quick. She knew that sometimes the work of counseling was not intended to produce a change; instead, it could be a space to explore ideas in safety to determine what her feelings were. This process could not be kept to a strict timeline. Even with this flexible view of what counseling could be, Mia was disappointed by interruptions in counseling that slowed their progress.
Mia shared her frustrations with the declaration, “Don’t rely on your clients to educate you.” This sentiment was echoed a few times in our interview process, such as a moment where Mia was describing the efforts of an acquaintance of hers who was training to be a counselor. The acquaintance was attending polyamorist meetups as a monogamist to become familiar with the polyamorous community. Mia praisingly noted, “She’s not putting that responsibility on her clients to do Q&A with them.” This reaction was both due to her general sense that a counselor should take the minimal time to complete an internet search if they are working with a client whose identities or life experience are unfamiliar to the counselor and due to the time Mia had lost in sessions having to educate counselors. Mia was clear that, although she had never felt harmed in her counseling, her counselors’ incomprehension seemed to reduce her importance as a person with their intent focus on narrow components of her way of being. Her perspective was that all those moments of inexperience were in subjects the counselors could be addressing in their own time, rather than taking time from Mia.

Mia was protected from the harm in these ruptures in the counseling process through her confidence that she was in no way at fault for those moments. This confidence emerged through an intersection of her positive counseling experiences and her own personal initiative. Her sense was a counselor should be more prepared through training and education, which was informed by her counseling experience, her experience with growth-fostering relationships in and out of counseling, and her awareness of how accessible the information was during the times they were working together. These points all highlighted how needless the interruptions felt for Mia. She had an understanding she might be on the margins in some of her lived experiences; but, counseling was intended to provide safety and connection, which cannot always be guaranteed in personal connection. Mia expected more in a relationship with a licensed professional, or at least
expected it would not interfere with their work together. After navigating counseling relationships permeated with ignorance, she took extra steps to ensure she was working with an informed counselor. She described how she sought out counseling through the service BetterHelp because she was no longer willing to tolerate these vexing occurrences and felt reassured BetterHelp could match her with a counselor who was familiar with polyamory. Although she was previously comfortable entering into counseling with almost any professional, Mia was now motivated to spend more time seeking a closer counselor match to avoid future frustrations.

Samantha

At the start of the interview process, Samantha identified herself as a White woman who was 44 years old. She quickly also identified herself as being proudly pagan and pansexual. She was tall and quick to laugh during our interview process, describing life plans she had for herself, including moving out of state to join with long-distance partners to form a triad. Samantha chose to meet in a public but somewhat private space of her choosing, including an open come-and-go eating space for our first two interviews and final member check and a coffee shop for our third interview, both of which were convenient to her home. She voiced she chose these spaces due to feeling high anxiety about the state of her apartment, which she characterized as messy. Samantha was one of the participants I had met before beginning this research. She and I met through a mutual friend and she voiced comfort with proceeding with the interview process given our previous acquaintance. Additionally, a consult was completed with the supervising researcher to determine that epoché could be maintained for this participant.

The invariant constituents and themes that emerged during the analysis of Samantha’s experiences were that counseling was efficient, growth-fostering, created deep connection, and
made her an informed consumer of counseling. In her textural description, her more recent and more positive counseling was highlighted, especially in contrast to previous counseling she had in college, which left her feeling unworthy in having to describe her then bisexuality to the counselors. In her structural description, it is revealed this requirement of providing education about her way of being repeats a pattern of having to justify her sexuality to others, creating a schema that something was wrong with her and she was somehow unworthy of mutual relationships. She returned to counseling after a severe panic attack and was able to set clearer expectations in what she wanted from her counselor through the clarity she had gained in more mutual social relationships. This exposure to mutuality created confidence wherein she was able to establish clearer boundaries and continue requesting more from herself and her relationships. In her textural-structural description, Samantha’s journey from feeling unworthy to worthy centers on setting boundaries and taking up space in counseling. This growth was further illuminated by recognizing both her goals to find connection and protect herself of close-minded others.

Textural Description

Counseling is so positive and constructive. I recommend counseling to all of my friends and I am a little bummed that not everyone can have a counselor as cool and good as mine. I feel like my biggest breakthroughs and growth have happened so much faster than they would have without counseling. I love the process of being able to go into the office and just dump everything else, to vomit it up, and then picking through it for what is important. I plan to be in counseling for my foreseeable future. I think I may be in counseling for the rest of my life and I am pretty jazzed about that.

My first experiences with counseling occurred when I was in college. I guess they were
more like advisors than counselors. They didn’t really understand my identifying as bi at the time and this was before I knew what poly was; but, they just couldn’t seem to get it together. I felt like I was teaching them or having to advocate for my identity a lot of the time. They weren’t bad but they didn’t give me much either. It meant that I delayed going back to counseling when I needed it. I only returned after my depression and anxiety got pretty bad. I had an anxiety attack so big I thought I’d had a heart attack. I sought counseling after I knew my heart was fine and someone mentioned it was probably anxiety. Something to be concerned about for sure.

My current counselor is amazing. I love him so much. I remember coming into my first session and dropping all of these things into his lap. I’m pagan. I’m pansexual. I’m poly. I’m kinky. Nothing phased him. He has been completely unflappable and that was exactly what I needed. He asked such good questions about what those things all meant to me but never asked questions about what those things meant. It made me feel so seen. I felt like I could let me freak flag fly free of censorship and that he would be there to catch me and support me and to look out for the stuff that actually needed work, like setting good boundaries.

He is also an advocate for communities that I am a part of and I know that he is part of the LGBTQ community too. I also know that he continues to educate himself, which I think it so important. I really like him as a person. I would say that we have a friendship as part of being in counseling. I feel like he is someone I would be proud to grow up to be. I don’t think he has it all figured out; but, he has a lot of things right.

With all that trust and support, I can tell that I have grown so much. I feel more like myself than I ever thought possible, if that makes sense. I know that some of that is just a product of growing up; but, I am so much more robust than I ever was before. I am capable of standing up for myself and maintaining healthy boundaries and I am less willing to put up with
bullshit. Even if it is my own bullshit, which is always the worst bullshit. I am stronger and able to take up space and just more powerful because of my counseling.

My biggest concern with counseling is that I hope to move in December of next year and I will need a new counselor! I have been preparing myself for what I will be asking any new counselor I might start working with because I can’t go back to just an acceptable counselor after my very good experience. Now that I’ve had it so good, I could never go back. This isn’t just about the technical knowledge that he had brought to our sessions, but also about the environment that he helped me to shape in our time together. I know I can’t have another counselor who is exactly my counselor now; but, I will need them to be ready to love me. The love and trust allow the growing I need to happen.

Structural Description

Samantha explored how she had engaged in various avenues for growth, such as meditation and personal spiritual work; however, none of these avenues seemed as fraught or as valuable as counseling had been. Her earlier counseling experiences during her college years repeated society’s confusion with and rejection of nonheterosexual orientations, which emphasized her experience that her identities should be judged. As a result, she felt othered. At that time in her life, Samantha felt she was already onerous in requiring extra effort of others to understand her queer identity. Although her most recent experience in counseling was prompted by a downturn in her mental health, she shared she valued the choices she made in returning to the process. She decided to seek a more informed counseling perspective to support her in understanding herself and her needs at a quicker rate than any of her previous counseling efforts. Her current counselor had created a safe space for her to explore herself more fully, allowing her to establish better boundaries and to grow.
Validation in Being Understood

Samantha appreciated her current counselor had a different history and background than hers while he was also aware of her way of being, which could be seen in the excitement Samantha brought to talking about their work together. The counselor used self-disclosure, such as being gay and being open about his advocacy work, to connect with Samantha and build a trusting connection to make the space feel safe and supportive for her. With genuine self-expression and humor, such as asking questions like, “Can I be a therabitch right now?,” he made himself more authentic and accessible in the therapeutic space because this was not something he would have been taught to say in a classroom. He used his uncensored self as a model to create the counseling relationship and to demonstrate Samantha would be safe to be her whole self as well. His authenticity supported her in being open about her identities in a way her previous counseling had not provided, as evidenced by Samantha’s report of feeling obligated to explain her sexuality to her counselors. She felt seen and accepted in a way she had not experienced in the past when she had to educate others about her pansexuality and other integral parts of her identity.

The counselor demonstrated self-love in his knowledge of himself and how he shared that knowledge with Samantha. She described how he was “constantly advocating for people of various relationship identities and gender identities and sexuality identities.” His advocacy was inspirational for her because he advocated both for others, with his education and privilege as a licensed professional, and also for himself. Samantha did not have to worry about being too much for the counseling space because she heard him discussing his ability to self-advocate actively. Thus, she was more able to trust his ability to tolerate her needs. As opposed to feeling misunderstood, Samantha invited all of herself into the process knowing her counselor had the
ability to hold space. She trusted she would not overwhelm him.

In working with her counselor, Samantha enjoyed accepting herself more broadly and openly while learning to set boundaries in her relationships and at work. Her counselor’s acceptance and appreciation of himself allowed Samantha to advocate for her own needs and to accept her uniqueness as well. She demonstrated increased confidence through her boundary work. Having the space she needed also supported her in starting to take up the space she deserved. While confronting difficult concerns relating to her boundaries and identity in the counseling space, she felt assured she would not overwhelm her counselor with her needs and wants. This imperturbability on the counselor’s part supported the emotional safety of their continued process.

Growth and Boundaries

Counseling seemed primarily to serve Samantha as a way to know herself better. She had developed relationships over her lifetime, including friendships and partnerships, which had created connection and helped her to accept herself more fully. This acceptance of herself developed through previous relationships, both personal and professional. These relationships started with friction or disconnection; but, they eventually deepened and fostered growth by tending toward connection, when possible. This openness was noted in Samantha’s increased ability to embrace her various identities, which might otherwise have been ignored or denied, to avoid judgement as part of cultural norms. Samantha’s increased openness and self-awareness supported her in seeking more recent counseling with a professional who was knowledgeable about her identities, which allowed her to be more vulnerable at the beginning of the relationship. She did not have to protect these parts of herself and meter out knowledge of them to the counselor. She opened with her social location of “poly, and pagan, and pansexual, and
kind of a dirty tree hugging dirt worshiper . . . [and] also into kink” with confidence that acceptance and knowledge of these identities were a starting place for a counseling relationship she innately desired. With these facts established, she could explore herself more freely and deeply without having to explain these integral pieces of herself.

Samantha reached the point in counseling where increased knowledge of herself helped her build connections in her community where she could deepen that knowledge of herself. This intensified understanding of herself made it easier to take action in her life, such as preparing to move across the country to be with her partners. Samantha cultivated connected relationships that helped her continue her growth. These relationships included her previously clumsy counseling, which was beneficial enough to encourage her to reenter counseling later, where she felt herself flourish. She identified that process as ongoing, saying, “I think really the biggest growth is [taking up space] . . . and I know also there’s lots further to go.” The work of counseling revealed there was so much Samantha could uncover about herself. She encompassed depths she could not have previously known.

This knowledge of her depth made Samantha excited to share about herself because she had seen how sharing creates greater self-knowledge and zest for life. Her energy was visible in the interview process in her easy smiles and her readiness to discuss the depths of what she had experienced. There was still some reserve related to her want to be open about herself; Samantha was able to share her lived experiences but choose to meet outside of her home for our interview, both as a boundary for her comfort and as a means of avoiding potential judgment.

*Trust of Self*

Samantha had negative experiences with needing to educate her past counselors about her then bisexuality and how she experienced sexual attraction. She did receive enough positive
benefit that she was motivated to return to counseling when her anxiety and depression escalated again. Ignorance and needing to educate her counselors did not preclude eventual connection in those relationships, indicating resilience and internal fortitude. Samantha found her counselors’ disconnection could be overcome or managed to create a space where she could make change through the counseling process. These interactions with previous counselors brought her through ebbs in her well-being, and she found ways to effectively integrate her counselors’ support. Still, she attributed these disconnections to herself due to a pattern wherein she was the consistent factor in these relationships.

There were other growth-fostering relationships in Samantha’s life, such as her spiritual connections and her partnerships. These relationships promoted a drive for action when she realized a counseling perspective was a necessity. Her readiness to find a better match in her counseling when she returned to the therapeutic process demonstrated her awareness she deserved a counseling experience that did not include spending time as an educator. Her past experiences with counselors provided negative case examples on who to avoid, which made the counselor selection process more complicated; but, it facilitated stronger connection with her current counselor. Samantha shared, “I had done research, and had picked him because he was LGBTQ friendly, but some people will say that and then not necessarily be that.” She prized his genuine knowledge, which allowed the relationship to reach greater depths more rapidly.

Things had to escalate for Samantha to choose to return to counseling. Her previous counseling had been effective despite her feeling required to explain herself and her identity in those relationships. She returned to counseling because counseling got her the result she wanted, which was to better understand herself. She now believed that, although she could have done the work of self-exploration and growth on her own, she felt empowered through the client-
counselor alliance, which expedited her personal growth. She had enough clarity in her knowledge of self to understand she cannot function as a solo unit in times when concerns arise; she needed relationships to receive support, mutuality, and growth. Counseling was a means to ensure she would receive focused and trained support.

Samantha identified that she may have reached her goal of taking up space and setting boundaries without counseling; but, being in counseling offered a shorter path to that place. She described, “I could continue doing the meditation work and the permission conversations and the life coaching sessions . . . and I haven’t gotten nearly the shift in self-awareness [that counseling provided].” Counseling was a safe place to delve into her past and current concerns to comprehend herself more fully and get helpful homework she could not have created on her own; she chose the work and the relationship. Samantha had also experienced growth outside of her counseling relationships, both from building relationships and from cultivating her meditation practices. She was building strong community, such as with her pagan community, which facilitated its own growth. By having growth and community, counseling became an experience she was opting into rather than one required of her. Samantha was a person who strove to be informed and valued her ability to choose, both in life generally and also in her counseling.

Connection Without Social Stigma

It was important to recognize that, when Samantha felt compelled to educate her previous counselors about their heterosexism and erasure of bisexuality and pansexuality, she had to expose herself to those toxic ideas to help unravel them. Samantha’s first counseling experiences included exposure to systemic oppression and related traumas as part of building those working relationships. Relationships that do not require this kind of labor come more easily to Samantha.
because there was no fear of having her identities pathologized or in finding bigotry behind a friendly face.

Samantha discussed feeling loved and cared for in her counseling relationship. This genuine acceptance and positive regard facilitated that step into connection. When acceptance was communicated openly, and when things that had previously received judgment were celebrated, mutuality was easier to develop. Samantha experienced her current counselor’s acceptance through his expertise and observing his knowledge of her queer, kink, and polyamorous identities. There did not need to be a process of miscommunication, education, and repair as she had experienced with her first counseling relationships. Although the arrival at connection from disconnection can be healing in itself, it can begin with fear when broaching a new topic or discussing an evolution in identity. Samantha’s most recent counselor understood what it meant to be kinky, pagan, poly, and queer. She sought a counselor specifically with this knowledge to avoid having to continue in her role as educator from the client seat, describing that she brought up all these identities early in their counseling to vet him.

Rather than investing labor to create the connection she needed, Samantha and her counselor’s shared knowledge was a foundation from which they could build their relationship together. This depth of connection was a valuable part of the counseling relationship because it allowed for a mutual growth-fostering relationship to develop, which benefited both Samantha and the counselor. The depth of connection fostered engagement in the process, which supported the change she desired.

Textural-Structural Description

Samantha fought hard for the growth and boundaries she was able to develop. Her experiences in both personal relationships and counseling allowed her to discover more and more
of herself as she developed over her lifespan. She was able to find community through those identities of polyamory, paganism, pansexuality, and kink; but, even with those connections, there was something tangibly different about the connection counseling provided. Through her own internal work that she supported through community engagement and counseling, Samantha had reached a juncture where she was beginning to feel an increased confidence in who she was. As a result, she had been acting to protect her own value and integrity, identifying this as an emerging process of self-care. Although Samantha was achieving her goals in counseling, she carried lasting impacts from the underwhelming nature of her first forays into counseling. She continued to be mindful of her need to protect herself from ignorance in others, especially in counselors.

*The Power of Depth In Connection*

Samantha broadly stated, “I think that there’s an overabundance of close-mindedness out there” when considering most people’s awareness of ways of being outside of the cultural norm. Samantha grew up in a conservative, Catholic household where monogamy was the only path for romantic relationships and was thought to be a correct way to be in the world. When she was in college, Samantha entered counseling in the hopes of creating mutual connections with greater understanding. She was struggling to find people socially who fully understood her and her sexuality. She felt a draw toward building relationships with others and seeking out mutual connections with a longing for connection even as she was receiving messaging that her sexuality made her less comprehensible. She longed for acceptance and to be seen as worthy in those connections. Samantha described future relationships where she felt safe discussing her internal landscape, such as being involved with “permission conversations” and being a part of her local pagan community. All of these efforts demonstrated a desire to move toward others and
be in relationships after navigating close-minded rejections. Although those experiences were valuable, they seemed to lack some of the transformative experience Samantha later found in counseling.

Being close and feeling safe was worthwhile; however, friendships were not fulfilling Samantha’s needs in the same way her connection in counseling managed to achieve. When discussing what made counseling different from the other relationships, she stated, “[My counselor is] not my best friend. . . . It’s somebody that’s impartial. There’s the word.” Her counselor was different because he was removed from her community. He was trained in developing the mutual growth-fostering relationship that allowed counseling to be effective. The counselor helped Samantha scaffold a robust model, which allowed her to deepen all of her connections through the ability to replicate desired aspects of a growth-fostering relationship. The counseling space also allowed for her to prioritize herself and her needs without fearing she might be taking space or time from others. Being able to focus on her relational self increased her understanding of who she was; she wanted to create her life in a way that none of her social relationships could have supported. With the counselor’s knowledge and experience of what a growth-fostering counseling relationship was like, he was able to guide their work to a level of connection that Samantha perceived as effortlessness.

The experience of being genuinely connected to her counselor was something Samantha had not experienced before; it was empowering and delightful to her. The result of their ongoing counseling process was something she wanted to continue on an indefinite basis. She wanted to take action to stay engaged with the counseling process based on how accepted she felt, including continuing to see her counselor after a change in insurance. She was not at a point where she could trust her drive for action would persist if the counseling relationship was
terminated, as captured in her fear that she would not be able to find another counselor with a connection similar to what they had created.

Samantha was also clear she had not been waiting for perfection in a counselor. She arrived at counseling in dire need after her heart attack-like panic attack. She had enough community support through friends and partners to set boundaries seeking her counseling. Samantha was able to find her counselor who was already aware of integral identities of hers. She appreciated how real her counselor was with moments where she was able to teach him vocabulary words that were not directly related to their work and having sessions where their energy levels were mismatched. Even with these small inconsistencies, he was trained to function at relational depth that profoundly motivated her growth in identifying her needs. Additionally, he was adept at setting clearer boundaries and allowed an explosion of development for her internal work to take up more space, both emotionally and physically. Their relationship did not require perfection to thrive; but, it did require authenticity. The counseling relationship became a mutual connection, which supported Samantha moving beyond early messages of unworthiness and embracing of herself.

Emerging Security in the Self

Samantha had been seeking pathways throughout her life to uncover more of herself and to feel celebration in those discoveries. She found connections with her peers in the communities she was part of and found people who shared her identities, even recognizing there were people in her community who were also managing their mental health with professional support. Samantha was finding more community by embracing herself; but, she concealed ongoing concerns of being found unworthy. These concerns emerged from past connections that involved rejection of crucial pieces of who she was, such as her earlier counseling experiences where she
sought counseling to better understand her sexuality but was then required to educate her counselors on that topic. Still, she was able to find enough affirming interactions through others with shared identities that she felt confident to start a new foray into counseling with a series of vulnerable declarations about who she was.

Samantha’s most recent counselor did not require her to define herself. She was prepared for her identities to be rejected; however, the counselor already had a baseline awareness of these identities. Although she may have socially experienced both ignorance and acceptance in her identities, Samantha felt affirmed through not having to educate a professional. When exploring the impacts of being transparent about all of her ways of being in the first counseling session, she described her counselor’s approach to understanding about what she had disclosed, sharing:

[It] was like he picked apart what my version of poly was so that he understood more. But, it wasn’t like he was questioning what it was. It wasn’t like I was educating him about the concept of polyamory. I was giving him more of who I was.

As their counseling progressed, the counselor’s explicit understanding was reinforced. As a result, Samantha was better at understanding who she was in addition to her labels; she was able to see a deeper sense of self and was able to better protect herself as worthy. This notion was the core of the boundaries she had been developing; she was becoming aware of her inherent value through being able to observe herself in relationship to her counselor. This awareness left Samantha able to seek new actions in the world, such as pursuing a plan to move several states away to develop a triad with beloved long-distance partners or being more able to say no when required at work or with friends. Some of her vulnerabilities still existed, which was something Samantha was aware of based on her desire to protect herself by meeting outside of her home for our interviews. She feared judgment and acknowledged some of her boundaries remained fairly weak.
Counseling was the structured space that gave Samantha the ability to sort through herself and put herself together from what she discovered. She described the process of counseling was to “pick apart [her] life with somebody that it doesn’t impact.” She accepted she would have to continue to expand her awareness into more and more of herself. This process had a shape that she understood and it was not something for her to fear now. Although counseling and her other relationships had not always provided safety for her exploration, counseling had become an integral part of coming to better understand herself and her innate worth.

*Learning through Disappointment*

Although Samantha’s more recent experiences in her relationships and in counseling had been generally positive, she experienced relationships of mixed quality across her lifespan. In college, she sought counseling for reasons involving her sexuality, but “felt like [she] had to educate them,” which highlighted how she was not receiving broad support for all her ways of being. Coming from a family that expected monogamy and heterosexuality, she was found wanting in those relationships. The sense of being unworthy was heightened when she entered counseling to find understanding about her sexuality that she was not receiving with her peers, but then had to educate those counselors on her sexuality. Samantha repeatedly emphasized that her main desire was to never educate a counselor again. This clear and strong desire illustrates the impact of this seemingly innocuous exchange. Samantha reported her experiences of counseling in college did not harm her; but, they left her underwhelmed with the counseling process. She received negative messaging that identities vital to her were not important to the counselor outside of their session time. Essentially, who she was not important to them.

Although Samantha did not think of the college counseling experience as harmful, she delayed counseling until she was actively in crisis. Living with increasing depression and anxiety
was preferrable to the perceived risks of returning to the counseling process until her symptoms had escalated to the point she thought she might be dying. Returning to counseling was her last choice after engaging in a variety of community supports and other means of addressing mental health concerns, such as meditation. Through her other internal work and community connections, Samantha had the strength to be meticulous in her search, fearing she would have to provide education to the counselor again. During the height of her depression and anxiety, Samantha most wanted to avoid another negative counseling experience and shared, “That’s why I was more careful when choosing this particular counselor.” This need to be sure and safe delayed Samantha’s treatment because prior experience showed her it would be more detrimental to choose arbitrarily.

This time, after taking her time and due diligence, counseling had become an overwhelmingly positive experience for Samantha. She recommended counseling to anyone managing their mental health or hoping for a deeper understanding of who they were, and shared during our interview she could not imagine being without a counselor. This enthusiastic support was the result of her careful work to seek a counselor who was a proper fit for her. Samantha continued to be aware of the risks of ignorant counselors and shared, “I spend enough time advocating for myself outside of counseling; counseling is about me time. So didn’t want to have to do that in counseling.” She developed strength in her community and an initial valuing of herself to create appropriate criteria and boundaries for what she was seeking in a counselor. She had been disappointed in her previous counseling experience and had been able to find repair, both with her specific counselor and with the idea of counseling based on this new way of connecting. Samantha had to reach an intersection of self-knowledge and need to uncover the value counseling held for her.
Evelyn

I completed all interviews with Evelyn in her comfortable and pleasantly decorated small home in an urban neighborhood where she lived alone. She had long hair, colorful nails, and dressed and styled herself in a manner that was powerfully at ease in her femininity. She was 34 years old when she responded to the recruitment survey. Evelyn described herself as a queer ciswoman who was Black and mixed race. She also identified as a solo egalitarian polyamorist, which meant for her that, beyond being polyamorous, her most important relationship was the one she had with herself. She strove to give equal value to all the relationships in her life.

The analysis of Evelyn’s interview revealed themes and invariant constituents that counseling was both educational and harmful, while creating experiences of empowerment and a dynamic knowledge of the self. In her textural description, Evelyn’s counseling history is recounted while also incorporating her discovery of her own intrinsic polyamory through relationships outside of the counseling experience. The structural description describes her building more trust in her community after she was able to build more trust with herself and with her counselor. That trust was facilitated by her counselor’s expertise, both in counseling and in polyamory specifically. Through her counseling, the shift of her relationship with power was epitomized as an experience that was once harmful but can now be shared. In the textural-structural description, Evelyn’s experience becomes clearly dichotomous. She first had to survive harmful and damaging parts of her life, such as relationships and jobs. However, she then entered a part of her life with new emotional spaces that felt safe and trustworthy where she could flourish. With this safety, Evelyn was able to grow for herself and found the capacity to share that growth with those in her community.
I’m a solo egalitarian polyamorist and I love my life. I’m trying to reconcile my identity with my actions because I am moving in with some partners to start a new chapter of my life and to start getting ready to be a parent. I am excited to be a mom and I love my life partners so much. These are all changes I really want; but, incorporating all of those changes into a solo identity is going to be interesting. One of my frustrations with poly is that there aren’t many good road maps, cultural examples, or touch stones. It seems like anytime I need to make a change, I am forging a whole new path on my own. It can get a little tiring at times; but, it is part of why I’m going to counseling. So I can have help with those new paths.

I think counseling can be incredibly helpful and at other times, it can be really terrible. My first experiences with counseling was seeing someone when I was in grade school because I was having problems with anger. It happened a long time ago. Then, I got into couples counseling with my ex-husband when I was 19 years old and that was terrible. We were open-ish and were having some threesomes; but, my husband had been cheating on me. The counselor we found through the military told me my husband’s cheating was my fault because I had wanted these sexual relationships with other women while we were married. It was all the more confusing because I didn’t just want a sexual relationship with those women; I wanted to date them and fall in love. I had been the unicorn to a couple before I got married and it was wonderful. I wanted more of that; but, I didn’t know how to ask for it. And then my counselor got in my head and had me feeling even worse for these things that I wanted. He made me feel like I was the problem. That shit messed me up for a long time. It was terrible and I was really hurt by that stuff. My husband and I ended up getting divorced and I had to spend a long time thinking about what I wanted and how I was going to make my life my own after that.
When I decided to go back to counseling, I was very careful in who I saw. I knew my counselor from my social circle. I picked her because I knew she was knowledgeable about poly and that she knew more than me about poly, which is rare. I don’t make hasty decisions. When I put my mind to something, I do it; but, I don’t act rashly. I started seeing her with my partner and then my partner didn’t want to go anymore; but, I was motivated to keep going. I continue to enjoy her expertise. She knows more than I do in a lot of areas, which feels good to me because I am almost always the most educated person in my room. I know a lot. I am even educating others on polyamory. I love how she motivates my growth. She is driving me to be that educator and to grow my business and I love it! Sometimes I wish I had had more options when picking a counselor. I have had a few moments when it is weird that my counselor also moves in some of my social circles; but, I had to choose to have a counselor who understands my life and it hasn’t been a real problem.

I continue to really value all that knowledge. My counselor has given me so many tools. She knows books to read that I haven’t found before. She is so skilled in helping me determine what I really want. We’ve done a lot of work on forging new paths and being my best me. She is there for it and really understands that work. I appreciate it so much. I definitely think I could have done all this work and growth without her; but, it would have taken longer. I am glad for the more efficient option. It gives me more time to live the life I want, rather than having to spend more time working to determine what my best choice is.

Structural Description

Evelyn transitioned from being in the military to being self-employed and from believing she was monogamous to embracing her intrinsic solo egalitarian polyamory. Evelyn described a complicated history with relationships, both personal and in counseling, experiencing trauma in
both spaces. She was open about her life experience and brought compelling honesty to the interview process, sharing about her journey into vulnerability through counseling and experiencing trust. She came to value those who had invested in gaining knowledge and expertise about her oppressed identities, especially given the harm she experienced at the hands of an earlier counselor who was ignorant. After a history of being exploited by those in power, she had developed appreciation of those who would share power with her. Evelyn had grown to see herself as a valuable member of her community through personal empowerment and embracing new roles such as being an educator, returning her growth to her community.

Building Trust through Collaboration

Evelyn’s life had been deeply impacted by her ability and inability to trust other’s motives over the course of her life. She shared, “My father taught us very early on to fight because we were very pretty, and he didn’t want us to be victims.” Other people were not to be trusted with her beauty or her body, so she was taught to keep them distant for her safety and was coached to default to wariness. When she joined the military upon entering adulthood, her work shaped these early lessons. Her work made it clear that violence against insult should not be her first option, and there were clear directives for who deserved her deference. Upon leaving the military, she learned those who are supposed to be trusted are not always deserving; not all counselors are trustworthy. She started forging her own path as an adult. Evelyn shared, “I close up when I need to, which I feel like is a lot. I’m learning to better process the things to talk about those things and be more vulnerable.” Vulnerability with a counselor or in a personal relationship requires a level of mutuality and trust that had been absent in her couple’s counseling and in some of her past relationships.

For Evelyn, counseling provided a means to address feelings or symptoms she could not
manage on her own; but, counseling was also a means to cultivate trust. She had previously experienced counseling as effective, and returning to counseling with concerns such as body dysmorphia required her to trust herself. She had the ability to leave counseling at any time when the counseling process felt destructive, an experience with which she was familiar. Surviving a destructive counseling experience also meant Evelyn knew she could survive another such encounter. When she could be vulnerable with her counselor and not experience harm, she could respect and trust that counselor, which encouraged growth through their mutual connection. Even when considering her desire for a counselor who had more expertise than she did, Evelyn was describing a counselor she felt she could trust. She believed that, if the counselor knew more and understood her identity and community, they would not exploit her vulnerability.

Evelyn’s growth in trust through counseling highlighted her need to seek support outside of her polycule. She was not unwilling to receive support in her polycule; but, she was also ready to seek outside care. Her drive to grow had both an inward and outward focus, increasing respect for herself intrapersonally, but also with the goal of increasing her ability to be vulnerable interpersonally. This drive could be seen in both her enjoyment of having a sense of organization and power in her life and in knowing she was a resource to others. As she increased trust in herself and in her counselor, she was more able to give and receive trust in her personal community, which she demonstrated in seeking to provide education to others. The educator must be trustworthy in ways that are similar to a counselor, armed with knowledge and a desire to build others up. Evelyn found she cherished the educator role on its own and for the reliability being an educator demonstrated.

Acceptance and Trust of Expertise

Evelyn specifically discussed how, in seeking counseling most recently, she wanted
someone who was more knowledgeable about polyamory than she was. She placed high value in that expertise, indicating that, if she was going to be vulnerable, she wanted to do so with someone who was educated and aware of the polyamorous community. Her need to feel safe and choosing to let someone else have power over her seemed even more crucial when considering her return to counseling was partially motivated by body dysmorphia, wherein she would have had to acknowledge her perception of herself as inaccurate. To manage her symptoms, Evelyn needed to rely on the counselor’s perception of her because Evelyn recognized her own judgment could not to be entirely trusted, heightening the need for counselor expertise and knowledge. Evelyn did not want to waste time having to educate others and could not trust someone with perceived ignorance.

This need for an expert showed Evelyn’s bias in how she perceived the counseling process. She wanted knowledge and sought a more knowledgeable person; thus, it was evident how she viewed and valued knowledge. Knowledge can be taken in; but, it starts outside the self. She understood knowledge as something people have and can seek from others. Someone less knowledgeable about polyamory than she was would have provided a less valuable counseling experience. Although some of this bias is warranted, as evidenced by the harm ignorance of polyamory had previously caused for Evelyn, there was also a level of competence she sought from a counselor that seemed beyond the necessary minimum for safety. Evelyn had even described her current counselor, sharing, “[She’s] a great person because she’s read more than I ever have,” which, according to Evelyn, was a high bar to clear. These standards made the search for a counselor complicated because Evelyn had developed a specialized knowledge base to better understand herself and desired a counselor with that knowledge as a focused interest. Evelyn also saw the work of counseling as skill building to help achieve specific ends where she
could grow in her expertise and be more fully herself. Her counselor’s expertise and skill helped Evelyn to recognize the counselor had power that could be hoarded or shared.

Navigating Relational Power

Much of Evelyn’s experience in counseling was of a power-over dynamic. Her counselors held power and sway as educated professionals she was receiving support from. Power is typically distributed in this way for children; a child might be asked to help collaborate, but parents get a final say in children’s activities. Evelyn’s assent was valued highly, as evidenced by her reports of feeling highly supported in her family and her positive experiences in childhood counseling. Power in her early counseling experience was handled intentionally and respectfulessly as evidenced by Evelyn’s “spotty” memory of counseling being a positive experience when she was 7 years old; counseling provided her with support through her parent’s divorce. Despite this respectful environment, Evelyn was not able to act autonomously.

Regardless of the power-over dynamic of childhood counseling, Evelyn had established trust in counseling as a space where she could be open. This trust left her vulnerable to harm when she later received couple’s counseling from a counselor with an overt sexist and monogamist bias. This counselor was the one made available to her by the military. The counselor made it clear to Evelyn that he felt she was to blame for the problems in her marriage to her ex-husband, who was present in this counseling process. The counselor told Evelyn she was emasculating him by outranking him and being unwilling to perform the role of wife as someone who cooks and cleans. She had also “opened the door to cheating by allowing threesomes” and not having enough sex with him as a twosome. She discussed that her experience was shaming, describing the way the counseling was handled was “a very harmful thing to do to somebody.” The counselor had a lot of power over Evelyn, both as someone who
was reporting to her employer and as a professional making such harsh judgements of her.

Although the power-over dynamic was respected in her childhood counseling, it was exploited in her couple’s counseling, leaving her feeling shamed. Evelyn described how the impacts of the couple’s counseling were so marked that she had to explore them in future counseling relationships.

Beyond the impacts of her counselor in the military, Evelyn’s time in the service carried other profound impacts. She described that, after a childhood of learning to set boundaries through violence, training in the military honed that power to a fine point. She excelled at hand-to-hand combat and shared:

I was the best at being lethal. And it was a very humbling moment for me, and it made me think, “You really need to get ahold of your temper, because now you know what you’re capable of, and you need to keep that together, because you don’t want to hurt somebody for real.”

By the time Evelyn was ready to leave the service, she recognized she was driven by anger and aggression that could harm others. Her personal work to build more connecting relationships left her with an awareness that she had the ability to claim power over others through might; however, she did not desire that power.

When seeking counseling after her time in the service, Evelyn became particular with whom she gave power to because her previous therapeutic experience included feeling harmed in her couple’s work. She stated counselors are “supposed to help people who are in need, and you need to take your personal prejudices out of it.” She needed counseling to address current concerns, but also to undo the impact of her previous negative counseling experiences. Her caution moving forward in counseling was both protective and reactive. Her acquired need for vigilance was a reaction to a counselor’s unhampered bias. Evelyn was able to separate the counselor from the counseling, and she strived to ensure she was not harmed in the counseling
process again. Those efforts were tempered with an evolving sense of knowing when to be comfortable with others having power over her versus knowing when and how she should push for her own autonomy.

Evelyn knew she had not always been confident; this idea was captured in her experience of body dysmorphia. She learned counseling included a sharing of power that could be exploited. She recognized a need to return to counseling to continue growing by exploring herself more fully and to heal some of the harm done by her couples’ counselor. Seeking support through counseling was something Evelyn was taught in her youth, and the work of counseling served her well as a child. Her continued experiences of counseling were caring and respectful of relational power, including the gentleness of one of her counselors who suggested she might be polyamorous. Evelyn came to recognize that power could be shared between herself and her counselors by creating power with rather than power over.

Empowerment through Change

Evelyn carried herself with confidence and had strong relationships through which she had been able to grow. She developed a profound sense of self-acceptance, and this self-acceptance supported inevitable change in her identity over time. She first entered counseling when she was a child, brought to the experience by her parents. By choosing counseling for her, Evelyn’s parents not only modeled how care of self was vital, but also emphasized the value of growing in ways that would help Evelyn to better connect with others. Evelyn’s parents saw her struggles with managing anger and they were able to integrate counseling without her feeling punished for her feelings. Essentially, her parents saw she was angry and wanted her to have the tools to manage her anger so she could sustain relationships. Although her childhood counseling experience was far enough in the past that the full extent of the relationship could not be
remembered entirely, it had set a precedence that there was positivity to be found in being with others that supported knowing yourself better.

Evelyn learned confidence could be revealed in the face of challenges, which left her open to change when needing to adapt to new life situations. Evelyn had many instances where she could have chosen to change or stay the same. Although her experience in her family of origin had rocky moments, she described her parents as attentive and providing care to the best of their abilities. The resulting relational models of connection and safety supported initial self-awareness. Evelyn continued to grow in her self-knowledge in the counseling setting; but, this growth was offset with her history of trauma. A clear example of her growth potential could be seen in Evelyn’s embracement of her polyamorous identity after receiving strong pushback from a counselor. Evelyn was disheartened by this pushback to such a degree that she had to seek future counseling to address the harm done. However, as with many of her struggles, Evelyn found the strength to embrace her solo egalitarian polyamorous identity with support from herself, her community, and her family of origin.

Evelyn’s growing confidence was revealed in her most recent counseling relationship. She shared:

My therapist has done a really good job of really encouraging me and pushing me to be a speaker and an educator on the things that I spend so much time educating myself on. It’s really been beneficial to my life.

Counseling inspired action both in and out of the counseling relationship. This growth was crucial for Evelyn’s positive experience in counseling because she wanted not just to benefit herself or her polycule, but also her community at large. Evelyn created benefit for her community by taking on the role of speaker and educator through the direct support of her counselor. The positive impact Evelyn experienced by having her expertise brought to the
foreground was increased due to the respect she had for her counselor. She also experienced the
counselor’s respect for her knowledge and competence when the counselor supported her in
sharing her lived experiences in these new roles. These were not roles she would have found so
easily without the support of her counselor, which left her feeling enriched and empowered.

Textural-Structural Description

Evelyn had overcome many struggles in the course of her life and was ready to speak
openly about her progress and growth. She described her experiences with sexist policing of her
body leading to body dysmorphia and a counselor whose monogamism had to be addressed in
future counseling. Evelyn survived shaming and harmful relationships that impacted her for
years. She had to learn what it meant to live with shame and seek paths to shedding that shame to
build new types of relationships. Through seeking knowledge about her experience, Evelyn
found a means of empowering herself and growing through her lifetime. She sought that growth
from a place of control, which ranged from becoming her own employer to seeking a counselor
she was socially acquainted with before starting their work together. By directing these parts of
her life, she had developed trust from a protected place of strength. Through this strength, she
was able create greater integration and connection with her polyamorous community through
taking on the role of educator, which solidified her experience of growth.

Surviving Shame

Evelyn had been able to withstand reoccurring harm and disconnection from herself and
her truth over her lifetime. She described that many of these instances had a clear and trackable
source with lasting impacts up to the time of our interviews. She attributed the development of
her body dysmorphia to having worked as a model in her 20s. She was told that her appearance
was unacceptable, which resulted in her abuse of diet pills and starvation to control the shape of
her body. These narratives that her body needed to change and become smaller were profoundly impactful due to preexisting priming from sexist narratives about women’s bodies, from patriarchal, exploitative society and her family. The impacts of trying to constrain her body for her job over a decade prior had persisted, creating lasting repercussions. Although it was being addressed in her counseling at the time of our interview, she shared, “I have really bad body dysmorphia, still to this day.” As a result, she could not see her body accurately and kindly due to negative messaging she received about having a “stout” body that should be controlled or changed. She was addressing those symptoms; but, these messages created a lasting mark that she was left to manage.

Evelyn also experienced shame in her relationships, both in being blamed for the infidelity of her husband and guilt for her own infidelity. Prior to recognizing her polyamory, Evelyn used many tactics to cope with her then unknown intrinsic relationship identity. She did not know how to function as an innately nonmonogamous person because she lacked a model for what her identity might be and she lacked language to describe her experience. She described that she was “trying to have monogamous relationships and failing horribly at it,” and shared, “Either they would cheat or I would cheat, or I’d manipulate some shit to happen, but I just couldn’t keep a monogamous relationship.” Evelyn lived through these reoccurring patterns in her relationships for years, believing she was at fault as the only common factor across all of her ended romances. As a result, she believed she was inherently unable to sustain the sexual exclusivity that she felt was necessary for a successful relationship in the social hegemony. This pattern left her feeling like a failure, as if she was defective in some manner when it came to seeking romantic love; this experience of shame was heightened in her couples counseling.

In her couples counseling, Evelyn experienced overt monogamism. The counselor left her
feeling shamed and blamed for failures in her marriage due to initiating consensual multiple partner sex with her husband as a strategy to manage her intrinsic polyamory. When recounting that experience with her counselor, Evelyn shared, “It just made me out to be a very bad person. It made me out to be a bad woman. It made me out to be a bad wife. That’s some shame I carried around for a while.” As opposed to building a growth-fostering connection in counseling, she clearly experienced being villainized in that counseling. Evelyn reported the damage from the counselor’s lack of education on polyamory and monogamism lingered and was something Evelyn had to address in future counseling, having to unpack concerns that she was a bad partner and a bad woman. All of these experiences had a lasting impact on Evelyn, and she stated, “I did feel shame and . . . having to unravel that whole thing later on.” The ramifications of shame from these disconnected relationships left her feeling unacceptable.

The result of surviving this shaming counseling experience left Evelyn with work and wariness. She was slow to return to counseling after her experience of an ignorant counselor and spent years believing she was to blame for her husband’s infidelity. Additionally, Evelyn also felt shame related to her body as evidenced by her body dysmorphia, which was ongoing at the time of our interviews. Evelyn survived these times of shame and harm, reporting, “I think the only thing good that came of it, it was an empathy. I have an empathy for people who live in shame.” She outlasted the detrimental relationships; but, these experiences left a mark she would have to cope with, and strive to recover from, to build to stronger relationships again in her future.

*Thriving through Emotional Safety*

Evelyn sought growth and change in her life, both to address harm done by the shame she had experienced, but also to support her becoming her best self. She valued this progress for her
own benefit and for that of her community, or for her personal relationships and the polyamorous
community at large. Many of her tactics to support that empowerment started with creating
spaces where she felt safe and in control. Evelyn was self-employed and running her own
business, allowing her to be her own boss. She was also filling the role of educator and advocate
in the polyamorous community, taking on speaking engagements and sharing knowledge she had
acquired. When considering the education and support she provided to her community, she
shared, “It’s helped them in some of their education of themselves. I really feel like I benefited a
lot,” demonstrating the mutuality of these connections to her peers. She initially required
encouragement to take on the role of educator; being in that position created confidence for
Evelyn because it transformed shaming experiences into teachable moments. She had learned
from experience that being able to move with self-possession through a situation did not protect
her from future shame; however, education did protect her. Education and broader
understandings transformed her experiences of being a “cheater” to being a polyamorist
struggling to come out. She acknowledged that this language change did not exonerate her past
actions; however, it did create a kinder lens through which to view her choices. Education was
something protective and healing. It created a verifiable way of doing things, such as receiving
consent to engage in other sexual or romantic relationships. Evelyn felt protected in having
become more educated. She also felt security in being supported by those who were educated,
especially by people she needed to be vulnerable with, such as her counselor. Her experiences of
shame and resulting cautiousness made vulnerability a difficult prospect; that security was
integral to being open to the work of counseling.

In her most recent counseling, Evelyn had been particular about who she sought as a
counselor. She wanted to work with a woman of color, like herself, who was preferably both
polyamorous and educated about polyamory. Evelyn required these criteria due to a sense that someone who did not meet them would not be able to understand the full range of her experience. She needed those connections and those shared identities to make reentering the counseling process feel safe. She needed that safety and comfort to receive the support she needed so she ended up picking an acquaintance as her counselor rather than risking a stranger. This choice allowed for more perceived control in the counseling process. Evelyn described her more recent counseling as beneficial for her, reflecting, “I think I know myself better and so therefore I’m able to communicate it better to other people,” which allowed for greater connection in relationships. Evelyn strove to balance growing and being vulnerable with staying safe after a life with so much harm. Her more recent counseling was a space that allowed her to shelter new efforts, allowing them to develop in peace until they were strong enough to be shared with others. For example, Evelyn claimed the role of educator in the polyamorous community, a step she was encouraged to take by her counselor. Evelyn shared, “I can say that I’m a leader in this poly world where I was very uncomfortable saying that before. . . . It’s really been really good to define myself as a [polyamorist and a leader].” As her assurance in herself grew, Evelyn experienced more of her inner strength and skill that she had been carefully cultivating. Being able to share her fortitude with others who might need it was ascendent for Evelyn.

By closely managing her choices and actions, Evelyn created identities for herself, such as business owner, educator, and counseling client, which created a strong foundation to continue her growth. She described her goal to “create safe spaces for other people so they know that they’re not the only one and they have a safe place to go and talk about whatever they need to talk about.” Having this goal and feeling confident that she had the skills to create change had helped her feel like a better leader, activist, partner, and person, highlighting her movement to
fully integrate with the polyamorous community and her desire to take action in it. She felt more empowered with the support of expertise and education. There was a lot of safety in having all information that would have benefited her when she was younger, working actively to dismantle shame she had experienced. With the skills and knowledge she had gained across her lifespan, she was able to thrive, not just for herself, but for those around her. She flourished through making choices to create safety in her relationships.

Heather

Heather greeted me in her home, which was in a city residential neighborhood near a major highway. Her living room was lined full of bookshelves sagging under the weight of books stacked two rows deep. During at least one of the interviews, I also met a partner that lived in the house with Heather. Heather also shared her home with another participant, Emily, who was her metamour. Heather was wearing a colorful dress and glasses. She was a larger woman who shared that she had done work to deconstruct narratives of weightism that would be placed on her body. Heather identified herself as intrinsically polyamorous. She was a White ciswoman who described herself as bisexual and pansexual. She was 31 years old at the time of the initial interview. Heather was effervescent and anxious, as evidenced by her excitement to be participating in the interview process and her repeated apologies about the state of her living room. She seemed to emit a strong drive to be liked, shown in her wanting to make me comfortable by offering me water and determining my comfort with her cats. I found this drive to prove her geniality interesting because she was generally likeable with her open attitude and seemingly forthright nature.

The themes and invariant constituents that emerged during analysis of her interviews were that her experiences of counseling were pragmatic, invalidating, and empowering.
Additionally, her counseling included both acceptance of the self and acceptance by the counselor, and this theme was illuminated. In the textural description, Heather’s childhood awareness of her intrinsic polyamory is described and explored alongside how that awareness impacted her history with counseling. She had been in counseling several times in her life, with experiences ranging from supportive to concerning enough that she had to end the counseling relationship. The structural description explores how invalidation was present in Heather’s life, through abuse in personal and filial relationships, and also through exposure to ignorance in counseling. These abusive and dismissive relationships stand in contrast to the value that she found through building growth-fostering relationships that supported her empowerment. In the textural-structural description, the essence of her efforts to manage actively harmful relationships is clarified, including her use of distance in counseling and personal relationships to create safety for herself. This use of distance to manage or exit relationships also stands in contrast to her experience of the connection and growth she found in relationships that were safe to be vulnerable in. She worked to balance using distancing to preserve her psychological and emotional safety with determining when a relationship was of the type wherein she would benefit from closeness.

Textural Description

I have been polyamorous for as long as I can remember. When I was a child, my Barbie went down the aisle with Ken and another Barbie to marry both of them. I knew the term pretty early on as well. My parents wanted me to be reading and they had all kinds of books in the house. I got my hands on a copy of The Ethical Slut because the rule in my house was that I could read anything I could reach. So, I read it when I was about 12 and felt an immediate connection. This is me. I want this. I’m gonna live my life like this. I am working on growing as
a polyamorist by trying to be more supportive of myself and my partners, but additionally of my metas. Sometimes I’m doing that because it feels right and good but sometimes I’m doing that because I feel like I’m supposed to or that it will make other things better. I want to get along even if I don’t want to get along.

I’ve been in counseling for most of my life and my family is supportive of counseling. My dad was in counseling when I was a kid so there was support from my family as well. I’m a practical person and I see that counseling helps me out so I choose to do it. I had undiagnosed mental illness for a while, which might have been why I kept coming back to it; it helped. I’ve had a variety of issues. My mom and my first girlfriend were abusive and I had another abusive relationship after that; I was feeling the impact of those interactions. I’ve had suicidal thoughts a few times in my life too. I’m also a larger lady so I had some body image stuff, which weren’t helped by my mother saying I wouldn’t find love because I was fat and ugly. Lots of things have brought me to counseling over the years.

My first ever experience with counseling was going to confide in my school counselor because I was getting bullied after I came out as bi. She encouraged me to stay closeted to try to manage that. I kept seeing the school counselors until late high school when I was having suicidal thoughts. Saying I wanted to kill myself got me in with a non-school counselor. I ended up seeing the woman my dad had been working with. Soon after, I left for college 1,700 miles away. It was good to be that far from my parents; but, I needed a new counselor so I saw the ones on campus. Sometimes it was individual and sometimes it was group. Most of it was positive; but, I did have some of those counselors who were so confused about how my relationships worked. It was frustrating to be asked, “How can everyone be okay with this?” and
then to only have them really understand when I was dating someone asexual. I guess it made more sense to them if I was only having sex with one person. It was all so weird.

Then, I had a really great counselor at a practice here in the city and she was supportive and understanding of my poly; but, she left after having a baby so I got a new counselor there. This was years ago; but, I remember she was terrible. I only did a few sessions with her and then quit. I wanted to be talking about the end of my marriage to my abusive husband; but, I kept having to hold her hand to get her through any part of my life that was out of the mainstream. She didn’t understand what it meant to be trans and I have a partner who is a transwoman so that was important information about my life. She wanted me to teach her everything. I felt so used by her. She even asked me if my rape was valid. Can you believe that? When I told her I couldn’t do it anymore, she gushed about how I was educating her and how the first session was free. It was so unprofessional and awkward. I ended up leaving that clinic all together because their only available counselor was a man and I wasn’t ready to work with a man. It was so bad there at the end when I was breaking up with her that I feel uncomfortable when I’m near the practice because I don’t want to run into her. Just demeaning and awful. It isn’t my job to teach her things!

Now, I see a counselor down south. I’ve been seeing her for 4 years now. It is more expensive because she doesn’t take my insurance, and the drive is long; but, it is worth it to know that she isn’t going to need me to teach her things. She is aware and supportive of lots of things that are important to me: poly, kink, trans, QUILTBAG. When I told her I was poly, she was supportive and I didn’t have to tell her what that meant. She checks in on my poly in a way that shows she understands what it means; I really appreciate that, her not diminishing any partners and being ready to remember and ask about everyone. Taking it seriously and seeing it
as valid. I like that I’ve been able to bring all my people into sessions as I have wanted and needed too. Because of the cost and the drive, sometimes I will only see her once a month; but, whenever something is happening in my life, I can easily start seeing her more and she can poke me in the right direction. She lets me ramble and then gets me thinking about things more deeply.

I did some [intensive outpatient programming, or IOP.] too for some suicidal ideation in the last few years. Things had gotten really bad; but, the IOP was fine and it helped. I’m also involved in my meta’s counseling and it is weird to be involved in that space because I am her family; but, people don’t know what to make of me at her [partial hospitalization program].

Structural Description

Not all of Heather’s relationships were fully accepting, both personally and in counseling. She described abuse in some of her past romantic relationships and she described managing counselor ignorance, which heightened feelings of invalidation as a polyamorist, a queer woman, and a sexual assault survivor. She was empowered through a growth-fostering relationship with her father and loving connections with her more recent romantic relationships. Heather was supported in seeking counseling from a young age. Counseling became a space to address her traumas at the personal level of abuse or at the cultural level of weightism. If she had learned anything, though, it was that some relationships have clear roles and serve a purpose, such as the practical role of being a supportive metamour and how counseling functioned best for her with clearly defined expectations.

The Enduring Impact of Invalidation

Heather had experienced people undermining or invalidating her since her childhood. She described disconnection in her maternal relationship as a child, which she identified as abusive
and specifically described that her mother was rejecting of her fat body. This early abuse resulted in Heather navigating the world with a model for caregiver relationships that included harm by those who were supposed to support her without condition. She carried with her a message that she was unacceptable and unlovable. As she entered her early adulthood, these internalized messages aggregated and escalated to suicidality, which was compounded by her school counselor’s encouragement that she should remain closeted about her bisexuality.

Heather shared an awareness that she was left with some deep psychological impacts from those connections. In a casual statement, she shared, “I had a lot to unknot from those.” Even though Heather had access to a more supportive relationship model with her father, the models of disconnection were compounded because there was little framework for questioning those harmful relationships. She was accustomed to being dismissed, which made her vulnerable to emotional abuse from a girlfriend and then from her husband, who also sexually assaulted Heather. She described deep personal work to address her vulnerability and repetition of harmful relationship models. Still, she carried herself in a manner that communicated her desire to be liked and to be found acceptable. During the interview process, she noted these early impacts continued to linger.

When considering her counseling more specifically, Heather encountered invalidating and distressing comments and ideologies. She was exposed to counselors’ ignorance about polyamorous, queer, and kink experiences. One counselor also invalidated her experiences with sexual assault. She experienced the counselors’ lack for knowledge mostly as something passive; they were choosing not to take the time to learn about these identities even when they were vital to Heather’s experience. The inactivity of her counselors was mostly tolerable until she experienced a deeply positive and growth-fostering connection with a counselor after college.
Heather gained awareness for how positive the counseling relationship could be. After this deeply connected and informed counseling relationship, her next counselor was found to be unacceptable because, “[The counselor] wasn’t putting in the effort to educate herself.” Heather described feelings of frustration and anxiety when revisiting her choice to end that counseling relationship.

Heather described the unacceptable counselor’s attempts to continue the relationship, which felt hollow because she had experienced the counselor’s lack of motivation. Heather then chose to leave the counselor’s group practice entirely for fear she would encounter the counselor she chose to stop working with. Heather had gained enough confidence in mutual personal and counseling relationships to be able to stop working with that particular counselor; but, she lacked the fortitude to tolerate having to revisit her choice to end the counseling relationship. Her anxiety reoccurred even when visiting the part of town where the counselor’s group practice was for fear their paths would cross, illustrating the intensity of that disconnection and how profoundly impacted she was by it. Heather maintained nonmutual relationship models as a result of feeling failed by her counselor, which diminished the likelihood she was able to experience an increased knowledge of self in the counseling relationship. Heather did not feel supported in discovering more of herself with a counselor who was rejecting of Heather’s self-knowledge that she held to be true.

Heather had not only been impacted by a rejection of her identities in counseling. She described the impacts of having to navigate counselors’ ignorance of intrinsic identities of her partners. This experience was most obvious in her counselors not accepting Heather as polyamorous or queer, leading to the rejection of the polyamory or queerness of any of her partners who identified as such. As a result, to tolerate a rejection of herself would mean she
must tolerate a rejection of her partner. Heather was specifically frustrated by the counselor with whom she had to end services with because the counselor did not understand what it meant to be transgender and did not do the work to develop that understanding. Although being transgender was not central to Heather, it was a vital identity for a partner. When recounting the experience, she was noticeably frustrated by the counselor’s indolent expectation that Heather should provide education on the transgender experience. Heather was aware that her more recent partnerships, which created growth and connection, were valuable and deserved her protection, even with the added work of having to seek a new counselor.

Finding Growth-Fostering Narratives

Despite negative counseling experiences, Heather also experienced growth and empowerment through the open acceptance provided by many of her other counselors and personal relationships in her adulthood. She started receiving support from her school counselors before moving to services outside of school when she started to experience suicidal ideation. The counseling process was normalized in her family through her father’s use of counseling, easing her entry into the counseling process outside of school. Heather found counseling could be a source of support, a space where she had her parents’ encouragement, and a space where she was able to disclose her sexuality without pressure to make herself more manageable or acceptable. Heather continued to return to counseling through college and her adulthood as part of habit or acclimation. The choice to return was reinforced through the counseling process itself, which typically provided the results she desired and supported her well-being. She described finding counselors who were “willing to engage with [trauma] and be supportive and actually know how to listen without judgment.” Although not all of her counselors met this standard, the one Heather found most effective did.
The effective support counseling provided became a means for managing other points of rejection and oppression in Heather’s life. Counseling became a means of managing weightism, a bias experienced by Heather due to her larger body being perceived as “fat [and] ugly.” When discussing weightism and fat phobia, she shared:

It got me into these situations, which has led to my need for therapy in a lot of ways. Breaking out of that and breaking out of the cycle of dieting and not dieting has been a really big, big deal.

Heather described the discussions she had about her weight with one of her therapists. She shared it was like interacting with Mr. Rogers; the therapist kept saying Heather was perfect just by being herself. This positive messaging was clearly counter to the narratives Heather’s mother shared with her when she stated Heather would not be able to find love and was undesirable as a fat person. Counseling was a space that provided a connected relationship and did not require Heather to hate her body to be acceptable. Through this accepting therapeutic relationship, Heather felt encouraged to further question other social systems of oppression and abuse.

Heather described her childhood and early adulthood, which contained many instances of emotional abuse in her relationship with her mother, in a romantic partnership with an early girlfriend, and with her ex-husband. Heather’s experience of being abused in her childhood created a relationship model that was not mutual or growth fostering. She described expecting a similar kind of treatment in future relationships, which made her more vulnerable to abuse because she lived with the expectation that loving relationships could include harm. In contrast, the counseling relationships were frequently supportive and trusting. Between personal work and therapy, Heather shared, “[I had] come to the realization . . . that people aren’t automatically mad at me and that I am not automatically bad if I don’t do something that they want,” which were all concerns she had previously held in her relationships.
Heather was aware growth stemmed from her counseling; however, it also stemmed from the work she was doing outside of counseling, such as being more able to identify abuse, knowing she should not accept abuse, and leaving abusive connections. Her awareness that she was creating positive change for herself was underscored by the knowledge that her self-confidence continued to grow despite only spending a small portion of her time in counseling. She had a better understanding of what was and was not appropriate for her relationships, which was reflected in creating relationships that did not repeat abuse. This growth left Heather more empowered to confront problematic relationships, including counseling relationships that did not provide support and acceptance.

*Insight from Contrasting Relationships*

Through having experienced the contrast of harmful and helpful relationships, Heather had become realistic in her expectation of how to relate. These expectations were clearly observable in her description of her relationships with her mother and her meta. She was ready to invest in those relationships because they filled important roles in her life. She was actively setting boundaries and striving to ensure they were not causing concerns in her life. Heather was disposed to working on these relationships after having mutual connections with friends and her father; but, she expressed an understanding she was making those choices for her overall well-being rather than specifically benefitting from relationships with her mother and meta.

It was better for her relationship with her father if her relationship with her mother was somewhat stable, which she created by acknowledging her mother’s actions as abusive. Heather’s life with her partner would also function more smoothly if she and her metamour were able to coexist healthily together. This choice for coexistence additionally meant providing support to her meta, that she might not have otherwise invested, to indirectly support her partner.
These relational choices supported her overall well-being and the ability to sustain those choices stemmed from growth she experienced in both her personal and counseling relationships.

Heather described the focus of her counseling over the previous 8 years, sharing, “[It broke] me of the habit of trying to make myself smaller; the habit of trying to ignore things and minimize what I’m going through in order to make other people happy.” In this thought, she identified counseling as a purposeful relationship. When her counseling was connecting and providing her with results she was desiring, Heather felt deeply motivated to continue that work. Although she was aware counseling could be a relationship of depth and connection, it was a working relationship that had both time and money costs. She loved and valued that connection when it arose; however, she voiced awareness that it was not her responsibility to motivate her counselors to be more of who she needed. Heather acknowledged she had the strength of her relationship with her father, which was healthy and supportive. She acknowledged she was strong enough to leave an abusive marriage and to hold her mother accountable for emotional abuse she experienced when she was young. As a result, Heather knew she was definitely strong enough to set boundaries in her counseling, such as being unwilling to educate counselors or to tolerate a relationship without mutuality. Heather could identify that, when a counselor was not a match for her, she could find other options to best support her well-being. She was able to take these steps as growth inspiring rather than experiencing the mismatch as a failing on her part. This fortitude was the result of her collaborative relationships bolstering her self-worth.

Textural-Structural Description

Heather had a deep desire to connect, which was observed in her openness and desire to fully engage with the interview process. Her experiences with relationships have been tumultuous, having experienced harm at the hands of some of her most intimate connections; but,
there have been more growth-fostering relationships in her life because she had gone through counseling. With the strength she had developed in her growth-fostering relationships over her lifespan, Heather found she was able to create distance from those more harmful relationships for her safety. This skill emerged naturally but was cultivated through counseling. It created greater safety in her life and consistently created changes she desired. She intentionally used the skill to create more relationships that included a sense of acceptance and growth. Relationships with mutuality of care and regard supported her in recognizing her self-worth, and the personal empowerment she experienced in her counseling generated a confidence that she could provide support to others as well. These two aspects functioned as two sides of her relational growth through counseling; first, she could safely choose more distance and then, she could choose more connection. She developed her self-empowerment through finding balance in these two tactics.

_Actively Managing Harmful Relationships with Distance_

Heather experienced harm and trauma in some of her closest relationships when she was younger. In those relationships, her experiences ranged from emotional abuse and shame about her body from her mother, to being raped by her ex-husband. Although these relationships were detrimental, they also involved people who had been key supports in her life. This juxtaposition promoted the complicated understanding that intimate connections would not always provide emotional safety or clarity. She cultivated a strategy that may have developed spontaneously when Heather left for college 1,700 miles away; this physical change in distance from her mother also allowed for more emotional distance, supporting Heather’s recognition of how harmful her relationship with her mother had been. With the support of her college counselors, Heather was able to take more physical distance reinforced by psychological distance from her mother, which allowed her to develop clearer boundaries. She then repeated this use of distance in future
relationships when she recognized abuse and harm. This response was practical with the real-world benefit of experiencing less harm, which became its own reinforcement of the tactic.

The ability to maintain emotional separation with the bolster of physical distance was not always an accessible step for Heather; it was a skill she grew as she gained experience in life and relationships. When describing her experience of counseling in college, Heather shared she experienced monogamism and misunderstanding about her drive to develop polyamorous connections. She stated, “Trying to go to these counselors and say, ‘No, this is really legitimate and it totally works. I’m not just playing the field,’ was tough because they didn’t see it the way I was trying to see it.” She had the confidence to push back against the counselor’s monogamism based on a confidence knowing that polyamory was a valid way of being. This confidence came from her intrinsic experience of her polyamory and through her early discovery of *The Ethical Slut* (Easton & Liszt, 1997), a keystone text in the polyamorous community. Regardless of this strength, the counseling relationship was strained because Heather tried to navigate building polyamorous connections and wanting to be ethical in forming polyamorous relationships while also having to teach her counselors about polyamory. Heather described that her college counselors only became comfortable with her goals when learning that her partner was asexual, which left her feeling misunderstood. The lack of understanding in how she was hoping to build her life led to Heather feeling disconnected; but, she chose to continue the relationship. The choice to stay in these connections with these counselors emphasized how she had to develop her boundaries and the strength to create distance from relationships that did not benefit her across her lifespan.

Heather’s more developed strategy for distance can be most clearly observed in her taking distance from a counselor who required so much education from Heather and invalidated
her experience of sexual assault. The open shock and upset about how this counselor comported
herself was obvious in Heather’s interview process. When she realized the counseling
relationship was not going to serve her well, Heather shared, “I broke up with my therapist.
There was a breakup phone call where [the counselor] tried to get me back. That was really,
really unprofessional.” At the time of the breakup, she had experienced enough growth-fostering
relationships, both in her personal life and in previous counseling relationships, to recognize
when a connection was not mutual. Through having both mutual relationships and imbalanced
relationships, Heather developed a more practical mindset that facilitated her exiting that
particular counseling relationship because it did not meet her needs.

The evolving nature of Heather’s ability to take distance in relationships was highlighted
in navigating the aftermath of breaking up with her counselor. This need for distance was most
apparent in Heather’s lack of trust in her ability to cope with confronting the counselor. First, she
did not trust an immediate gut response to end the relationship, stating, “I gave [the counselor]
three shots. I tend to stick a little bit longer in relationships than I should.” Heather
acknowledged she had continued to struggle with knowing when she needs to exit a relationship,
which was a remanent of her complex relational trauma. She also shared she felt anxiety about
being physically near to where that counselor might be, sharing she started avoiding the part of
town where the counselor had their practice. This sense of trepidation was exacerbated by the
counselor failing to accept the ending of the relationship because the request to continue placed
strain on her one effective strategy for creating safety.

Being able to choose distance was a strength Heather developed over time through her
relationships, both professional and personal. Despite confidently recognizing the counseling
relationship needed to end, she feared interaction and having to confront her choice to gain
distance. Still, she chose distance. Distance previously created change in her relationship with her mother, which became safer when she left to attend college. Her relationship with her ex-husband became physically and psychologically safer by Heather being somewhere he was not after she divorced him. She was in charge of the amount and type of contact that could occur in a relationship when she created physical distance, which supported her physical, emotional, and psychological safety. There might be other means to creating emotional safety; but, this solution had consistently worked for her. Heather was also honing the distancing skill in her relationship with her metamour; she was striving to balance providing support with having distance for her personal well-being. With this balance, Heather was able to cultivate emotional safety while feeling empowered to continue investing in her beneficial relationships.

*The Compounding Benefits of Relationships*

While developing awareness and boundaries with the pernicious relationships in her life, Heather continued to be drawn to building new relationships with greater mutuality. She knew from when she was younger that this type of connection existed because of her supportive father. She also knew greater mutuality existed in counseling, describing her first counseling relationships as “very supportive,” even while her mother was not. Heather’s experience with these growth-fostering relationships helped her identify what she desired in a relationship. As she developed, she sought more romantic and personal relationships without abuse or sexual assault, allowing for the potential of depth of connection and being able to experience how worthwhile she felt in mutually beneficial relationships. Part of Heather’s desire for polyamory was a desire to be in multiple positive relational experiences. This intrinsic drive was clear since her childhood. She shared, “When I had Barbies, I would always marry the Barbie who represented me to Ken and to another Barbie at the same time. It was always a trio wedding, walking down
the aisle.” Polyamory was affirming of her bisexuality, her desire for more relational connections, and also an intrinsic sense of who she was. To experience that much affirmation and love through dating drove Heather to desire more committed relationships.

Heather’s self-acceptance came from having developed her growth-fostering narratives that were shaped by counseling. Even her germinal growth-fostering relationship with her father was impacted by counseling because he was in counseling when Heather was a child. Heather’s acceptance of herself was supported through finding connection in her later counseling experiences. She described that counseling showed her she could be loveable, not as the person she had the potential to be, but as who she was in the moment. She expanded on that idea, sharing:

It’s at first an external person telling me that I am just fine. I am perfect. . . . This is a very Mr. Rogers thing to say, but you are perfect just the way you are. Getting that reinforced especially by someone who I’m telling all these awful things to that have gone on in my life and these awful things that I think about myself, is very reassuring and that is good.

Counseling was a space where Heather could be herself fully while still feeling worthy and loveable. Through feeling more accepting of her body and trusting that others are not inherently mad at her, she felt more empowered to be selective in her relationships, choosing connections that felt beneficial to her. The experience of connected counseling provided assurance that who Heather was inherently did not need to be changed. When relationships could include mutual acceptance, they provided Heather a boost of self-worth that made relationships a desirable experience to seek out.

By accepting herself and receiving acceptance from her counselor, Heather was more able to open herself to those mutual relationships. She also grew in her dating relationships by no longer tolerating abuse that had been normalized in her relationship with her mother and in her
early romantic connections. Counseling had been a place where Heather could grow for herself and for others. She described how her recent counseling supported her work to be part of those connections, sharing, “[It was through] trying to be a better ally, both towards my partner and her therapy and just in general in life.” Counseling supported a model for growth-fostering relationships that Heather could build from as she sought more connections in her personal life. This growth supports a cycle where the mutual nature of counseling aids Heather in accepting herself, making her a more desirable friend and partner because she was able to know her relations closely without striving to change them. In those personal connections, Heather could grow her knowledge of herself. She could then explore herself in counseling to expand her self-understanding and self-growth. The benefits of having mutual relationships continued to compound, creating more beneficial and connecting experiences in Heather’s life, inclusive of her counseling relationships.

Emily

Emily had buzzed hair and was dressed in a sleeveless shirt when we first met. Her bare arms showed the marks of cutting and self-injury, which included having the word “FAT” scarred into her arm. She was 27 years old and identified as a White, queer, ciswoman. This participant shared a home with her metamour, Heather. Emily was recovering from a recent ankle surgery during the first two interviews. We completed all our interviews in the privacy of her room, a space that was lived in and somewhat messy. She seemed slightly emotionally removed from the interview process with flattened affect. She was ready to be open and answer questions; but, her openness seemed a process of habit rather than genuineness. Emily described herself as living with a persistent need for counseling alongside other mental health support as necessary to keep her suicidality, self-harm, and other symptoms manageable.
Emily’s emergent invariant constituents and themes of her experiences in counseling were that she had become an informed consumer of counseling, and that experience was requisite, engaged, disengaged, connected. The textural description relates the breadth of Emily’s experience with counseling. She shared a counseling history that started when she was 5 years old and covered a variety of treatment modalities from partial hospitalization programs (PHP), intensive outpatient programs (IOP), being fully hospitalized, and receiving electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Through this history, she developed a preference for counselors who were willing to connect with her and a frustration for counselors who could not take time to educate themselves. In her structural description, Emily’s experience of feeling powerless in life and in counseling is illuminated based on her belief that she needed ongoing support to survive with her severe mental illness (SMI). The interwoven nature of change and counseling was also apparent with how consistent counseling had been in her life. In the textural-structural description, Emily’s sense of internalized ableism is expressed, plus how that experience then impacts her desire to feel understood. From that desire to be known and to feel understood, her need for counseling and the benefits she had experienced with growth-fostering relationships was elucidated. Her sense of being other created a clear value in being known and supported because of how relatively rare an occurrence that had been in her life.

Textural Description

I need counseling. Not like someone boring would say that they need a latte. I believe I would actually be dead if not for the counseling I’ve done. I first started counseling at age 5 because I was having anger issues. Since then, I’ve been inpatient, done PHP, IOP, and outpatient individual stuff. Group counseling too. Even ECT. I’m actually back in a PHP now. I have done a lot of counseling. It’s just part of my life, really.
I haven’t always been in counseling. When my insurance changed, or I didn’t have enough money, or when the bus lines changed and I got worried about being lost in the city. I was out of counseling for a while recently and I felt like my life started to fall apart. Just being emotionally unstable and not able to get any shit done. I needed that impartial third party. Someone with skills and knowledge, because it isn’t just advice. I wish I didn’t need counseling like I do.

I’ve been out as poly in my counseling for as long as I knew. I came out as poly in a teens group I was in when I realized it at 19 years old. I needed to share about myself for counseling to be effective and that was a part of me; it would be dumb not to share it. So, I’ve been in counseling my whole life and I’ve been out in that process.

I’ve done enough counseling that I know what I’m looking for. I have had counselors who are crap at what they do. I go in and I am trying to work through my shit and I just feel like I’m there all alone. That isn’t what counseling is for. I don’t know how to describe it when my counseling is good. I feel loved and cared for in my sessions. I feel like they’re really worried about my well-being, whether I live or die. I expect them to share about themself some too. I’m sharing all of my stuff. If they didn’t share anything, it wouldn’t be fair.

In a practical sense, I’m concerned about finding counselors who take my insurance and who are LGBT friendly. If there are still options, I want someone who does DBT because I found that works best for me. It won’t say if they’re poly friendly or not in their bio. I have to find that out later. It will be in the first few sessions while I’m talking about my relationships. I have to gauge their reactions. No one has been revolted. The best option is that they are then knowledgeable and we can just move on. If they’re curious, I have to figure out if they are curious about polyamory or if they are curious about me. I have quit with a counselor in the past
and having to teach them about polyamory was part of why we didn’t click. That’s their job to figure out. I’m not paying them for me to teach shit to them. If they don’t know anything but they are willing to do their own work, we can figure that out. I would rather they have their own knowledge; but, I can work with someone who is willing to figure it out. If they’re completely clueless, I’m worried they won’t be able to figure out how important my relationships are to me; but, I can still work with it.

Structural Description

Emily’s history of SMI was apparent both in her report and in the presence of her scars from self-harm. She made limited eye contact and had an attitude that communicated disconnection, which I perceived as her being careful because she had been harmed by others. Emily had a history of complex trauma and disengaged relational models starting in childhood, from before her earliest counseling experiences at 5 years old. Emily believed she needed counseling to stay alive and at least minimally functional. She believed saying no to counseling was not viable, leaving her feeling powerless over her decision to engage in counseling. Through her experience in counseling, she developed clear opinions about what does and does not make a good counselor for her, which empowered her to set boundaries in this necessary work. She understood she did not want to teach her counselors; but, she also had a deeper understanding that she could be a difficult client. Her lived experiences were so deeply woven with counseling that all aspects were impacted by it, including the emergence of her polyamory.

Experiencing Despondency in Powerlessness

In balance of privilege versus oppression, Emily had many identities that are stigmatized as being outside of the current cultural standard. She survived with little power as a fat, queer, polyamorous woman living with SMI who had struggled to maintain full-time employment.
There is the added impact that, although some of her stigmatized identities might be concealable, she chooses to leave her scarring visible, which makes her SMI apparent, and her buzz cut, which codes as visibly queer. Her haircut and showing her scars are a declaration of the self. Emily’s chronic and complex struggles required the consistent support of the mutual growth-fostering relationship of counseling to facilitate her functioning, whether she actively desired being in counseling at that time. She shared, “To me, therapy is basically like taking medication, it’s something you do to stay healthy.” She felt surviving was, in part, dependent on her staying in counseling given her personal experience of rapid deterioration when she had discontinued services in the past. As Emily stated, “When I have stopped going to counseling, it’s always led to disastrous results. That happened last fall and I ended up hospitalized as a result.” Emily could not function on her own, even though she could recognize she was “fucking up.” She had insight; but, it was not enough to make change. Emily’s need for ongoing counseling indicated the depth with which nonmutual relationship models were set for her, likely beginning in childhood. These models had additionally been impacted by her experiencing trauma and abuse, which led to anger and frequent reoccurrence of self-harm and suicidal ideation. The relationship models she used were creating disconnection, despite Emily and her counselors’ efforts, leaving her helpless to stop the repetition of these models in her own relationships and powerless in her constant need for counseling.

Emily’s powerlessness with counseling reflected powerlessness she felt in life at large. Although she was aware of the need for the stability counseling created in her life, there were times she had tried to do without it. She had stepped away from counseling for many reasons, including changes in her energy levels, concerns with insurance, and anxiety related to reaching her counselor after changes to bus lines. Her desire to discontinue counseling was also impacted
by her counselors’ ignorance of polyamory, making the experience into something uncomfortable. Most of the consequences related to her leaving counseling were factors over which she had no control, adding to a sense of feeling impuissant when managing this vital aspect of her life. These changes added to her overall life instability, such as changes in employment and variability in her symptom intensity.

Emily was also managing change in her mental health care due to the frequent need to change the level and intensity of that care. She reported having been in all levels of care: individual, group, partial hospitalization program, intensive outpatient program, and inpatient. She was even in ECT for a time, which impacted her ability to remember parts of her life. Although ECT is not counseling, it was part of her mental health care. The result was a comprehensive view that being in treatment does not just demand her time and money, but also parts of her memory, making parts of her past hazy. For Emily, there was an understanding that even the most supportive relationships come at a cost. She continued to return to counseling, saying, “I’m dealing a lot with self-harm and suicidal urges. . . . That’s what’s keeping me going to counseling.” Although there have been periods of time where counseling had been challenging for Emily, she continued because she felt there was no other choice, leaving her trapped in a process that took energy, time, and money.

Developing Boundaries in Trust

Emily spent enough of her lifespan in counseling relationships that she developed an understanding of her needs during that process. She described how positive it was to have a counselor who challenged her. She received counseling that challenged her to address her trauma as a day-to-day struggle, which was beneficial for her. This shift in focus changed Emily’s trauma into something more actionable and concrete, rather than the abstruse exploration of her
symptoms from her previous counseling. When considering her counselor who pushed her in this way, Emily shared, “I really respected her. I really trusted her, and I trusted she was trying to tell me the right thing, and deep down I knew it was the right thing.” The result of this shift was feeling more connected with her counselor, and being challenged highlighted her strengths and what she was capable of. She needed to feel empowered and connected for counseling to be authentic, as would be true of any mutual relationship.

Emily’s need for counseling became complicated due to counselors frequently having a dearth of knowledge related to polyamory. She started to begin new counseling relationships by sharing she was polyamorous and that polyamorous content would be present in their work. This introduction set an expectation for the counselor’s performance in their relationship, which was an essential change from the powerless manner she typically functioned from, especially about her mental health. Emily hoped for greater depth of knowledge from her counselors; but, she had to settle for someone who could grasp the content enough not to impede the counseling process. Thus, Emily developed an expectation for counseling, sharing, “I feel like being a therapist is kind of a learning profession. You learn about your clients and about the world as you go along.” She saw counselors who were able to adapt and learn as she thought they should be able to as part of their profession. More recently, she ended a counseling relationship where questions related to polyamorous content negatively impacted her ability to generate a feeling of mutual trust and alliance. She had a depth of experience in such a wide variety of mental health treatment that she felt able to set those boundaries in her counseling. Her choice to end the counseling relationship demonstrated her increased boundaries related to her polyamory.

Emily believed she was a demanding client, and it was an aspect of her self-perception she was conscious of. She shared, “I’m not always the easiest client to manage.” She self-
described as stubborn and her mental health concerns included complexity with interrelated factors such as trauma, self-harm, and addiction. Additionally, she was not seeking a cure for her mental health concerns. The belief that she could not find long-lasting relief from her mental health symptoms highlighted her understanding that she would always need counseling. Her experience of deterioration when she was not in counseling emphasized this conception. Emily’s treatment would not end with a neat termination session that would begin a period of her life without mental health care. This resignation to perpetual counseling drove that stubbornness. She wanted this essential treatment to feel valuable and informed. If she must be in counseling, Emily wanted to benefit from a connected and supportive counseling relationship that she would take an active role in creating. In her life, Emily experienced the brittle rigidity of trauma and needed flexibility and movement from her counselors to feel seen and connected in the counseling process.

Emergence and Protection of Polyamory

Although the experience of counseling was deeply entangled with much of Emily’s identity, she was still a separate being outside of that process. She was in counseling before she first identified as polyamorous. Polyamory was an emerging identity for her at 19 years old after connecting with a couple as their partner. Counseling was a place to come out as polyamorous because polyamory was becoming a part of her life. She recalled her experience of first coming out in group counseling as one wherein no one outright rejected her identity or experience; but, no one connected with it either. They did not question it, which set a precedent for future relationships, both personal and professional, where she enjoyed people “not treating [polyamory] like some sort of curiosity.” Counseling was both a place to share this identity and a notable place where she came out but did not require approval. This detachment demonstrated
how, although she sought counseling and needed the support the counseling process provided, Emily was still growing and making decisions outside of counseling. Even though some of her motivation might have been the result of trauma, spurring her toward a recreation of harmful relationships and moving into actions like self-harm and addiction, she had growth-fostering models from some of her counseling, which supported her accepting and obtaining greater self-knowledge and self-determination.

Emily was also clear that she would not have important identities like her polyamory dismissed. She did not view this boundary uncritically because she knew her relationships had been unhealthy at times. In association with her romantic connections, she was ready to have the health of her relationships examined; but, she was frustrated by her counselors questioning the general viability of polyamory. She shared, “They’re skeptical about whether [polyamory is] good for me. That is probably what I was getting at. I’ve had therapists say that maybe it’s not the best thing to do.” Emily was ready to have many aspects of her life questioned. She was ready to be told she needed to manage her life differently in her counseling, and she was primed to receive messages that she was wrong as the result of her experiences of abuse. That messaging had been her entire life; but, she decided the counselor’s inquiries needed to be supportive rather than rejecting.

Textural-Structural Description

Emily had a wide variety of experiences in counseling that spanned almost her entire life, resulting in counseling being a mainstay in her existence. This breadth of her familiarity with counseling allowed for her interviews to focus fundamentally on counseling. In an effort to provide context for her counseling experiences, we also defocused the process across her lifespan as a whole. Emily was aware that her need for ongoing support from counseling made her
different from others who might engage with counseling as a short-term connection with substantial periods in between. Emily had spent much of her life to that point both being in counseling and also having to work persistently to continue receiving counseling services, leaving her feeling frustrated and othered. She sought out depth of understanding, especially in relation to her polyamory. Emily’s comprehension of the value of feeling understood in counseling and in her other relationships stemmed from experiences in relationships without that connection. Such disconnected relational encounters were survivable; but, they created more friction as a result. Although Emily had been in many counseling relationships, the most fruitful one contained not just understanding, but also trust and respect, which allowed a growth-fostering relationship to develop. Emily recognized how relatively rare that type of connection was and noted that the work she completed with that counselor was more effective as a result.

*The Impact of Internalized Ableism*

Emily had been in mental health treatment at some level of care for most of her life. She started individual counseling at 5 years old and had paused counseling due to gaps in treatment or changes to insurance. She believed she would need counseling for the rest of her life because of the dysfunction that became apparent when she was outside of the process. When she learned other people complete therapy and only engage with it as short-term care, Emily shared, “It made me question whether I was weird or something like that.” This quote highlighted an awareness that Emily’s need for counseling made her feel different from other people, leaving a lingering feeling of being othered. In this perception, she expressed her engagement with internalized ableism from social messaging that she should not need this much counseling.

This self-perception that Emily should not need counseling for as long as she had received it highlighted the lack of systems that supported her in receiving counseling on this
timescale. She described a period when she was searching for a new counselor and shared, “I couldn’t afford to see my old one anymore and I needed someone on my insurance.” Having her care dictated by forces such as insurance had occurred throughout her counseling effort and had impacted her treatment, including ending a counseling relationship with a professional she described as “amazing” due to changes in coverage. The result was an ongoing effort to maintain services either through coordinating insurance, determining if she could do without care for a time, or even managing changes to the bus route because she lived without a car. All of these occurrences reinforced a precept that she was supposed to be returning to work and being productive; but, she was unable to comply due to the intensity of effort required to sustain her counseling. Emily was outside of the norm for many reasons, including being queer, polyamorous, and living with chronic mental health concerns. She felt othered again and again through having to fight for the services that made her life manageable.

*The Desire to Feel Understood*

Emily knew she was having to strive constantly to maintain her mental health to avoid suicidality and to promote what well-being she could find. She had engaged with enough counselors that she had clear preferences in her care. She was highly knowledgeable concerning what a counselor could offer and what could be expected for them to know. She voiced a preference that the counselor would already know about polyamory; but, she understood that was not always possible, sharing, “I don’t expect my therapist to know everything about [polyamory] because it’s not mainstream,” which highlighted flexibility with her expectations in the counseling relationship. Polyamory was an important part of who Emily was; thus, it was also a part of the content of her counseling. However, Emily found it more important that she and her counselor were able to find a path to connection as long as it did not “detract away from the time
[she] could talk about what was going on.” Understanding did not inherently require the
counselor to have knowledge of polyamorous terminology; but, an openness to what the
experience was like for her felt vital. This sense of compromise was not consistent across
Emily’s interviews; her willingness to work with counselor’s who did not already have
knowledge of polyamory was contrasted with her repeated want for counselors to educate
themselves. Although Emily’s knowledge about counseling taught her relationships could
function without shared definitions and knowledge, this shift in her desire highlighted Emily’s
unwilling compromise to feel understood.

Emily’s want to be understood was not always met in counseling or in her other
relationships. In her counseling experiences, a past counselor struggled so keenly to understand
what polyamory was and how it existed in Emily’s life. Emily shared, “It just led to so much
friction that I stopped seeing her and that’s really the only one where I haven’t been as engaged.”
In her personal relationships, Emily passingly stated she had experienced trauma and abuse. She
also described her mother as nagging, pushing her to live in a certain way that did not honor
where Emily was at in life. Through these relationships and others like them, Emily learned she
could survive a failure to connect and to comprehend. The result was a life of tolerating most
relationships because it was better to be in an inimical connection than no connect at all.

When Emily felt known and fully understood in her counseling, it was an invaluable
experience for her, especially with specific dimensions of her life such as polyamory. She
shared, “Because [polyamory is] such a big part of my life but it is especially important in my
counseling. Like I can’t see myself developing a fulfilling relationship with a counselor and
holding that back and about myself.” Her thoughts were clear that what she desired was to be
able to exist without having to explain or censor herself when she would want to explore and
discuss her polyamory in a counseling session. Emily worked so hard in counseling, and what she wanted was understanding from her counselor, despite her learning to push past it if that understanding did not develop. Her counselors were frequently able to create those growth-fostering relationships; but, many of those connections were impacted by a sense of the counselor merely enduring the relationship. Emily desired the sense of being known and understood found in mutual connections; but, she had developed a readiness to settle for connections, especially any connection that was not actively harmful.

*The Presence of the Growth-Fostering Relationship*

There was something specifically different about the counseling relationship for Emily. It was a space that helped her survive her mental health symptoms, such as her self-harm thoughts, anger, and addiction. When it worked, Emily received support that was “disastrous” to be without. She also described that not all counseling had been equivalent for her. There was one counselor in particular who had been supportive and valuable for her. Emily shared, “[The counselor] challenged me. She definitely would tell me to get my stuff together.” Although having a counselor encourage her to change her actions was not uncommon in Emily’s experience, this experience was different due to the desire to make that happen as part of the counseling. Emily felt a difference, voicing, “I respected her enough to listen at that point; but, then I didn’t respect my other therapist [who had provided similar guidance].” When considering how that counselor was different from her other counselors, Emily stated, “She doesn’t judge the way [my polyamory] works.” Emily felt empowered to share fully of herself, which was an exertion that often felt risky in counseling, both due to having to explain her polyamory and also due to the fear that her counselors had hospitalized her in the past for sharing suicidal thoughts.
The security of a growth-fostering relationship was evident in feeling her way of being was not judged; instead, she felt trusted. The result was that all other work in counseling felt safer.

Although counseling relationships were generally different from Emily’s personal relationships in the type of support they offered, the additional respect and trust for the counselor fostered more work and change. She shared, “I really respected [the counselor]. I really trusted her and I trusted she was trying to tell me the right thing and, deep down, I knew it was the right thing.” Respect, trust, and feeling she was not being judged allowed the relationship to flourish. Due to that flourishing, Emily was more open to her counselor’s feedback. Emily believed she could trust her counselor because the counselor had heard her, openly and thoughtfully, allowing Emily to take more action outside of the counseling relationship. Those actions supported her in making changes that she had desired but was struggling to take without the counselor’s support. The presence of this trust and respect resulted in the only counseling experience that Emily described as amazing after decades of counseling experiences. Their relationship was unlike anything she had previously experienced in or out of counseling and she voiced a desire to continue with that counselor. Having long felt jaded that most counselors were unable to meet her needs, the growth-fostering relationship was compelling, made counseling more effective, and promoted motivation for Emily.

Sue

Sue was living in a densely furnished apartment on the cusp of a city and suburbia for our interviews and was in a cluttered, book-filled house for our member check. She lived in both spaces with roommates. Sue had long, dark hair and her cat supervised our first two interviews. She was a White woman who was 37 years old at the time of her survey response. She was open
to discussing herself as “a creative” and was very excited to share her experiences in the hopes that she could help others by being interviewed.

The themes and invariant constituents of her experience of counseling was egalitarian, disconnected, and growth-fostering; these themes emerged in the initial analysis of her interviews. Her textural description describes a life of managing depressed symptoms with varying qualities of support. The process of counseling began to feel more beneficial for her when she felt connected to her counselor as an adult. In the structural description, her previous experiences of disconnection formed clearly in her childhood and extended through her early adulthood, leaving her feeling unworthy of relationships that valued her. Through finding more connected personal relationships, Sue was to return to the counseling process where she found growth and acceptance through the mutual association she formed with her counselor. This mutuality supported her claiming more autonomy in her life to take action both inside and outside of her growth-fostering relationships. The textural-structural describes Sue’s development of an internal sense that she was unworthy through bullying and disengaged parenting when she was younger. This experience was emphasized in the counseling she received as an adolescent where the counselor was not able to effectively bring Sue into the counseling process. As an adult, she began to form more growth-fostering connections which helped her to both reimagine herself and to return to the counseling process. With the support of a counselor, she was able to find her own resiliency that expanded her ability to build a life that was best suited to her, rather than one that she was expected to live.

Textural Description

I first went to counseling when I was a kid at 18 years old. I went because I told my parents I was suicidal. I knew I was depressed and that I needed help; but, it was such a cold,
clinical experience. I remember looking at my hands, sitting in this office with all this dark wood, and feeling so very out of place; it was a terrible experience. I don’t feel like she gave me any real guidance or help. It was just bad. She didn’t even work to help me understand what I was supposed to be doing there. I knew I was supposed to go because I had seen it on TV; but, after that, I was just there in the office feeling out of place with her big desk and leather-bound books. I ended up on medications before I even started counseling, and I just did what I was told.

I returned to counseling when it was recommended to me by a professor I respected. I liked that teacher so much. I still like him; but, I ended up crying in class one day because I got overwhelmed in class; it felt awful. I don’t like crying in front of other people. I was overworked and stressed out and he gave me a card to his counselor who specialized with creatives. I knew that I continued to be depressed and I was having a hard time keeping my life together. That second attempt with counseling was wonderful.

The counselor was so warm and accepting. Her office was bright and airy and colorful with prayer flags and a Buddha statue. Her clothes were boho-chic. She made me feel open and she was so welcoming. She did a really good job of helping me see that I had power in that office; that I was in control in that relationship. I was paying her for services and she was providing them. So, I could choose how fast and how slow we went. She asked me how I felt about medication as a solution and she was ready to follow my thoughts and needs. It was an amazing experience. I know myself so much better and I feel so powerful knowing that I have graduated from counseling. It was such an amazing experience. I recommend counseling to anyone who is struggling.

My reasons for going to counseling weren’t related to my polyamory. I had lived all my life with depression and she helped me better manage those things. While we did counseling, she
had me read books and I learned a lot of new skills and things about myself. We did EMDR [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing] too because I had some trauma when I was growing up. I wouldn’t say that I blamed my parents for my problems; but, my mom didn’t know how to manage her own anger and I don’t feel like they kept me safe from some of the harder stuff. My counselor helped with that and called me on my bullshit too, in a really gentle caring way that showed me she knew how to work with someone who had dealt with trauma. I know I can go back to her if I should need to; but, it feels so good to have graduated from counseling.

When considering my polyamory specifically, I was raised very traditionally to seek a monogamous relationship. I was familiar with polyamory because I had some friends who were polyamorous. My counselor asked me if I was polyamorous because of how I talked about relationships in my counseling. She didn’t introduce me to the idea; but, I feel like she removed roadblocks that were keeping me in a monogamous frame of mind. During counseling, she recommended I read *The Ethical Slut.* It was fine, I guess. I didn’t like it that much. It was too radical and too preachy with way too much focus on how many people you were sleeping with. I am poly functional, being able to be either poly or mono as best suits the relationship I’m in at the time. I’m currently in a polyamorous relationship and think of myself that way. I’m in a closed poly-cule with my boyfriend and his other girlfriend. I’m striving to build stronger relationships with my metamour and I am pretty happy about it.

**Structural Description**

During our interviews, Sue described her history in relationships as dichotomous, initially authority-based and later egalitarian-based. Her parents were rigid and defined by social tradition; similarly, her relationship with her first counselor was directed and directive, which stymied her growing sense of autonomy. This relationship model left Sue feeling burdensome
and insecure in her future relationships. When an instructor prompted her to return to counseling, she was met with an egalitarian relationship unlike those she had previously experienced. Sue craved validation both in her personal relationship and in the counseling process. Through these last encounters, she developed the awareness that counseling can be dismissive or empowering. Her desire for openhearted connection and affirmation was paralleled in the interview process as well, because she wanted me to see the journey she underwent in discovering more of herself and, with it, her autonomy.

*Precedent of Disconnection*

Sue explored feeling a lack of support when she was younger, and this experience perpetuated both feelings of rejection and confusion. This rejection and confusion revealed a larger pattern from Sue’s childhood and early adulthood of disconnected relationships with people who she saw as being in positions of authority. She seemed to feel very little autonomy in asking for attention or clarification in those relationships. Although limited autonomy is typical of childhood, Sue portrayed a deeper sense of disconnection, such as with her parents, because she felt they “didn’t see or didn’t do anything about [her] childhood depression.” This relationship model was recreated in other types of relationships, such as romances, in which she held onto fear of abandonment from her young adulthood. Sue was not able to successfully advocate for her needs and wants, which repeated in her first foray into counseling.

Sue struggled to engage in the therapeutic process in her first counseling relationship. Some of her disengagement with the process was due to the overall reticence and difficulty of being connected to a mental health professional when she was a teenager with depression. Her descriptions of that relationship illustrated the therapist did not support her in engaging with their work. Sue made it clear that much of her experience was one of feeling distant; she did not feel
invited into the experience and was not given guidance on how to form the relationship needed to engage in effective counseling. She described the experience as being overly formal, focusing on details like the desk that tangibly separated her from the counselor and books—“not the colorful books or anything, it was the leather-bound volumes, the tomes”—which she discussed as something she would have expected in the office of a professional. This accoutrement deepened a divide between her and the counselor. The counselor was the kind of person who would have leather-bound books and dark wood in her office. Sue was not. She told a narrative of feeling shut down and shame in the relationship, which continued the adult-in-power dynamic she experienced with her parents. Sue was polite and compliant; but, she disengaged in a way that seemed descriptive of her childhood and much of her early adulthood—a good child but not an empowered one.

This counseling experience contained deep disconnection; but, Sue had a second counseling experience which was drastically different where she felt seen and respected. The disparity in these experiences shaped how she came to view counseling as a whole. It was an experience she would now gladly recommend for anyone who was struggling; but, she would do so with an awareness that counseling is not always an ameliorating process. She discussed her second counseling experience as a contrast to the first, using that initial experience as a lens that highlighted the specialness and importance of the relationship to her. She had an understanding that counseling can be disconnected and confining, heightening the feeling of mutuality in her second counseling relationship.

A New Model for Relationships

Sue’s second counseling relationship started much in the same manner. She was directed to receive counseling by someone she saw as having authority over her after she had reached a
breaking point. Sue shared that the instructor who recommended her second counselor to her was someone whom she viewed as a mix of authority and aspiration. She would not have returned to counseling without being prompted to do so. The instructor provided her with a personal recommendation to see his counselor who specialized in working with creatives, an important identity for Sue. She described a tearful breakdown during a class where she was then invited to find some calm in the instructor’s office and he provided her with the recommendation to start counseling. Feeling seen in her distress was so unlike how her parents had interacted with her feelings, and the intimacy of the personal recommendation was noteworthy for Sue. He did not recommend any counselor; he recommended his counselor, which required him to be vulnerable about being in treatment as well. Being viewed as a peer left Sue open to being seen as a whole and valuable human being in the counseling process. Even before scheduling her first appointment, she was set on an equal footing with an instructor because he saw they were similar people who needed counseling. Knowing some of the efficacy of counseling is predicated on how much a client believes counseling will help (Lambert, 1992; Wampold & Imel, 2015), and this distinct and considerate beginning set the stage for a growth-fostering relationship.

Sue shared that, when she started the relationship, her counselor’s office was “bright and airy and colorful.” Sue offered these descriptors with excitement and a tone that clearly conveyed these were desired and positive traits for a counselor’s office and a projection of a counselor’s way of being. Sue saw the counselor as warm and open. The counselor was clearly different from how Sue had experienced expertise in her life previously. The counselor created a space that was different for Sue, which allowed safety to develop in the gap between her expectations from past relationships and the reality of this new one. The stage was set to develop a relationship of mutuality and a respect of Sue’s power she had never experienced before. The
counselor invited her into the client role and helped her understand she was “in control in that relationship.” She could be fully herself with her counselor and could remain respected and connected to her counselor.

Sue identified others differences beyond the office and the new safety in this counseling experience. As an adult client, she was paying for the service of counseling. Sue described that being financially accountable emphasized her choice in being in counseling that gave her greater freedom to share what she needed and to receive the feedback she required. Sue voiced that she was “paying [her counselor] to tell me that shit. So, it was great.” She could share more about herself without judgment because of the mutuality, which left her encouraged to embrace herself in a way no previous relationship had offered. The counseling relationship created a space for her to explore new ways of understanding herself and how she wanted to express that new awareness, including how she wanted to structure her relationships.

Sue felt seen and understood in the counseling relationship and was given psychoeducation about different ways romantic relationships could be structured to support her growth and self-acceptance. In her counseling, Sue experienced increased knowledge of the self—a clear indication of experiencing a mutual growth-fostering relationship with her counselor. She was aware at this point that she saw herself with wants and needs equal to others, not as secondary, as she had believed in the past. Although she was already experiencing some personal growth in her choice to return to school as a nontraditional student in her 30s, her counseling seemed well timed to capitalize on that emerging readiness. Graduating from the counseling process left Sue feeling accomplished and solidified that her efforts in counseling were not in vain. Acknowledging her own progress and having that progress formally recognized as an achievement by her counselor, whom she had grown to trust, created a milestone for her.
**Claiming Autonomy**

Although similar identities such as ambiamorous or polyflexible exist, Sue’s identity of poly functional is one entirely suited to her. Sue created this label—poly functional—to encapsulate her experience in a polyamorous relationship. She was excited to explain what the term meant to her. She emphasized valuing the personal flexibility and a willingness to meet a partner’s need to have time and connection and not specifically needing polyamory for herself. She described how part of counseling was “removing blocks from [her]self,” like a revealing of self or a discovering of a new facet previously unknown. Her polyamorous identity emerged as part of her counseling process, supporting both a connection to herself and fully embodying the role of client in a counseling relationship that demonstrated a fuller understanding of herself. The increased knowledge of the self and a desire to take new actions outside of the counseling relationship was a realization about herself that was uncovered and named during her time in counseling. Sue’s emerging confidence was demonstrated by new freedoms from past behaviors, such as not being saddled with unpleasant emotions (e.g., feeling “betrayed or abandoned”) when seeing a romantic interest flirt with someone new.

The creation of a new designation for her relational orientation in the counseling process also supported Sue in embracing her uniqueness and in highlighting that she had forged her own way in life. This energy was reflected in her willingness to see a counselor who specifically supported creatives and her claiming of other identities such as being a highly sensitive person and having complex posttraumatic stress disorder. During the interview process, it was clear Sue wanted to be viewed as someone who was experiencing life differently from other people. This awareness of herself was new; but, she shared this recognition as something to be celebrated. Her coltish excitement in her uniqueness reflected the work she had done in counseling to embrace
herself fully as opposed to living with difference as a way of being that should be rejected or sanitized.

The readiness to meet her own emotional needs while remaining in connection with people she cherished marked a change from the disconnecting relationships Sue experienced when younger to experiencing connection in her adult relationships, including romances. This growth was uniquely hers and left her feeling empowered. Having an egalitarian experience in her counseling relationship where she shared power with her counselor, Sue felt safe to be herself in a way the counselor supported and allowed. She felt confidence to bring that knowing to a relative stranger in the interview process as well.

Textural-Structural Description

Sue was incredibly proud of the growth and change she had experienced during her life, especially during her counseling. Sue had clear and strong narratives of disconnection, describing how she felt unnoticed and unworthy as a child, including when she experienced bullying. She was well into her adulthood when she was able to begin creating new experiences, which gave her the motivation to choose options such as attending college. These changes also supported her expanding her self-image and what she was worthy of. Sue was able to claim the label of being “a creative,” denoting the types of reimagining of self that were possible for her when she was able to embrace all of her ways of being. As things started to improve, she was prompted to return to counseling. Under the guidance of her counselor, Sue was able to deepen and change; her friendships and found family connections were something she did not have to fear.

The Impact of Perceived Unworthiness

Sue’s relationships when she was younger left her feeling something was wrong with her,
thinking she was unworthy or unlovable. Sue described her childhood traumas and bullying. She was a target of mistreatment; but, she was not valuable enough to receive protection from those who cared for her, creating narratives that she was unworthy of that protection. Although she had been striving to forgive her parents, she blamed them for how bad things got for her, sharing, “[I blame them] for not seeing I was depressed as a child. Or, if they saw something, they didn’t do anything.” Sue’s need to be noticed heightened these unwelcome and depressive symptoms. She ended up in a spiral filled by a want to feel worthy and not feeling noticed by her parents. This invisibility continued to heighten her depression and psychiatric symptoms until she was on a “medication merry-go-round” trying to find something to address her psychological concerns as a teenager. The intensity of the spiraling continued through her adolescence with a developing awareness that medications were not helping her. None of the provided supports appeared to be making improvements for Sue’s mental health, highlighting the disconnection between herself and her parents, increasing the presence of disconnection and, eventually, suicidality.

When Sue had her first onset of suicidality at age 18, her parents were quick to seek help for her. Their response was a want to provide help; but, their help included sending her away to counseling rather than being with her. Sue described that initial exposure to counseling, sharing, “I was there because I needed help; but, I was also there because that’s the [counselor] my parents had chosen.” This quote highlights an adolescent internal conflict that Sue developed a greater understanding of as an adult. She did need the additional support a counselor might be able to provide; but, she also presented to counseling to comply with her parent’s wishes, using a strategy of tractability to hopefully generate connection with her parents. Unfortunately, this connection never emerged.

Sue had a profound sense of disconnection, leaving her feeling isolated, confused, and
misunderstood, especially with her counselor. Sue shared:

I felt like there was something wrong with me because it wasn’t working. Like, I wasn’t doing enough or thinking the right things. That’s a recurring thing to my depression, it’s like, something’s wrong with me. I’m not doing enough. I’m not doing the right things.

There was an expectation that counseling was supposed to be different; but, Sue’s initial experience left her feeling deeply misunderstood, reinforcing the narrative that she was not able to connect with others. Sue became more vulnerable; each reoccurrence of disconnection heightened a sense that something was wrong with her, which was what she feared. With Sue’s counselor in particular, this lack of connection was detrimental because Sue’s symptoms were not improving, which heightened her fear she was not doing things right, even in the space that should have been creating improvement. For Sue, there was a long period of time where most of her relationships repeated these narratives that she was not enough.

*Fully Embodying the Self*

In Sue’s early adulthood, there were clear signs she was starting to create new healthier types of connections in her world. Her ability to claim the label of being “a creative” at 28 years old evidenced change in how she saw herself. Sue’s willingness to claim this identity was deeply impactful; it prompted her to attend college to get her bachelors in film. She attributed this major life change to her openness to accepting this identity, and she continued to struggle with claiming identities that imparted specialness or power. Through expanding her self-image, she was able to expand her conceptualization of what she was capable of. Sue was able to take action in her world and take on difficult tasks like school through understanding more of who she was and who she could be.

An instructor encouraged Sue to return to counseling as a result of her reaction to being directed to put the word “professional” into her resume, which was a word that carried authority
Sue felt undeserving of at the time. Sue recounted she was “ugly crying tears because of that one word.” This sensitivity indicated ongoing anxiety that could occur in just being perceived after a childhood of invisibility. It was hard for Sue to be seen and it was harder to need help. She was able to accept help from her instructor who seemed to be striving for an egalitarian connection, even as an instructor who could have had power over her. Sue was able to accept his recommendation out of old habits to be compliant. The nonlinear nature of her growth brought her to the point where she could return to the counseling experience.

During Sue’s more recent time in counseling, she identified and claimed many identities for herself. She recognized other identities were more nuanced than she had previously realized. Sue described:

I thought having depression being the reigning influence in my life was something I would have to live with forever; but, getting proper diagnosis for things, like the [highly sensitive person], the [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder], and the [complex posttraumatic stress disorder], was a big difference. I wasn’t just depressed.

With these diagnoses, Sue had a greater depth of understanding of what was occurring with her mental health. These diagnoses were parts of herself she could share with others now that she could better understand them. There were other people who also had those labels. Sue realized there was not something wrong with her; her symptomology was something known and categorized that existed for many people. Sue felt additional safety because she experienced her counselor as nonjudgmental during the process of identifying her symptoms. A mutual, egalitarian counseling experience reversed her previous experience where known symptoms were a reason to be sent away, rather than embraced.

Sue felt her uniqueness was highlighted and made valuable in her counseling sessions. She learned about her relational orientation in counseling. She found her counselor specialized in creatives, a deeply important identity, which was affirming for Sue given the depth of work she
and her counselor created. Sue was also able to acknowledge she did not deserve judgement for identifying as a witch during the counseling process. She was confident in these changes and noticed their impacts in other relationships, demonstrating she had incorporated new relational models thanks to the work she and her counselor completed. Sue was worthy and loveable. This realization allowed Sue to share herself fully with others, to create stronger connections without having to censor herself.

Finding Change through Relationship

When Sue began her most recent counseling experience, she noticed a special quality of her counselor early on. Sue shared, “[My counselor] was a guide and almost a mentor on my journey with me. I didn’t feel separated. I didn’t feel like I was being judged.” Her new counselor was able to invite her into the counseling relationship, which her previous counselor had been unable to achieve. Potentially, some of this change may have been the result of Sue’s ability to form more connecting relationships since the time of her initial counseling. Sue may also have been more ready for mutual relationships due to being at a different stage of life. Regardless, both Sue and the counselor were ready to fully enter into a growth-fostering relationship Sue had not experienced previously. With the trained support of her counselor, Sue was able to form an egalitarian connection unlike any other relationship in her life.

After her counselor effectively made counseling a safe space to be vulnerable, Sue was able to feel secure as she explored her internal landscape. She shared how she was prompted to explore her relational orientation and how she discovered her ability to be poly functional, valuing the personal flexibility and a willingness to meet a partner’s need to have time and connection while not specifically needing polyamory for herself. Sue shared:

And so, that became a journey with my therapist of exploring my views of relationships and what my actual needs are versus what I’d been conditioned to believe they are, and it
sent out a switch; I can be poly or monogamous, depending on the people I’m with. Sue felt empowered to take action beyond the relationship, such as to question cultural norms and determine what was best for her. In questioning those norms, she was open to question if the way others structured relationships was right for her, which was a pretty drastic change in her way of being as someone who was once worried that everything she was doing was wrong. In the safety of that mutual relationship, Sue was able to forge her own way of being.

With a fully formed, mutual, growth-fostering relationship to provide a model for Sue’s relationships, the shape of all of her relationships had been changed by her increased confidence and self-acceptance. Sue shared, “You have the right to a therapist who doesn’t think you’re crazy for being involved in witchcraft, polyamory, and things like that. Yeah, I’m sort of an advocate for that with my friends.” Sue reached a point where she did not need the approval of everyone around her. She also reached a point where she was able to share those ideas with her friends, stepping into the role of advocate. Sue carried herself with pride rather than feeling she was constantly wrong. The idea that she graduated from counseling was a concept Sue repeated; it imparted a sense of accomplishment to her. There was a clear feeling she had grown and was more capable of managing herself and her moods. By both making progress and then celebrating it, she did not have to exist in her found family relationships as a scared child who was worried she was unworthy. She flourished as a fully connected member of her family of creation and her community.

Marty

At the time of our interview, Marty was a 34-year-old White, straight, cisman who presented himself as the master of his life. He owned a home, held a stable job, and had support from his friends and family. We completed all of our interviews in his home in a dendritic
neighborhood in a suburban offshoot of a city. His house was comfortably decorated with some nerdy flair in the wall art and fridge magnets. He was a tall and broad man with short-cropped hair. He was verbose with a readiness to extend the length of our interviews with a sense of privilege about my time, wanting to ensure I was able to capture all the possible detail of his experience he could provide.

The invariant constituents and themes from analyzing his interviews were that his experience of counseling was validating, growth fostering, and functional. In the textural description, Marty’s experience of counseling as a regular and consistent experience in his adulthood is outlined, beginning with his first exposure to counseling as an idea from when his sister went to his own current, ongoing treatment. He appreciated the constant affirmation of counseling in his life. In the structural description of Marty’s experience, his increased confidence was described. This confidence was built through growth-fostering relationships and was influenced by the relationship model he built in counseling. He additionally found growth from the familiarity and stability that counseling gave to his life. The textural-structural description illuminates how Marty’s privilege in Whiteness and financial stability created a stable platform upon which he could build his relative success, such as knowing he could have continuous access to a counselor. He also had the security that his goals did not differ from the primary social scripts to find a reliable job and buy a house, supporting a narrative of success that aligns with the social hegemony. He was empowered through counseling to address concerns, such as his relationship with his body or his anger, while remaining relatively unchanged and in control.

Textural Description

I can be poly; but, I’m not one of those polyamorists. I just want to work my job and have
my house and chill. I’m cooling it on poly right now because I can’t find partners that fit the way that I want to live my life. In most poly groups, I feel pretty conservative and I don’t really like that. I started being poly because I wanted to date this one person but that fell apart after a few years. I think if I could find poly people more like me, I would want to return to it. It makes some good options. I was talking with my counselor about it when I made the choice to try polyamory for the first time. I wasn’t her only poly client at the time; but, she wasn’t poly so she didn’t know how polyamory is tied in with kink and burners here in the Dallas area. She couldn’t really help me with those things.

I have been doing counseling for a very long time. Lots of people in my family have anxiety and my sister went to counseling after I was in a car accident where two other people died. That was scary for her because no one told her what was going on. I didn’t go to counseling until I had a friend get pregnant. It was a bad day in school and I was left feeling totally helpless so I started going to counseling. That was a long time ago; but, I remember it being pretty positive. I saw that counselor for about 2 years and then I moved away.

It was probably 3 years before I started doing counseling again. It wasn’t a terrible time in my life; but, it was hard. It was me and a girlfriend living in a two-bedroom apartment with two other people. It was tight and difficult. The counseling was good but then the counselor had to move to Austin.

There was a 2 year or so gap where I tried to just take account of my world. I thought I could do things on my own and things got pretty bad for me. I went back to counseling and I have been with that counselor for the last 6 years. She was the counselor I was seeing when I decided to try poly. She wasn’t shocked by my decision to try polyamory because I don’t get jealous; I never have. She would check in with me about it. I have reached a point where I am in
a really good spot because of counseling and my counselor agrees that I’m in that good place. I have done a lot of important stuff in my counseling, like figuring out my relationship with my body. In the past, I was so scared of being alone that I was rushing into relationships; but now, I can be single and it isn’t as scary.

Counseling is incredibly important stuff. It is why there is a counselor in Star Trek. I think that everyone needs counseling. I have unresolved stuff I’m still working on, like my anger, and I figure everyone else does too. Even after years of counseling, I have days where my counselor points out that I’m doing well and asks me what I want to do next. All I have to do is look into all the repressed stuff that I have. There seems to always be more to work on. I think doing counseling helps my life work. The next time I’m in an established romantic relationship, I want to do couples counseling. If she wasn’t willing to go to counseling with me, I think I would second guess that relationship. I really think everyone should be doing it.

When I think about counseling, I think about how important it is to be really honest. If you aren’t honest then you’re just cheating yourself out of progress. It is just so good to have someone knowledgeable in my corner who knows me so well. She is able to help me notice that what I’m doing is alright and to support my choices. She also calls me out on my bullshit in a way a friend wouldn’t be able to. It keeps me on track with myself and helps me avoid getting into a bad place. I think counseling has made my life much better and I plan to continue with it.

Structural Description

Marty was motivated to participate in the interview process with a want to advocate for the benefits he had experienced in counseling. He shared openly and had to be prompted to pause the few times his roommate entered into the interview space. Marty explored his long-standing experiences of connection and support from family and friends, and how those experiences were
reflected in the support he had received from a counselor. From that support, he had the ability to explore new-to-him relational orientations. This perusal had been compelling; but, it had resulted in relational awareness, such as wanting stability in his romantic partners. He found both stability and common interests were missing in his local polyamorous community, leaving him ready to part ways with that coterie despite feeling a connection to the ideas of polyamory. Throughout his time in counseling, Marty identified that he continued to value the support the process provided, including being able to fully examine aspects of his life to help develop new ways of thinking. As a result, an investment in counseling had been present for much of his life and he intended for it to continue.

*Strength from Supportive Relationships*

Marty had clearly benefited from secure and supportive relationships across his lifespan, reporting support and connection. Marty learned flexibility and adaptivity in how he entered into new connections. He identified himself as being “really not a very jealous person.” Even though his experience with trusting people openly left him feeling naïve after a difficult break up, he had experienced mutually growth-fostering models for many of his relationships throughout his lifespan. With this positive, mutual, or reciprocal frame of reference, he typically felt secure in exploring new types of relationships because of the confidence he had in understanding what he was seeking in a relationship. Even a painful break up demonstrated he had the capacity to survive a relationally arduous time. He additionally benefited from both social and financial privileges, which dramatically lowered risks associated with entering into ways of being that might not be socially sanctioned (Sheff & Hammers, 2011), such as mental health treatment or polyamory.

Marty was exposed to counseling as a seventh grader when his sister started the
counseling process after they were in a car accident that deeply impacted her, creating a schema that family members would support each other when entering treatment. His first counseling experience was a few years later to help support him through a troubling time in his adolescence after a friend disclosed a pregnancy to him. Both Marty and his sister entered into mental health treatment for situational concerns rather than a general deterioration of their overall well-being, which augmented a larger narrative of family connection. Additionally, he had a model in the media. Through the character of Deanna Troi in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Marty saw people needed the ongoing support of a counselor. The presence of Counselor Troi in this vital position continued the messaging that counseling was acceptable and important, even for successful and capable people. With an openness to trust in new kinds of relationships, Marty was able to find a safe and stable connection even when it was unfamiliar for him.

Although polyamory does not feel like an intrinsic way of being for Marty, his previous relational stability gave him the safety to choose a riskier relationship structure. Being in a relationship had been safe; but, polyamory seemed to Marty to be the result of wanting deeper connection. He explored how his first time entering into a polyamorous relationship was the result of wanting to begin a romantic relationship with a polyamorist. He was aware of polyamory before meeting that partner and he thought it an acceptable way of being from those previous exposures. He came to the decision to attempt polyamory with the support of his most recent counselor. This willingness to attempt a new style of relational orientation models how he sought new connections based on how good all of his growth-fostering relationships felt; but, the nature of trying on the role of polyamory highlighted his separateness from that community.

*A thread of Familiarity and Stability*

Although Marty enjoyed the decentering of jealousy and the flexibility polyamory gave
him, he shared being part of the polyamorous community had left him feeling disconnected and different from those in the coterie. He described himself, sharing “I’m the squarest poly person in [my area]. I’m not into any kinks, I don’t go to burns, I don’t go to shows.” He attributed this disconnection to his local polyamorous community rather than perceiving or acknowledging personal responsibility. This disconnection tied into Marty’s intergenerational anxiety, which was present in many of his family members in a way that indicated it was a filial model for how to move through the world. His anxiety also existed to attend to the tenuous security that privileges like Whiteness and being a man created. He was functioning with a variety of privileges, including relational ones; most of his relational connections were long term and robust, supporting an internal narrative that these new folks were odd in not having clear overlaps in his interests.

Although having positive relational models for friends and family, Marty remained closed to some experiences, as indicated by his traditional goals for personal success such as non-gig employment and owning a house. When describing the community of polyamorists near him, he shared, “I always noticed when looking around at all the people I knew that were poly, these were people that had extremely interesting but turbulent lives.” His initial trigger for entering counseling was having a friend in high school announce that she was pregnant, which indicated occurrences outside of an expected pattern or norm were discomfiting for Marty and not something he was able to cope with because it stimulated that intergenerational anxiety to monitor privilege. This want for normalcy seemed to have continued into Marty’s adulthood as a desire for stability and predictability. He desired new kinds of connections with familiar touchstones to build from, such as shared life stage and interests.

Marty limited commitment to a polyamorous identity, which then cultivated a curiosity if
he was seeking polyamory for means of creating variety in his life, rather than building new identity. He voiced awareness of this fact, sharing, “This is one of the few things in my life that really gives it flavor and color. Everything else about me is very White, suburban, 30-some odd male.” He gave a sense that he was testing polyamory to determine if it would help him to create more romantic success. As a result, he became aware he might return to monogamy. This return was not due to a mismatch between his way of being and polyamory; rather, it was a mismatch in the others who shared the label of polyamory. Marty wanted to build relationships with others like him, which felt reasonable and common; but, it had left him feeling isolated in polyamory.

Seeking Growth

Marty’s descriptions of counseling showed his sense that counseling provided a means of connection he found imperative. He had long-term friendships and family connection; however, his experience was that “Friends will always tell you what you wanna hear; a counselor will always tell you what you need to hear.” The increased self-knowledge that came from the growth-fostering relationship served as a means to have the zest for life and drive for action that he needed to be successful in his other relationships and in life. Marty had gained many tools from his counseling that served to make his life more manageable, such as a means of addressing relational trauma about his weight from a past romantic partner. He had experienced acceptance and care from his counselors, resulting in a greater ability to be with himself.

Counseling provided other varied benefits for Marty. He found validation and acceptance in his relationships and counseling, which made accepting others easier. To find connection, it was essential he experience self-reflection and be able to metacommunicate about his feelings. Marty also shared he had been navigating anxiety as a part of himself since he was younger, and it seemed to be a common occurrence in his family. As an adult, he had also been managing
depression. He first explored whether counseling alone would be enough to manage his symptoms. Then, he used the supportive space of counseling to seek a psychiatrist to start his medications. Counseling had been vital to understanding his symptoms and how they changed when on medication.

Marty had a firm stance that counseling was an important part of staying objective across the lifespan, stating “Everyone needs counseling, even people that think they have it all together.” The counseling relationship became a necessity for Marty; he cited that his growth in counseling had been indispensable. He believed having someone to be connected to who could be understanding but also realistic with him was something he could only reliably find in the counseling process. This perception of counseling as positive was also bolstered by the specific benefits of addressing his relationship with his body, starting psychopharmatherapy, and exploring the perception that he was able to stay present through life events like the ending of a primary relationship. When considering the function counseling played in his life, Marty shared that “The biggest thing is [people in counseling] have to be willing to be honest.” He followed up with the thought that being honest in counseling allowed him to recognize when he had been lying to himself. For Marty, the lies had protected him from hard truths, such as from recognizing he was naïve in his romantic relationships and the idea that he could just find ways to cope with his intergenerational anxiety. Being able to penetrate these self-deceptions increased Marty’s objectivity and his ability to “have it all together.”

Textural-Structural Description

Marty was fortunate he had access to counseling for most of his adult life, and he expressed a depth of enjoyment in the counseling process. That fortune could be attributed to a family that valued counseling and mental health and it might additionally be attributed to the
privilege that his financial stability provided him. Counseling was a space of emotional safety that supported Marty’s continued growth in many parts of his life, including his relationship to his anxiety, how he was structuring his romances, and how he was continuing to address additional concerns, such as his anger. Marty could come back to his counselor again and again with problems or concerns and knew he would receive her honesty to support their growth-fostering relationship. The stability counseling had created in his life was a counterpoint to the growth. Counseling supported him in achieving his goals, which had remained relatively consistent. Counseling also enabled him to come to a better place with static things in his life, such as living in his body. He shared he wanted that stability for others, highlighting the benefits of security and validation counseling provided and how he believed he would always be able to access counseling for his needs.

*Growth through Exploration and Connection*

Marty had been in a counseling relationship for most of his adult life because it had been modeled through other family members seeking counseling. He shared, “I’ve always kinda sought out a professional. I wanted to seek out someone that could help me be objective about moving past [strife] in a healthy way and not a self-destructive way.” His need for this ongoing support included recognizing anxiety and depression were common in his family of origin, and shared, “I was aware that I’d probably inherited it.” He described his relationship with anxiety was growing and changing; but, it was persistent in its presence in his life. When he was younger, Marty believed his anxiety would be situational and that, if he could solve certain conditions in his life, his anxiety would resolve. As he grew up, Marty became aware drivers of his symptoms were more “existential” than “logical” as he had hoped. He could not think his way out of his mental health concerns. This exploration of his psychological landscape that was
underlying his symptoms was supported through counseling as his thinking grew and changed about his anxiety, giving him more of the self-control he desired.

Marty had determined with his current counselor that it would be valuable to pursue medication management after several years working together to address his symptoms. After recognizing counseling would not provide the results Marty fully desired, they worked together to find a psychiatrist to begin psychopharmatherapy while continuing to monitor and manage his symptoms through their working relationship. Marty felt able to begin using medications because he was confident he had fully explored other options to manage his concerns, as opposed to defaulting to that choice. He found ease in following the guidance of a trusted, trained professional. Marty’s symptoms had become more manageable through the combination of counseling and medication, providing a much more stable life, which was a dramatic change for him.

Through counseling, Marty also felt empowered to change how he was building romantic connections. When considering his decision to enter into a polyamorous relationship for the first time, he stated, “I kinda went into it with a bit of an adventurous mindset. I thought to myself, what has monogamy gotten me?” Although none of his previous monogamous relationships had been terrible, he did not think he was growing toward anything that was adding to his life. His experience in romance and in dating left him feeling ready to try a new type of relationship structure when the opportunity presented itself. Marty thought he was still in a period of exploration in his life where he could try on new identities with little risk and, as a White person with relative financial stability, it was a relatively low risk to take on this stigmatized identity. Counseling was a valuable resource in this journey; he had his counselor’s support as he entered into his first polyamorous relationship and was still with the same counselor when things fell
apart. He shared:

The place that [my counselor] held when I was going through the breakup in terms of just being a fixed, very positive place, and making herself available too, where when I was having really, really hard times, I could reach out and she was very open and honest about, you know, remind me that yeah, it’s gonna suck.

Counseling was a space where Marty could explore whether he wanted to continue to move through the world as a polyamorist, just as he originally explored whether it was worth it to try out the label. These considerations continued to grow his understanding of himself and what he desired in a romance as he broadened his experience.

The counseling relationship was a growth-fostering connection that provided security to problem solve concerns in Marty’s life. He stated his counselor was effective at helping him to confront challenges. He shared, “My counselor was always, ‘No this is a problem and you need to deal with it.’ She was always very good about forcing me to take the uncomfortable truth head on.” Marty’s counselor had established counseling was a safe space; it was also a relationship for doing important work. He needed her honesty and persistence to make the changes he desired, and his counselor was ready to hold him accountable in that process. Marty had the desire to be in counseling as an ongoing process to support self-examination and to serve as a place where he could make tough choices. Marty also benefitted from having resources to be able to choose to be in counseling without any hesitation. His growth and change were still unfolding when he was completing the interview process. He still had psychological concerns he was striving to change after years of work in counseling. Marty shared, “Anger management for me is a big one. I tend to really go overboard when I get upset. I have a temper and I don’t like that, so I’m working on that.” With the energy and ability that counseling created to take action in his life, he continued to benefit from their work to address concerns and areas for growth in his life with the confidence the growth-fostering relationship created.
Validation through Consistency

Although Marty had spent much of his life in counseling, it was also clear many of his goals had remained unchanged. He desired consistent, gainful employment and homeownership, both of which he had achieved. These achievements represented stability for Marty, and this desire for stability may have stemmed from his recognition he had been holding onto “unresolved conflict from when [he] was younger or unresolved conflict from prior relationships.” Counseling helped support stability for Marty because it helped him accept aspects of himself, both through better understanding of himself and recognition that some cultural scripts were not benefiting him. As an example, Marty confirmed how little jealousy he experienced in romantic connections when first venturing into polyamory with the support of his counselor. This verification felt like a celebration for finding a place where he was not controlled by his emotions in a life that was otherwise impacted by chronic anxiety and angry outbursts. Marty’s recognition highlighted that not all emotions would have marked, negative impact in his life. Counseling supported his ability to illuminate what was already true for him while not requiring any change from him.

The support of counseling created safety and stability, which could be observed in Marty’s efforts to address the emotional and physical aspects of his life he felt pushed to change. He shared he had been pressured in past romantic connections to change his body and to lose weight, which left him feeling his body was undesirable. When this occurrence had come up in counseling, he shared there was a good session where he and his counselor were “dismantling a lot of emotional baggage and a lot of negativity that [he] placed on eating healthy and eating, just eating better in general.” Marty was still exploring the experience of feeling pressured to change his body in his counseling; however, he expressed he felt more in control of his body and how he
viewed it. Marty was aware his relationship to his body had been changed by counseling and there were aspects of his experience that felt strongly validated. The increased acceptance of his body supported his ability to create a stable connection with his body and how he was caring for it. The result was less a change of himself as he was and more of a return to a previous norm or comfort with his build, which he maintained as part of the counseling work.

While he was exploring judgements he had received about his body, Marty shared judgments he had of others for their instability. His desire for consistency could be seen in how he viewed the polyamorists he had contact with, stating, “I don’t know of many of them that had the kind of stability that I had,” making it clear his stability was something he prized. He was better able to manage his anxiety from the safety of his stability. It also demonstrated his perceived success to have that solidity in his world. He shared, “I was able to start saving up for some things I wanted like a house. . . . I was one of the only kind of regular people that was doing poly.” Although he recognized that being “regular” allowed for security, he also expressed an awareness of being separate from the polyamorous community, which made dating more complicated. He believed he could not share their experience and interests from his place of constancy. He described that he openly advocated for counseling for everyone, which was functional; but, it seemed disconnected from reasons why his peers might be unable to seek counseling, such as monetary constraints. It also highlighted how counseling validated his experiences in creating stability, creating a perception that everyone would want to create the stability he had, seeing it as universally desirable because it aligned closely with cultural standards of success that he coveted from his place of relative privilege.

With the relative constancy of counseling in Marty’s adult life, counseling was a stabilizing and familiar force. He was aware there was ongoing work for him to be doing, which
contributed to that need for the counseling relationship to be a constant touchstone in his world, as observed in his achieving goals, naming weightism, and confronting his anger over the course of his adulthood. Counseling served as a place to face life’s complications. He had the privilege of being able to afford counseling throughout his life without concerns that insurance or cost would limit his engagement. His privilege of Whiteness, housing stability, and consistent employment allowed for ease in exploration of polyamory, a stigmatized way of being, without too great of fear of repercussions.

Marty experienced counseling without judgment; instead, it was a source of support that was constant. This support created strength in Marty, especially with the added constancy of a long-term counseling relationship, having spent 6 years with his most recent counselor at the time of our interviews. His counselor had been honest and ready to share hard truths with him, which built Marty’s trust in the counseling experience. He trusted his counselor as a sounding board; there was a sense he could be completely honest with her and that she was supportive of his well-being, even as he continued to change during their work together. As a result, the counseling relationship created stability in Marty’s life that helped him move and grow in other spaces.

Dub

At the time of the first three interviews, Dub was renting a small house with roommates and cats in a residential urban neighborhood. Their home was full of colorful knick-knacks, and I was particularly struck by the variety of textures in their seating space, both in their bedroom and living room, from fuzzy blankets to sequined pillows. I completed the final member check in the home they moved to in a smaller city where we met surrounded by movie posters and shelves of DVDs. Dub was 36 years old at the time of the recruitment survey. They were Black, gender
queer, and also identified their sexuality as queer. They were a burlesquer, which they discussed
verbally; but, this identity was also present in their living space with scattered costume pieces
and wigs. They had short cropped hair and wore colorful but comfortable clothes during our
meetings.

The counseling experience for Dub revealed the themes and invariant constituents of
growth, connection, trepidation, and efficiency after the initial analysis of their interviews. Their
textural description captures a narrative of reliance on their community for support and the
relative novelty of receiving support from a professional. Their reticence for starting counseling
and what they gained in the counseling process are also present in that section. In the structural
description, Dub’s experience of being exposed to counseling hesitancy from their community
was highlighted as a narrative of prioritizing trust for those they see as part of their community.
They found growth in the connection that the counseling process created and their continued
evolution of their identity was revealed and explored. The textural-structural description revealed
greater depth in their reticence with starting counseling, including historical context that Dub
navigated as a Black person. This section also illuminates the relative surprise Dub experienced
when starting counseling after having delayed it for so long. They had imagined counseling to be
something that would always result in them feeling drained; instead, counseling placed focus on
them, allowing them to build skills and to feel listened to in a way that felt natural. As an
outcome, Dub experienced more growth than they originally anticipated while also benefiting
from the safe connection that counseling created.

Textural Description

I had never tried counseling before recently. My mom is pretty supportive of this kind of
stuff but I didn’t understand why I would pay for advice. I could just ask a friend, right? So I was
concerned about the cost and what I would get. Then I was concerned before I started my
counseling because I had heard from my people in the burlesque community that a lot of
counselors don’t understand polyamory or consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) and will end up
being really shitty to you as a result, not on purpose but not being able to give you their full
support. I have heard from friends who were told that their way of living their life was weird and
it wasn’t a good fit so they had to go through the work of finding another counselor after that too.
I wanted a counselor who would know enough about the poly community so that I wouldn’t have
to be defining and describing everything in my life; to know what was important to me and to be
able to identify dangerous stuff without confusing my way of being for danger. I was really
worried about finding that when I got started. I think it might have slowed me down from
starting in the first place.

My counselor has been great for me. To be sure that they knew about the lifestyle I
picked an acquaintance of mine who I knew in passing from my social group. I knew they were a
counselor and I asked if they would take me on as a client. It has been pretty excellent. They’re
so knowledgeable about poly. I enjoy their experience and welcoming attitude. It has been a very
safe and supportive space. I feel like I can be so open and that helps the whole process and he
will point out where I’m succeeding but also where I’m full of crap. There are definitely days
when I don’t want to go but I feel like everything gets better when I start talking about it. When I
was more depressed there were days I would choose not to go, because I could but it is always
better when I go.

Counseling has helped me develop tools to cope better with hard situations. There are
things that I feel like I can handle now that I wouldn’t have been able to handle in the past. It has
been interesting to see those moments where in the past that I would fall into a pit but now I can
spot those things. I can see the negative self-talk and I can help myself avoid it. Used to I would just have to suck it up and push through things or try to talk things through with friends. It didn’t always work out. I even had to take a break from counseling for a while there when I was really depressed because I just wasn’t up to going to the office and talking about myself. But I made it back and I feel like it has helped so much. It also felt good to know that I could stop when I needed and return when I was ready. Now I can see my downswings from my bipolar and I feel like there are things I can do to pull myself back up. I also really like that now that I know about counseling, I feel good recommending it to people. It feels good that this thing that has helped me could also help people I know and love.

Structural Description

Dub’s approach to answering questions was casual and comfortable during the interview, which conveyed confidence in who they were. Dub had overall robust and growth-fostering relationships across their lifespan and had only decided to enter counseling more recently to better manage intermittent mood symptoms. They explored how the polyamorous community that gave them connection also made them wary of the potential ignorance of counselors concerning polyamory. In addition to polyamory, Dub illustrated how their self-identification changed over the years as it related to their relational orientation, sexual orientation, and gender identity. These changes occurred primarily through community support; but, Dub also experienced changes to their identity through counseling, all of which has supported increased connection with their community. Because of the specific supports counseling provided, Dub changed how they experienced their depressive episodes and helped them build greater depth in all their relationships.
Dub was surrounded by supportive and healthy relationships, as evidenced by how they described the supportive and contemplative conversations they could have with their partners and friends. Dub described finding the polyamorous community, which closely connected to their burlesque community, gave them the ability to “talk about certain relationship aspects without getting shock or confusion.” Most of their adulthood, Dub was aware they were having periods of depression; but, they felt their friendships were enough to manage those symptoms. Dub described how they put off starting treatment and shared, “This is what I have friends for.” Generally, Dub was doing well and their intermittent periods of depression were manageable. Although their friendships and partnerships were supporting their well-being, these close connections also contributed to their delay in seeking counseling.

Dub described how they had many reasons to avoid counseling, including issues over payment and what their insurance would cover. Dub also described how they had friends who provided warnings about counseling and shared, “I know other people that’ve had trouble finding counselors that would understand [their relational orientation].” This shared knowledge from their community created concerns that counseling was something that should not be undertaken lightly. Given the trust Dub invested in their social connections, there was no reason to dismiss their concerns about finding a counselor who would not require education. This concern about finding an informed counselor created further delay in entering counseling, delaying until seeking professional support felt unavoidable for Dub.

To protect themself, Dub chose a counselor from their burlesque community as someone unfamiliar or outside of their community might have repeated for them the difficulties that their peers experienced. As a Black, queer, gender queer, polyamorist seeking counseling, they were
aware of their social vulnerability. Dub’s passing familiarity with the counselor inspired more confidence as they entered into this new type of relationship. Dub gave specific effort to “choosing a counselor on purpose who has experience and a welcoming attitude towards that lifestyle.” They invested this additional effort to manage their mounting concerns about selecting a counselor. Although Dub’s mutual peer relationships may have created extra care in their counseling selection process, it also supported Dub forming a connection with their counselor after determining they were a good match. Dub was familiar with sharing themself with others as part of the protective interconnection of their community, which facilitated them taking on the role of counseling client.

Evolving Self-Identification

Dub appeared as someone who was open to continuously reevaluating who they were and updating their labels to better suit both who they were and who they were becoming. They described being part of a community that supported this style of self-exploration, including supporting mutual conversations about identities. Dub shared that these labels were openly discussed among their peers and explained, “It’s still very helpful to see how other people go about things and [receiving] advice and friendship.” Dub described they had experienced changes in their sexual orientation and the label they used, shifting to identify as queer. Dub also adjusted how they labeled their sexual orientation to address the identities of people they were attracted to or partnering with. They had a similar journey with their relational orientation, shifting from being monogamous, to entering into an open relationship, to then coming to know and understand what it was to be polyamorous. They had found a closer match with polyamory considering their more recent wants for romantic relationships, all before entering the counseling process. Much of Dub’s growth occurred through having connection to peers who shared these
identities, not being isolated, and trying to determine nuance in labels on their own, which would continue to support connection in their community facilitating further growth.

Dub developed greater security to explore these stigmatized identities through having established relationships with people who were queer or polyamorous. They described they felt “privileged” in being able to openly explore these identities despite having a family who did not fully understand or support these labels. Dub found connection outside of family that continued to support their growth. Dub stated there was also a close overlap between the polyamorous community and the burlesque community in their area. Burlesque was a passion of theirs, which created regular contact with their polyamorous peers, further reducing a potential sense of isolation.

When Dub entered into counseling, they shared they “talked a little bit about labels and identity in various ways” with their counselor. Some of that discussion was intended to ensure Dub was working with a counselor who was knowledgeable about their identities and labels. They also shared to ensure the counselor had an understanding of how Dub conceptualized themself. Being supported by a professional who did not question what Dub knew to be true about themself allowed Dub to continue further and deeper investigation of who they were. They described they had recently found “a new box” in their gender identity and that “someone’s handed [them] a label maker to test out.” Dub was pursuing some of that exploration in their counseling sessions, which was an experience still unfolding for them at the time of our interviews. However, their gender was not the only identity that changed while under their counselor’s care.

Dub experienced an increase in self-knowledge through the mutual relationship they had built with their counselor; but, they had also experienced a concrete change in identity through
receiving a diagnosis, which created a clear and concise narrative of their mental health concerns. This macro view allowed Dub to better manage their symptoms with the counselor’s direct support. Having a professional label their mood symptoms as Bipolar Mood Disorder allowed them to receive closely tailored support from their counseling and empowered them to be able to search for additional information on the internet to independently deepen their understanding of the patterns of their changing mood. That clearly defined identifier also allowed them to use their diagnosis as a means of quickly describing nuanced parts of their mental health to friends and partners, to clarifying the nature of disconnection that might occur during depressive periods. Dub had a clear desire to share and be connected with their peers in meaningful and intentional relationships; having gained an understanding of what was occurring around them supported their ability to be an integral member of their community.

Continuing Growth through Connection

Dub built robust relationships across their lifespan with friends, community peers, and partners. Through having one growth-fostering relationship, they were able to find and build others. Through these relationships, Dub had been able to explore their needs and wants in life, on top of discovering who they were. These efforts supported their experience of life as something that had been generally positive. Still, Dub described having repeated periods of depression that intermittently reoccurred for them, even during the overall pleasant experience of their existence. After having a depressive phase that coincided with “a few deaths,” they determined they were ready to start counseling, and shared, “I want to improve my life. I don’t want to go through this time wasted anymore. . . . Now is the time to jump in on this.” They were motivated by their grief and a present awareness that life was short to build a more emotionally healthy and stable existence.
After carefully selecting a counselor, Dub found the process to be one that supported their openness in all aspects of their life. They experienced feeling both affirmed and unquestioned in being queer and polyamorous, which made the space one where they could explore their gender identity. They effectively built a mutual growth fostering relationship in their counseling; counseling had helped them better explore who they were and how the relationship supported them through their last extended bout of depression. Dub shared they were skipping much of their life and avoiding friends; but, they were able to continue attending counseling. Although their counselor offered many tools or techniques to help manage their depressive symptoms, the depressive symptoms inhibited their ability to incorporate the suggested behaviors. Still, Dub was able to continue attending most of their scheduled counseling sessions, making it the most reliable source of human contact they had during that time. Thus, “just having that support was handy” and it reduced the isolation that might have continued to intensify their symptoms. To find the label of Bipolar Mood Disorder while feeling honored in that identification process demonstrates a level of connection in the relationship and tact from the counselor. When speaking generally about the benefits counseling provided them, Dub shared, “[The counselor’s] humor has been very helpful. Their humor and their acceptance of the labels that feel right for me.”

Dub reported they started advocating for their friends to seek counseling based on how good counseling had felt for them and that many of those friends are already in the counseling process. They shared that the result was that “They are more open to [counseling’s] ideas and that makes me feel happy.” These changes give Dub a sense of hope that others were not delaying counseling and thereby delaying relief of any life-interrupting mental health symptoms as they had. This change in their community was also supporting more connection as they shared
a common set of tools and open-mindedness from counseling. Counseling supported deepening their social growth-fostering friendships and those friendships, in turn, were able to support Dub in building the type of relationship that counseling required to be effective. Dub’s counseling supported their growth and perceived benefits, and they wanted to ensure those same friends were getting to experience how good counseling could feel.

Textural-Structural Description

Dub had delayed starting counseling; instead, they prioritized building relationships with friends and partners as a space for social connection and support. For Dub, starting counseling was something they avoided for as long as they could due to the potential risks counseling posed from a social, economic, and historical perspective. They needed a clear precipitating event in the form of “a few deaths” for the potential benefits of counseling to seem worth the dangers. After having delayed going to counseling, Dub was surprised by the difference in the support they received from a friendship versus that experienced in relationship with a counselor. Dub experienced the knowledge of the counselor as an asset; but, they also enjoyed the benefits of having a relationship where the focus was entirely centered on them and their needs. With the skills and attention the counselor brought to the relationship, Dub experienced more gains than they had initially conceived of.

The Compounded Risks of Mental Health Care

Counseling was inherently risky for Dub when considering a broader social context and given their identities as a gender queer, queer, Black person. Transgender identities (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 2000), nonheterosexual orientations (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), and Black racial identities (Galán et al., 2021; King, 1968) have all been pathologized in mental health care; being Black has historically included risk while receiving
medical care in the United States (Kendi, 2019). Nested in this historical context, Dub described they had friends and acquaintances who “had poor experiences with their counseling.” Dub also briefly described that people they knew had counseling experiences that were disconfirming of their polyamory, adding to the list of marginalized identities they had that could be pathologized in counseling. Dub’s community was supportive of counseling for the individual, as evidenced by open discussion of counseling and having at least one counselor as a part of their burlesque community. However, their community appeared generally wary of people outside of that shared social and relational? narrative. This ambiguity in guidance from their trusted social supports added to the complexity of choosing to begin the counseling process, as there was no clear consensus on the value of counseling from Dub’s community where they drew most of their strength and support.

When delving further into Dub’s concerns with starting counseling, they also voiced fear about starting the counseling process. If they did not find a fit in their counselor, they would have to try several people until they found an effective counseling relationship. This concern then tied into worries about resources and effort sharing, and Dub stated:

It’s like, do I have the time to do this? Time to share hard feelings with people and then get a moment where you’re grating against each other. Feeling like you’re not being understood and just having to jump through these hoops over and over again.

Dub was able to identify that they had also avoided counseling due to mental health stigma, which may have been a deeper root to their avoidance. This awareness of the stigmatized nature of mental health concerns brought the historical perspective of risk into focus. Although Dub knew people who were benefiting from counseling, for much of their life, the risks of seeking professional care were too great.

With their strong support system and general well-being, Dub chose to delay counseling
for as long as they could. When faced with risk of something new versus their survivable known state, the primary motivation was to hold out because change was too unpredictable. The support of Dub’s friends was known, and it was enough support that they had successfully built relationships and survived difficult times. Dub’s bipolar symptoms were something they knew they could continue to live with whereas choosing counseling was too great a risk. It took the impact of people Dub knew dying while experiencing a depressive episode to look beyond their established coping skill to reach the point where the potential benefits of counseling outweighed the concerns. Although Dub had not had any negative experiences of counseling, the fear and risk counseling posed was its own negative encounter as they navigated living with bipolar mood disorder without skilled support.

*The Benefits of Prioritizing the Self with Trained Support*

Dub shared they were able to make changes in their life they had been unable to reach previously with the support of their friends. Dub was almost surprised with how much growth they had been able to make in the counseling process when compared with previous efforts of receiving support from their friends. Dub identified that this change manifested from the benefits of receiving clarity of having a diagnosis and learning new, effective tools to address their symptoms. Although Dub’s friends had been able to provide support, after starting counseling, Dub shared, “It has helped with moments where I normally would have fallen into pits of self-sabotage, or just being completely down and out. I had new tools to combat that.” When considering Dub previously held the belief that counseling was equivalent to talking with friends and that counseling would always result in crying and feeling drained at the end of a session, this focused tool building was unexpected. Dub found satisfaction and ease in the utility of a counselor’s training and skill.
Additionally, counseling was different from friendship due to the relationship being centered entirely on Dub and their needs in the counseling process. Dub experienced the counselor being there to take in what was happening for Dub through listening, and then used their knowledge as a trained professional to generate better questions, tools, and skills for Dub. This shift to an entirely inward focus was unusual for Dub, who had been so community minded. Dub described a recent bout of depression where they experienced difficulty in being able to connect with friends or family; but, at the same time, they felt able to continue in their counseling relationship. While navigating their depression, Dub felt safe in being able to regulate their relationship with their counselor without social pressure for relational reciprocity. This ability to continue the relationship had additional benefits, and Dub shared:

Even during the time when I was depressed but still going and having a few thoughts afterward like, “Is this even really doing anything?”. . . . Then, when I finally reached points of, “Hey, this [tool] that I’ve been given, I can finally find a way to utilize this.” Those moments of feeling like, okay, this is working out.

Dub’s counseling relationship was an unthreatening place to connect that did not include guilt for not fully attending to a friendship. Being able to continue the work of counseling through their depression gave Dub a place to connect, and those tools were available to them when their mood began to improve.

The entire process of personal growth had been more efficient than what they had been previously achieving with friends because Dub was not having to also invest in the other person in the relationship. They trusted their counselor was getting the support they needed without Dub’s help, allowing their shared work to stay focused on Dub’s needs. Through learning about the counseling process from within it, Dub was able to form new opinions. They found counseling was “natural, but at the same time, very well balanced, practiced, and natural, if that makes any sense.” There was a discovery and unfolding in the process that made it feel safe. Dub
felt trust and an affirmation that was clear in their tone and their excitement about the benefits of the counseling experience. Dub clarified the extent of the value of this experience, reporting they were now hopeful people in their community would seek counseling because of how beneficial and supportive the counseling process had been for Dub.

Composite Textural-Structural Description

The composite textural-structural description was the final level of analysis completed for this study. I explored unifying themes of participants across their lived experiences as counseling clients and as polyamorous adults in North and Central Texas. When individual textural-structural descriptions were viewed as a whole, a greater quintessence became apparent. This analysis allowed their shared experiences to be viewed as a larger whole with three textural-structural essences: (a) disappointment and disrespect in ignorance of vital identities, (b) the necessities of trust and connection for empowerment and growth, and (c) the complementary nature of relationality in polyamory and counseling.

Disappointment and Disrespect in Ignorance of Vital Identities

Although all participants had positive experiences in counseling, they all described moments of disappointment, disconnection, or harm connected to their counseling experience. Most of those incidences occurred directly as the result of their counselor having ignorance of one of their key identities with a perceived unwillingness or apathy about educating themselves. This lack of education had marked impacts on participant’s experience of counseling with that particular counselor and with counseling in general. Participants felt misunderstood or felt parts of their identity were not important to their counselor. The intensity of this messaging even impacted those who had not begun counseling yet, as observed with Dub. Dub’s peers had counseling experiences that were disconfirming of their identity as polyamorists, which was part
of Dub’s reasoning to delay beginning counseling to avoid a similar experience. Although polyamory was an identity frequently misconstrued by participants’ counselors, participants also navigated discourtesy connected to being bisexual, being a rape survivor, and being an adolescent. Some of these counseling relationships were able to recover from this disconnection reaching a place where the work of counseling could occur; but, not all relationships recovered, resulting in fraught endings to the counseling relationship.

As a result of polyamory being an integral part of their lives, participants experienced pressure to provide education about those identities to support their counselors through their ignorance. Some counselors were able to meet that demand and others were not. Samantha described that she “felt like [she] had to educate them.” Mia shared her frustration with the experience by stating, “Don’t rely on your clients to educate you.” The experience was one of compulsion and obligation. If counselors were going to have understanding of the experience, there was a sense information had to flow from the participant. Their experience was that if they waited for the counselor to take action to educate themselves, no change in the counselors’ comprehension would occur. Although the counseling experience includes effort and work for clients, being required to educate their counselors about stigmatized identities created disconnection for participants. Feeling required to provide that knowledge created a sense that their minority status was unimportant to their counselor.

For participants who did not feel able to provide education to their counselor, the experience felt like a trap. Sue’s time of disconnection occurred around her experience of being an adolescent. The nature of her adolescence was not something she was developmentally able to elucidate for her counselor. As a result, Sue shared, “I felt like there was something wrong with me because it wasn’t working.” Evelyn had congruent experiences and described her counselor
“just made [her] out to be a very bad person.” Additionally, Evelyn shared, “That’s some shame I carried around for a while.” Evelyn was only 19 years old at the time; she did not have the tools to stand up to her counselor’s assessment that it was somehow Evelyn’s responsibility as a woman to keep her husband engaged and sexually faithful. As a result, these participants believed they were caught in a counseling experience that left them feeling they were deeply flawed and seemingly unable to improve or grow, especially given a professional was informing them this was the truth of their existence. Shame provoked by ineffective counseling limited potential growth and self-awareness because participants were unable to be in the vulnerable state of connection that counseling required.

Additionally, there were moments where participants felt pressured to explain who they were and how they experienced their identities when the counselor lacked empathy and understanding. For Heather, this occurred with counselors who could not understand her polyamory and only seemed to find it acceptable when she voiced that her established partner was asexual. For her counselor, this fact created a distinction in the importance of her relationship with that partner that was more centered on sexual connection in a manner that did not connect with Heather’s experience. She shared, “Trying to go to these counselors and say, ‘No, this is really legitimate and it totally works. I’m not just playing the field,’ was tough because they didn’t see it the way I was trying to see it.” Emily described her experiences with a counselor who could not seem to grasp polyamorous concepts, sharing, “It just led to so much friction that I stopped seeing her.” These counselors may have been giving their best efforts to understand; however, participants believed counselors were not taking steps outside of their sessions to internalize information their clients were providing.

This perceived lack of counselor effort left participants feeling frustrated and unable to
connect with their counselors. This frustration stemmed from a paralleling process of their cultural experience of being othered or misunderstood. As a result, participants felt disconnected from the counselor to an extent that participants were unable to form relationships with mutual connection because that type of connection included a deepening knowledge of the self. If the self they had previously known was rejected, the work of the relationship became a matter of defense of that self-knowledge making the working alliance adverse to the type of connection that yields a beneficial counseling relationship. Thus, participants described friction and disconnection, which centered on being unable to address the goals they sought counseling to achieve.

Six participants experienced an increase in carefulness or wariness when selecting future counselors. Emily shared:

I don’t want to feel like every time I have to talk about an issue I have to educate my therapist on what polyamory means cause that would detract away from the time I could talk about what was going on.

Similarly, Samantha shared, “I spend enough time advocating for myself outside of counseling; counseling is about me time. So, didn’t want to have to do that in counseling.” Samantha highlighted an important piece of living with a stigmatized identity, which is that much of her life included having to teach others about her polyamory and her way of being in the world. Counseling needed to be a space where she did not have to defend her existence as she was often expected to do. As a result, participants were less able to trust that counselors would be willing to seek out the knowledge participants needed them to have, as evidenced by the counselor’s failure to do so. Some participants sought counselors they were familiar with and others were more fastidious in their vetting process. Mia even sought counseling in a whole new treatment setting as an early adopter of telehealth to increase the likelihood of finding someone who would
not need education. Participants did all of this work because they were unwilling to tolerate ignorance in a counselor again.

Counselor knowledge of polyamory in particular was important to participants because the polyamory community was defined by shared knowledge with this nonmainstream label. Many participants described reading specific polyamorous texts to speak a shared language in this community. Mia described how the polyamorous community thought about language use, stating, “I think in the polyamory community, there’s this whole thing about what do words even mean, and it becomes really difficult because you can only define words by words, and everything means something slightly different to other people.” With this level of intention and thoughtfulness about language and education shared across participants, there was an expectation that a counselor might do the same. This personal awareness heightened the disappointment and disrespect they experienced with their counselors’ ignorance.

The Necessities of Trust and Connection for Empowerment and Growth

All participants were able to find connected and empowering counseling, and all of them found effective counselors while they identified as polyamorous. Connection in this context describes psychological contact with another person as a nonjudgmental understanding and embracing of the holistic self of the participant that facilitated vulnerability, while still experiencing counseling as practical and egalitarian. They were able to find counselors who were skilled at creating safety and growth-fostering relationships that included the ability to support participants in creating an overall increased sense of worth and increased knowledge of themself. Participants sought counseling for different concerns, such as managing anxiety, living with chronic mental health concerns, or navigating situational stress. They sought counseling with different goals in mind. Mia shared, “I just needed somebody to keep venting to when [a crisis
with my metamour] kept being terrible.” Samantha described her counseling experience, sharing, “[It is] a point in my life where I get to completely just be. And pick apart my life with somebody that it doesn’t impact.” Dub described receiving tools from their counseling when they were more depressed. As Dub started to improve, they shared, “I finally reached points of, ‘Hey, this [tool] I’ve been given, I can finally find a way to utilize this.’ Those moments of feeling like okay [counseling] is working out.” Reasons why counseling was growth-fostering for participants were as varied as they were; but, participants all benefited from feeling understood and safe in their connection with their counselor. To vent or pull life apart required vulnerability that their counselors were able to support.

All participants were able to reach a point in their counseling experiences where counseling was something that helped them live their life more ably. Counseling was affirming of them holistically. Heather described counseling, sharing, “[It was] an external person telling me that I am just fine. I am perfect. . . . This is a very Mr. Rogers thing to say, but you are perfect just the way you are.” Sue echoed that sense of being seen in her entirety, sharing, “[My counselor] was a guide and almost a mentor on my journey with me. I didn’t feel separated. I didn’t feel like I was being judged.” To try new ways of being in a relationship was threatening for those who had not experienced growth-fostering relationships in the past. The security of the relationship was necessary to be open to the novel experience of a mutually connected relationship. For participants who had already experienced a growth-fostering relationship, the need for that type of connection became crucial for greater depth of vulnerability.

Effective counselors were able to help participants build growth-fostering relationships, which then supported greater self-knowledge through increased vulnerability, an increased capacity to engage in self-exploration, and the increased confidence to attempt new problem-
solving in their life. Even though the effective counselors were not always described as soft-handed or gentle, they were all trustworthy. Emily shared her best counseling experience, stating, “I really respected [the counselor]. I really trusted her and I trusted she was trying to tell me the right thing and, deep down, I knew it was the right thing.” Samantha shared an assessment of her experiences, stating, “I figure that counseling isn’t always supposed to be comfortable because then it wouldn’t be really growth.” Marty echoed a similar sentiment, sharing:

The place that [my counselor] held when I was going through the breakup in terms of just being a fixed, very positive place, and making herself available too, where when I was having really, really hard times, I could reach out and she was very open and honest about, you know, remind me that yeah, it’s gonna suck.

These counselors were trusted to say hard things in ways that communicated caring and connection with their honesty. The discomfort of growth that Samantha voiced was survivable with a trusted and supportive counselor. The counselors’ unwillingness to sugarcoat the experience was tolerated, and even prized, because it supported participants in making the changes they desired in their lives. As experienced by these participants, trust and connection were necessary to be on a path to growth and change that counseling could provide uniquely.

The Complementary Nature of Relationality in Polyamory and Counseling

When observing the unifying essence of what brought participants to counseling, there was not a singular cause; but, all participants valued connection and all shared a belief that their lives could be improved. Many of them experienced trauma or abuse and continued to seek relational connection, both in and out of counseling. This relational drive was shared across participants. Many participants had their first counseling experiences as children or adolescents, setting a precedent that counseling was acceptable and, at times, expected in their family of origin. Others described that counseling was encouraged and openly discussed in their social community. Most of them experienced some disconnection or harm in counseling; but, they
chose to come back to the experience to try again. This willingness to return to the process demonstrates a readiness to not judge the experience of counseling by a single relationship and a trust in their community, who supported the counseling process.

The participants had been existing outside of the social hegemony through an acknowledgment that they desired relationships other than those sanctioned in the current mononormative cultural standard. This capacity for additional romantic attachments denotes an increased desire for intimacy. As a result, participants were ready to consider and address emotional complexity to achieve their desired outcomes, and a readiness to believe their life could be made into something different. In counseling, participants were supported in creating growth-fostering relationships, which was a model for building further empowering and mutual connections, both in and out of counseling. Emily shared, “[Polyamory is] such a big part of my life; but, it is especially important in my counseling. Like, I can’t see myself developing a fulfilling relationship with a counselor and holding that back and about myself.” There was a need to be fully present in the counseling relationship that did not support compartmentalization of the self. Participants were people who were open to the counseling experience as a relational vector for change, which required an acknowledgment of their inherently holistic nature. Their experiences as polyamorists could not be removed from their experience as clients. The counseling experience was relational, their capacity for polyamory was relational, and those experiences were inextricably linked. From this understanding, there was a merging of personal responsibility to address their emotional needs through counseling, while then providing those increased emotional resources to their partners and their community.

To further emphasize their orientation to community, many participants were not just attending counseling; they were also actively espousing for the benefits of counseling with their
peers and in their community. Many participants described their advocacy and support for others to start their own counseling, including Sue, who stated, “I recommend therapy to anybody who’s going through stuff.” They experienced connection and growth in counseling and wanted others to be able to experience it. Dub shared:

I’m friends with a lot of people that are going into counseling and are more open to these ideas, and that makes me feel happy. So, there’s like a new generation of people who have the right tools and an open mindset to things. They’ll be able to help other people.

Dub wanted that type of change and care to exist in their community. These experiences reinforce the normalization of the counseling process in their communities. Counseling supported an active relational way of being, from Heather, who stated she was using her time in counseling “to be a better ally, both towards [her] partner and her therapy and just in general in life,” to Evelyn, who shared, “I think I know myself better and so therefore I’m able to communicate it better to other people.” The way the participants were in their relationships, both personal and professional, was changed through how they experienced relationships in counseling, through the depth of connection and increased knowledge of self they found in that process.
APPENDIX D

EXPANDED DISCUSSION
The purpose of this study was to explore lived experiences of polyamorists in North and Central Texas who had received counseling in the 3 years previous to the recruitment survey. The study was approached as a phenomenological inquiry. The analysis was completed with the modified version of the van Kaam method as outlined in *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Moustakas, 1994) and used relational-cultural theory (RCT) as a framework for conceptualizing participant experiences. The final step of this analysis was to complete a composite textural-structural description, with revealed three final essences that captured lived experiences of my participants. In this appendix, I discuss findings of three essences in relation to existing literature, implications for counselors, implications for counselor educators, limitations of the study, recommendations for counselors, recommendations for counselor educators, recommendations for future research, and a final conclusion.

Findings Related to Existing Literature

The current prevailing cultural standards of mononormativity and monogamism were reflected in findings of this study (Emens, 2004; Hardy & Easton, 2017; Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Sheff, 2014). Given the known impacts of unexamined bias (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Boysen, 2010; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Nakash et al., 2015), effort to build awareness of this stigmatized and marginalized group (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Emens, 2004; Sheff & Hammers, 2011) should be a key point of advocacy for this multicultural group.

All participants of this study disclosed their polyamorous identity to their counselors, which is higher than the reported 62% of surveyed polyamorous people in counseling who chose to share their polyamory with their counselor in a study by Weber (2002). Although Weber identified 10% of polyamorists in counseling who disclosed their polyamory to their counselor received a negative response, they did not capture the occurrence of ignorance and negative
response to other identities such as being a rape survivor, being bisexual, being an adolescent, or being a woman.

In the following sections, I explore the specific relationship between findings and the literature from Appendix A. These findings are sectioned to explore each distinct essence captured in the composite textural-structural description and what can be known about lived experiences of counseling for polyamorist participants. As outlined and described in Appendix C, the essences were: (a) disappointment and disrespect in ignorance of vital identities, (b) the necessities of trust and connection for empowerment and growth, and (c) the complementary nature of relationality in polyamory and counseling.

Disappointment and Disrespect in Ignorance of Vital Identities

Although much research connected with polyamory is dated, many findings were reflected as still being accurate in this study. One of the most important findings corroborated in this study was people who are polyamorous are not specifically seeking counseling to address concerns about being polyamorous (Peabody, 1982). Although their polyamory provided important context or background for concerns in the participants’ life, none of them reported presenting to counseling to address their polyamory as an independent concern. Participants believed their polyamory was not an inherently disordered identity and it was actually a healthy way of being (Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Knapp, 1976; Peabody, 1982; Weitzman et al., 2009); therefore, it did not require specific treatment. Participants brought concerns related to mental health, and those concerns mirrored what might bring any person to counseling, ranging from chronic mental illness to wanting additional tools and support for navigating complex social dynamics. Although they all experienced supportive counseling, they all found something lacking in the counseling profession.
The ongoing persistence of mononormativity is clear (Barker & Langdridge, 2010) when considering the impacts of many participants’ counselors lacking information on polyamory. Kisler and Lock (2019) also captured how polyamorous counseling clients desired their counselors be more informed about polyamory. As participants experienced counseling, being required to provide education to their counselor to have the structure of their relationships understood, continued the feelings of marginalization, delegitimization, and relative invisibility (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; McLean, 2004). Feeling required to educate your counselor, a trained and educated professional, further perpetuated the experience of stigma concerning polyamorous identities in counseling (Kisler & Lock, 2019) and discrimination against polyamorists (Graham, 2014; Weber, 2002), despite available interpretations of both the American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (2015) Codes of Ethics wherein polyamory would be a protected identity. This persistence of monogamism additionally matches with the understanding that an unexamined implicit bias will be perceived by clients in counseling sessions (Boysen, 2010). This bias can result in counselors who appear rejecting and neglectful in the process of counseling (Asay & Lambert, 1999), which participants experienced when encountering moments that clearly indicated a lack of investment on the part of the counselor. This stigma participants experienced also echoed experiences of participants in the Kisler and Lock (2019) study.

Participants also experienced pockets of ignorance with their counselors for matters other than their polyamory; but, these were matters directly connected with their other vital identities. Also, these moments were perceived as stemming from a lack of interest or investment, which reflected bias perpetuating a sense of unimportance or the rejection and neglect captured by Asay and Lambert (1999). Multiculturally competent counseling is knowledgeable counseling (Ratts et
and multiculturally competent counseling is ethical counseling (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004). Participants needed counselors who were ready to identify their own places of inexperience and a lack of knowledge; however, many counselors failed to do so, resulting in wariness of counseling in the future.

The Necessities of Trust and Connection for Empowerment and Growth

Participants were receiving effective counseling that empowered them to know themselves better, to take action in their lives, and to not settle for unsatisfactory relationships. Participants in this study clearly benefited from counseling relationships that contained trust and connection, where connection is defined as psychological contact with another person as a nonjudgmental understanding and embracing of the holistic self of the participant that facilitated vulnerability, while still experiencing counseling as practical and egalitarian. These concepts are reflected in the RCT Literature.

From the framework of RCT used in this study, effective counseling occurs when a counselor is able to establish a growth-fostering relationship with their client that has mutual empathy (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997). The growth-fostering relationship is marked by having the five good things: (a) a sense of zest or energy, (b) an increased knowledge of oneself and the other(s) in the relationship, (c) a desire to create more relationships, (d) a desire to act in life, and (e) an overall increased sense of worth (Jordan, 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997). This type of relationship combats internalized narratives that the client is somehow inherently unlovable or unworthy, which then perpetuates mental unwellness by creating relationships that repeat this messaging of unlovability or unworthiness, or both (Miller & Stiver, 1997). All movement toward a new type of relational connection requires vulnerability. For example, Jordan (2018) stated, “Trust enlarges as the client takes small steps toward more connection” (p. 58). Trust and
connection were part of the vulnerable process of exploring novel models of relationships. The building of that trust and connection functioned uniquely due to various factors, such as how knowledge of the self is experienced as unique to that person and how a desire to take action would be defined in the context of the participants' life. The result is that creating trust and connection is unique as the nature of holistically experiencing another person.

Although the growth-fostering relationship can be specifically cultivated in the counseling relationship, it can occur in any part of the client’s life, giving benefits to that type of relationship model (Miller & Stiver, 1997). After being developed, the relationship model is frequently repeated by the client in other areas of their life, either by creating new relationships with this model, changing relationships to include this model, or ending relationships that cannot sustain this model. Participants described experiences that could capture the five good things and they were also learning how they wanted to structure their relationships as part of the counseling process.

Additionally, ethical counseling is knowledgeable about multicultural identities (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004; Arredondo et al., 1996). In the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies, the authors explicitly stated, “Multicultural and social justice competent counselors . . . take action to seek out professional development opportunities to learn more about themselves as a member of a privileged or marginalized group.” (Ratts et al., 2016, p. 39). Although knowledgeability was not the most important component for successful counseling, it enhanced the benefits participants received from the counseling experience. It also clearly demonstrated skill in multicultural competencies that was lacking in participants’ other counseling relationships.
The Complementary Nature of Relationality in Polyamory and Counseling

All participants were able to create and sustain the mutual growth-fostering relationship needed for successful counseling (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Their ability to form a robust and healthy relationship with their counselor as a polyamorist reinforced the knowledge that polyamory is healthy way of being (Fern, 2020; Knapp, 1976; Peabody, 1982; Weitzman et al., 2009). Polyamorous clients benefit from having a counselor who is able to confront monogamism as part of the therapeutic process (Jordan et al., 2017). This previous research frames the finding that the relational nature of polyamory and counseling are connected in the counseling process, especially when facilitated by a knowledgeable counselor.

Counseling and polyamory are further connected as processes when considering most of the participants were reading about polyamory. Much polyamory literature includes the suggestion to seek counseling to build further tools and to address concerns such as jealousy, communication, and time management (Fern, 2020; Hardy & Easton, 2017; Veaux & Rickert, 2014), which would mirror topics and skills that could arise in the work of counseling. Polyamorists have been seeking counseling for mental health concerns; but, they are also receiving messages from their communal literature to seek counseling for attachment concerns (Fern, 2020), to develop robust personal boundaries (Veaux & Rickert, 2014), and to work through concerns that might arise in the transition to polyamory while in an existing relationship (Hardy & Easton, 2017). None of these reasons are criteria that corresponds to a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The desired role of counseling in such situations serves to develop new ways of being in relationships, such as learning how to be in a mutually growth-fostering relationship with the five good things from RCT (Miller & Stiver, 1997), or learning how to navigate having multiple
attachment figures (Fern, 2020). Participants’ experiences with these new relationships, both in and out of counseling, supported participants in understanding and identifying what they desired in relationships.

Many participants were developing the relational models for an effective counseling relationship in their social or romantic connections, such as Evelyn being more able to advocate for her needs before returning to counseling. Participants such as Samantha appeared to more able to understanding and identifying what they desired in relationships through exploration and connection that develop in their counseling. These examples are reflective of the understanding that the growth-fostering relationship can develop in or out of counseling (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Participants were all able to experience the mutual growth-fostering relationship as part of their counseling process, which connected to their innate drive to build more connections like the one they experienced in counseling (Jordan, 2018). This drive toward mutual and empowering relationships was seen in the efforts of all participants to be in a counseling relationship that felt transparent and affirming.

Implications

The findings of this study support an increased usage and awareness of the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) with counselors-in-training and in-practice counselors. These findings further support the understanding that polyamory is a relatively healthy way of being that does not have a direct, negative impact on the ability to form the growth-fostering relationship necessary for the counseling process. Participants were able to find effective and supportive counseling services; but, this was not a consistent experience because half of participants had a negative counseling experience specifically related to their identity as polyamorists. In the subsequent sections, implications for counselors and counselor
educators are provided to help support future polyamorous clients in receiving effective counseling services from their professionals.

Implications for Counselors

First, it is important to highlight that all research participants found and received quality counseling that supported their desired counseling goals while they were out as polyamorists. Therefore, there are clinicians who are providing quality services to those in need, which indicated that some counselors are seeking further education related to polyamory, as evidenced by participant reports of the counselor’s knowledgeable services. From participants’ varied counseling experiences, these clinicians are available in individual counseling, group counseling, and intensive outpatient programs, and even with newer business models for counseling, such as online services. Still, the polyamorous community has been sustaining othering and harm, which was experienced by participants of this study and is captured in the literature (Graham, 2014, Kisler & Lock, 2019).

Polyamorists are receiving counseling that is either insufficient, ineffective (Kisler & Lock, 2019), or, at times, harmful (Graham, 2014). From findings of this study, the primary delineating factor between ineffective and effective counseling was having knowledge, or a willingness to seek knowledge, about communities participants were part of or identities they claimed. Polyamorists are concerned the counseling they are going to receive will be ineffective and are even being guided through polyamorist texts to prescreen their counselors with tactics such reviewing information posted on their websites (Hardy & Easton, 2017) and using directories of poly-aware counselors developed in the community (Veaux & Rickert, 2014).

Providing competent and sensitive counseling requires ongoing growth and development through education and self-awareness (Ratts et al., 2016; Toporek & Daniels, 2018), and both take time
and concerted effort. Because most polyamorists are not seeking counseling directly concerning their polyamory, basic knowledge should be supportive of most client needs to ensure participants are not defining basic terms or feeling that it is necessary to protect their way of being (Kisler & Lock, 2019).

Implications for Counselor Educators

It is essential that counselor educators find paths to increase counselor understanding of multicultural populations they might not otherwise consider or encounter. These areas need to be further explored to prevent ongoing impacts of ignorance and stigma on marginalized groups. Given the finding that many participants experienced their counselors as ignorant of vital identities in their life, it may be that counselors are not effectively recognizing a need to receive varied education that would broaden their understanding of unfamiliar groups.

For counselors-in-training, it is crucial for counselor educators to instill a drive for diverse education when serving as in-practice counselors. Early and regular exposure to material such as the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) and a continuous integration of multicultural identities throughout course work can emphasize the importance of such identities (Odegard & Vereen, 2011). Trainees and students should feel enveloped by a culture that supports seeking awareness on diverse populations as part of a counselor’s way of being.

For in-practice counseling, creating access and interest in diverse education will be more complex than it might initially appear. Embracing the reality of how continued education is sought must be part of this process. Although practicing mental health counselors are required to receive continuing education to maintain licensure, the depth and breadth of that continuing education is impacted by personal interests (Neimeyer et al., 2010). As such, counselors may
avoid unfamiliar topics might not be immediately apparent as relevant to their client base. Additionally, cost will impact willingness to engage with continuing education materials, with counselors preferring low or no-cost options (Neimeyer et al., 2010). Ensuring quality research and education on diverse populations is reaching in-practice counseling should be a concern for all counselor educators.

Limitations

This study contained several limitations, including limited diversity in both the participants and the research team. Polyamory research has failed in capturing a more diverse experience for people who are polyamorous (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). This study had eight participants; six participants were White and five participants were ciswomen. Of the 24 respondents to the initial survey, 22 respondents identified as White and 17 were women who did not consistently clarify their status as cisgender or transgender in their responses. Although this study strove to attract a diverse background of participants, most participants identified as White women. There may be several factors related to this result. The first possibility may be that more people who are White (Dobalian & Rivers, 2008) and women (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) are open to seeking counseling services, resulting in a group that is preselected in its homogeneity. Additionally, the demographics of people who self-identify as polyamorous are more likely to be White (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Lastly, data on the demographics of polyamorous communities of North and Central Texas do not exist; thus, the predominant Whiteness of study participants may simply be a reflection of the polyamorous communities of North and Central Texas. Regardless of these explanatory factors, the experiences of polyamorists who are people of color are a necessary part of describing the polyamorous experience at large; thus, an increased presence of those voices would have been preferred in the scope of this research.
Sheff and Hammers (2011) suggested cultivating a more diverse participant base by attempting to capture greater diversity in research team member backgrounds. Although the research team initially contained two Latinx team members, both members had scheduling conflicts at the beginning of the study and decided to exit the research team for their well-being. As a result, I was the remaining research team member, and recruitment was driven and shaped by Whiteness, which is inherently less able to attract Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) experiences due to a perception of potential tokenization (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

An additional limitation included the lack of entirely negative counseling experiences in participants sampled. When considering participant recruitment, most participants had some negative experiences in counseling; but, all participants’ most recent counseling experiences were generally positive. There were no participants with all negative experiences, even though many participants had this narrative at some point in their journey with counseling. It was in the original scope of this research to include participants with an entirely negative experience of counseling; however, no participants with this narrative were captured in the interview process. This disparity could have been due to participant recruitment methods. It is possible a person with only negative counseling experiences would be less willing to be interviewed about those experiences. Additionally, people with only negative experiences may have been less likely to fall in the 3-year sampling window because a person with only negative experiences of counseling may have stopped receiving counseling services and been away from that process for a longer period than 3 years. A repeat of this study with different recruitment tactics could help reveal the nature of why all participants had positive recent experiences. A study that creates a research question more centered on negative counseling experiences might also provide illumination.
Additionally, this study experienced timing delays. Although the initial goal of this study was to have analysis completed within a calendar year of the initial interviews, this study took more time than originally intended. As a result, there were longer periods between interviews and a delay in completing the analysis process. Additionally, these delays may have impacted my ability to be saturated in the research process because participants were all engaged in other projects, employment, and the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic during the scope of the study. To address this concern, I rearranged my personal schedule over 2 months to complete the analysis process with more continuous engagement, resulting in data saturation.

Recommendations

Participants of this study had experiences consistent with current knowledge of polyamory (Jordan et al., 2017; Kisler & Lock, 2019). The prevalence of the ignorance they experienced with their counselors is not surprising given the relatively limited information that exists on polyamorists in counseling. The impacts of that ignorance are not surprising when set in the current knowledge of the effects of unexamined bias (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Boysen, 2010; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014; Nakash et al., 2015). As such, the first group of recommendations is aimed at practicing counselors with suggestions how they might better serve the polyamorous community currently experiencing cultural stigma, and whom participants of this study experienced as disappointing and disrespectful when they were ignorant of the polyamorous experience. The next section of recommendations is for counselor educators. These recommendations focus on how to better support counselors-in-training and in-practice counselors to have the education and information needed to curtail the lack of exposure to polyamory and nonmonogamous relational orientations generally. Lastly, there is recommended
future research to suggest paths to reveal more of how people who are polyamorous are experiencing counseling and how counselors are gaining information after they are licensed.

Recommendations for Counselors

Mononormative messages are embedded in media in the United States and are infused into the broader cultural experience, reinforcing the idea that monogamy is the ideal state for a romantic relationship (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Rothschild, 2018). For some people, this idea has never been questioned (Conley et al., 2012). Counselors are known to have bias when they perceive a value conflict between themselves and their clients (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014) and unexamined implicit bias can impact the work of counseling (Boysen, 2010; Nakash et al., 2015). Bias can also damage the working alliance (Asay & Lambert, 1999). To avoid this bias, counselors should begin work to address and identify biases they hold in relation to polyamory. This exploration could be structured by following the guidelines outlined in the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016). In the ACA (2014) Code of Ethics section C.2.e, consultation is recommended for maintaining an ethics-centered mindset. A counselor who has never worked with a polyamorous client may need to seek out consultation when beginning to provide services for a person who is polyamorous to facilitate identification of bias. Additionally, there may be instances when it is most appropriate to refer a client with an unfamiliar multicultural identity (ACA, 2014). The choice to refer should be undertaken with an attitude of helpfulness and with client collaboration where possible (The North Carolina Community College System Department of Student Development Services, 2008) and, in the referral process, the expectation to manage bias about a client’s identities or values lies with the counselor (ACA, 2014; Kocet & Herlihy, 2014).

When considering findings of this study, it is noteworthy the unifying essence of
disappointment and disrespect in ignorance of vital identities indicated that many clinicians are not addressing the need for ongoing knowledge and training to provide ethical counseling. The multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) are a structured approach to help counselors cultivate a deeper understanding of themselves and their clients. Most participants felt impacted by a lack of knowledge on the part of their counselor. There was a sense that polyamory was not believed to be a valuable way of being, which then connected with participants’ experience that their counselors seemed unmotivated to acquire that knowledge. The straightforward recommendation is to seek out knowledge and training as part of providing multiculturally competent services, with the additional directive to revisit the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016).

From this study, findings included the idea that potential clients are choosing to be more discerning about the counselor selection process and are having tools for differentiation recommended through texts such as The Ethical Slut (Hardy & Easton, 2017). Updating paperwork and websites can establish an actively antimonogamist stance visible to potential clients. This concrete suggestion may seem simplistic; but, mononormativity may exist in the forms and paperwork in a counselor’s office or on a counselor’s website. Counselors should take a moment to read through intake paperwork clients complete before or during their first appointment. I suggest paying particular attention to points in the form where clients are asked to share any important partner information. If there is space for the name of only one partner or if words like partner or spouse appear only in the singular, a client who is polyamorous may assume the counselor is not aware of polyamory. For websites, counselors need to consider the use of the term “couples counseling.” A couple is defined as “two persons married, engaged, or otherwise romantically paired” (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para. 1a). Thus, couples counseling
would seem to refer to romantic relationship with two people. This wording is an excellent choice if the goal is to specifically advertise that counseling services are for people in a pair. If the goal is to advertise more generally for people in romantic relationships, counselors could consider the term intimate relationship counseling or other more inclusive terms.

Additionally, it is noteworthy most participants were reading texts connected to polyamory, which included skills and practices for improving communication or self-reflection, with participants specifically citing *The Ethical Slut* (Hardy & Easton, 2017). However, these tactics are present in many texts such as *Rewriting the Rules* (Barker, 2018), which guides readers through structured questioning of social norms, and *Polysecure* (Fern, 2020), which includes information on integrating attachment theory into a practical approach to polyamory. Clients who are already seeking their own education might desire skill, education, and nuance in their counseling experience beyond what they have accessed in their own investigation. These clients might already be more psychologically minded with priming from texts such as these. This work outside of the counseling setting is currently connected with experience of polyamory described by participants, connecting their relational style and skills and knowledge that might flow from counseling. I suggest counselors be ready for nuance and a wider variety of known skills when working with polyamorous clients. Taking time to read books your clients might be reading will give greater insight to how they are understanding polyamory and relationships.

When seeking knowledge, counselors should recognize books are not the only tool. There are online resources such as the Multiamory podcast (Multiamory, 2022), the Black & Poly website (Black & Poly, n.d.), and spaces where polyamory occurs, even if not the primary mode, such as the Decolonizing Sex episode of the podcast *All My Relations* with Dr. Kim Tallbear where they discuss using polyamory to decolonize how romantic love is conceptualized and
navigated (Wilbur & Keene, 2019). Additionally, participant Mia suggested seeking out open polyamorous spaces to engage with polyamorists to learn about the community directly and have that knowledge from the local polyamorous people, rather than seeking information from clients. These groups can be found through social media websites, such as Facebook. All attendance to such groups should include curious respect with a goal to learn and not intrude.

According to the *ACA Advocacy Competencies* (Toporek & Daniels, 2018) counselors should be working to create social change, both in the counseling office and in the world at large, to aid their clients in all aspects of life. This drive for advocacy is then further supported by the counseling code of ethics which states counselors should strive to “address potential barriers and obstacles that inhibit access and/or the growth and development of clients” (ACA, 2014, Section A.7.a). Given the cultural and legal barrier for polyamorous clients, advocacy is a reasonable step. In the office, advocacy could be helping polyamorous clients to feel empowered (Toporek & Daniels, 2018) and providing psychoeducation that their experience of stigma and bias about their polyamory may be reasonable and real (Berry & Barker, 2014; Jordan et al., 2017).

When advocating on behalf of clients in the community or the public arena, the effort can take on many different forms. These forms include, but are not limited to, advocating for political changes, advocating for systemic changes such as a policy change in a school district or place of employment, or advocating for more members of the public to be aware of mononormativity (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Be mindful advocacy for any population should be done with that population, not for them as a parent does for a child. Listen to polyamorous clients and get in touch with the polyamorous community. Find out where support is needed and advocate accordingly.
Recommendations for Counselor Educators

It is essential to include polyamory in multicultural counseling courses and also integrate knowledge of this population throughout curriculum more generally if counselors are going to be more knowledgeable about polyamory. Minimally, material on relational orientation and relationship structures would be appropriate in human growth and development courses and family counseling courses. Odegard and Vereen (2011) found having social justice concepts woven throughout the curriculum encouraged masters’ students to be more culturally sensitive and better able to practice their counseling ethically. They were also reminded multicultural competence is a necessity for an ethical counselor practice (Arredondo & Toporek, 2004).

There are many possible examples for how polyamory might be included across the curriculum, such as requiring students to include client’s relational orientation when completing a case conceptualization. This prompting requires a student to question what a client’s relational orientation is, which may prompt an awareness of potential monogamism and mononormativity. Counselor educators could also train new professionals to be mentally flexible and to be self-aware of personal biases (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2012). Providing education and instruction inclusive of polyamorists to counselors-in-training and supervisees can prompt self-exploration and awareness of unconsidered bias. Students, trainees, and supervisees may require direct intervention to address monogamistic microaggressions in classes, during supervision, or in one-on-one situations, which a skilled counselor educator should be able to facilitate in a manner that promotes awareness and growth.

When considering pockets of ignorance participants experienced for vital identities, more general recommendations for education of counselors-in-training should be examined. Early and regular exposure to material such as the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies
(Ratts et al., 2016) might benefit this process, with a goal of further modeling how they might seek that information independently in the future. Creating assignments that would model seeking their own education of marginalized identities or niche communities could be a valuable means of creating those skills. Additionally, creating those assignments in such a way that would account for future of counselors-in-training where they will not have access to resources of a university library.

For in-practice counselors, continuing education is required to maintain counseling licensure; but, mental health professionals choose their continuing education based on cost and personal interests (Neimeyer et al., 2010). As such, it is possible a practicing counselor might never be exposed to polyamory or relational orientations other than monogamy until a client of such identity presents at their practice. First, impacts of cost on seeking continuing education could be addressed by offering continuing education on marginalized populations for free. These offerings could serve as advocacy for those populations to ensure minimum exposure and education for those in-practice counselors. Actively promoting information on marginalized populations to ensure greater awareness for in-practice counselors should be in the forefront of the minds of all counselor educators.

Second, counselor educators could choose to include relational orientation into collected and reported survey information in research as appropriate. A more general inclusion of this participant information can help to normalize reporting of such identities and can also help make visible the nature of mononormativity by requiring a declaration of monogamy by people who are monogamous. Such inclusions should begin mindfully because polyamory is a stigmatized identity (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Inclusion of relational orientation reporting will also increase the presence of relational orientations and polyamory in continuing education through report of
participant statistics. Broader inclusion of polyamory in research could increase the likelihood a practicing and licensed mental health professional would encounter this information in publications or continuing education before they would be in a position to do harm through ignorance as in the case of five participants of this study. Inclusion and illumination of polyamory and polyamorists could also serve as a form of advocacy for this stigmatized population (Toporek & Daniels, 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

There are many valuable future paths for research revealed in the process of completing this inquiry. This study shows a limited and ungeneralizable snapshot of experiences of polyamorists in North and Central Texas. A first line of further research might be to repeat this study in other regions of the country. I have experienced a difference in the presence of polyamory in different parts of the county, such as discovering a polyamory peer support group that had been meeting for at least the last decade in the Pacific Northwest; meanwhile, a friend in the Midwest reported they had been unable to find other polyamorists on their dating apps. These are anecdotal samples which could benefit from direct exploration through research. The prevalence and acceptance of polyamory in different geographic regions might impact client experiences in counseling. This supposition could be explored by repeating this research in different parts of the country, which could capture change over time and distinct experiences from different regions. This repeated research could also focus on capturing the experiences of BIPOC polyamorists who are present in the polyamorous community, but continue to be underrepresented in research (Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Another important detail that arose while completing this research was hearing from two different participants that they selected their counselor from people they had prior social
associations with, which could include risk for dual relationship concerns. Additionally, future research on how clients who hold a concealable minority identity that is stigmatized with perceived sexual deviancy, such as being a polyamorist, kinkster, or a furry, are finding supportive counselors who they believe will meet their needs without need to be educated. Having a better understanding of this process would help support minority populations in receiving quality services with clinicians who are educated and ready to provide informed support to clients by being better able to know what they may seek and how they seek those professionals.

Additionally, given the observed impacts of ignorance on participants of this research, future research could be done to examine how practicing mental health professionals are seeking education about populations they are unfamiliar with. Although I drew heavily from the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016), some practicing clinicians may not be aware of those competencies; I was not aware of the previous version (Arredondo et al., 1996) when I graduated from my master’s program. Although there is research on how mental health professionals seek out continuing education (Neimeyer et al., 2010), further exploration of how practicing counselors recognize, seek education, and support a minority population that had previously been unfamiliar to them would be illuminating.

Conclusion

Based on the literature and findings of this study, polyamorists are receiving counseling of mixed quality and are not being viewed as a multicultural population worthy of being supported as such by counselors and counselor education programs. Although this study did reveal how polyamorists are receiving effective counseling and how they are using the counseling space to explore how they would like to build relationships, participants also
encountered concerning ignorance. This ignorance was not only connected with their polyamory; but, it also was connected with other vital identities, highlighting a general failing to view multicultural identities with flexibility and appropriate action as outlined in the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts et al., 2016). Additional research to explore how practicing mental health professionals are seeking additional education and knowledge concerning populations that are unfamiliar to them is recommended based on these findings. To ensure support for people of stigmatized identities, like polyamory, counseling as a field needs to continue to strive for a more inclusive definition of multicultural identities. This level of inclusivity needs to accompany action and education about those populations to address biases and erroneous beliefs about those communities. Without this active support, clients will continue to fall through the cracks with ineffective or harmful counseling that will, in turn, cultivate community narratives that counseling is not intended to serve those who are most vulnerable.
APPENDIX E

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS
Researcher Recruitment Script

Hello. My name is Carly Stevens. I am a licensed professional counselor intern and a student at the University of North Texas (UNT). I am researching the counseling experiences of people who are polyamorous. My research focuses on adults over the age of 18 who self-identify as polyamorous and who have received counseling in the last 3 years or are currently receiving counseling. This study was approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB #17-356).

You may be selected to be interviewed about your experiences in counseling and your polyamorous identity. There is currently no research that explores the perspectives of polyamorous clients on their counseling experience. My intent is to amplify your voice so that mental health professionals might better understand the polyamorous identity and the experiences of polyamorists in counseling. I am hoping that you will share openly and honestly with me to help improve counseling practices as they relate to polyamorists. Any information you provide will be kept confidential and your name will be changed to protect your identity.

There will be three interviews and a final meeting as a part of this research. The first and second interviews will last approximately 60 minutes and will take place in a private setting to be coordinated for your comfort and ease of access, both in location and appointment time. Interview three and the final meeting will last no longer than 30 minutes and will also take place in the similar setting. The final meeting will include my sharing the findings of the study with you for your review in a format called a member check. If you complete the three interviews and final meeting, you will receive a $20 Target gift card.

I would like to you to read the Informed Consent and then complete an eligibility survey at this time. Reading the Informed Consent and completing the survey will take approximately 15 minutes.

(Participants had to select one of the following)
I am interested in participating.
I am not interested in participating.
Title of Study: The Counseling Experiences of Clients who are Polyamorous: A Phenomenology

Student Investigator: Carly Stevens, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Counseling and Higher Education

Supervising Researcher: Dr. Lisa Schulz, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Counseling and Higher Education

Purpose of the Study:
You are being asked to participate in a research study exploring adult (over 18 years of age) polyamorist experiences in counseling. The study will examine subjects including your experiences in counseling and your polyamorous identity.

Study Procedures:
If selected for this study, you will be asked to engage with this recruitment, informed consent, and eligibility material, and then to participate in three interviews and a final member check with Carly Stevens, the student investigator, to discuss your counseling experiences and your polyamorous identity.

The recruitment, informed consent, and eligibility material that you are engaging with will take approximately 15 minutes. You will also be asked a series of short questions through Qualtrics to verify your eligibility for the study. Eligibility will be determined by age, counseling experience, and a polyamorous identity. Participant selection may be additionally determined by diversity factors including but not limited to education and race. After eligibility is determined, you will be contacted to confirm your participation and to arrange your initial interview.

The first two interviews will take place in a private space determined by you and will take about 60 minutes of your time. During these interviews, Carly Stevens will ask you questions about your experiences in counseling and your polyamorous identity. The second interview will ask you to verify previous information and will ask for greater depth on subjects that emerge from the first interview. The third interview will last approximately 30 minutes to verify information provided in the first and second interviews. There will also be a 30-minute member check meeting after the interviews, at which time Carly Stevens will present the findings of the study for your review. Participants should expect a 1- to 4-week time period between interviews and a maximum of 3 months between the final interview and the member check meeting.

Interviews will be audio-recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by research team members. The transcription will be completed by Rev. Audio recordings and transcribed data will be kept...
confidential and your identity will be protected at all times. Upon completion of research, interview recordings and transcribed data will be stored for 3 years and then destroyed.

**Foreseeable Risks:**
The potential risks involved in this study are the risk that discussing personal information related to your polyamory or your counseling experiences may bring up emotional content undesired by you. If this occurs, I am able to provide counseling referrals to address these emotions including but not limited to the Counseling and Human Development Center in Denton, TX 76201, (XXX) XXX-XXXX, open Monday-Thursday from 10am to 7pm. For 24-hour emergency support, please use National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or XXX.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:**
This study is not expected to be of any direct benefit to you, but we hope to learn more about the counseling experiences of adults who are polyamorous, as this has not been researched. The study may benefit the field of counseling by providing educational information to counselors and counselor educators enabling counselors to better meet the needs of clients who are polyamorous.

**Compensation for Participants:**
You will receive one Target $20.00 gift card upon completion of the three interviews and final member check as compensation for your participation.

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:**
The confidentiality of your individual information will be maintained in any publications or presentations about this study. The investigators will ensure confidentiality and protect your identity by removing any identifying information from what you choose to share during the interview. No names will be attached to resulting documents or research notes, and identifying information will be maintained in a locked location. The participate with create a pseudonym to be used by the research team and the study. This pseudonym is subject to review and change by the research team to ensure anonymity. The student investigator will obtain permission from you before sharing any quotations in study results.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study including questions about this Informed Consent, you may contact Carly Stevens at XXXXX@XXXXX.XXX or Dr. Lisa Schulz at XXXXX@XXXXX.XXX.

**Review for the Protection of Participants:** This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-4643 with any questions about the rights of research subjects.

**Research Participants’ Rights:**
Selecting accept indicates you have read all of the information and you confirm all of the following:
- You have been told the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study and that you have received answers from Carly Stevens or Lisa Schulz about any question you may have related to the study.
• You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
• You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
• You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
• You will receive a copy of this form by email.

(Participants had to select one of the following)
Accept: I have read the above information and I wish to be considered for the study.
Decline: I do not wish to participate in the study
Eligibility Survey

1) What is your age? Fill in the blank
2) Do you identify as polyamorous?
   Yes
   No
3) Are you currently in counseling?
   • Yes: If yes then skip to question 5.
   • No
4) Have you been in counseling in the last 3 years?
   • Yes
   • No
5) What is/was your counselor’s license?
   • LPC, including LPC-Intern and LPC-S
   • LMFT, including LMFT Associate or LMFT S
   • LCSW or LMSW
   • Clinical Psychologist
   • Unsure
   • Other: Fill in the blank
6) What is your highest level of education?
   • Some high school, no diploma
   • High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
   • Some college credit, no degree
   • Trade/technical/vocational training
   • Associate degree
   • Bachelor’s degree
   • Some graduate school, no degree
   • Master’s degree
   • Doctorate degree
7) What is your yearly income? Approximation is acceptable. Fill in the blank
8) What is your Race and/or Ethnicity? Fill in the blank
9) What is your gender? Fill in the blank
10) What pronouns do you use?
    • She/Her
    • He/Him
    • They/Them
    • Other: Fill in the blank
11) Name: Fill in the blank
12) Email: Fill in the blank
13) Phone Number: Fill in the blank
14) Best means for communication: Fill in the blank
15) If you are selected to participate in this study, you will be referred to under a pseudonym to protect your confidentiality. Please select a first and last name for a pseudonym. This can be changed if you should wish. Fill in the blank
16) Please leave any additional information that you believe is important at this time. If none, please leave blank. *Fill in the blank*

17) You will receive an email in 48 hours that confirms completion of this survey and contains a copy of the informed consent you agreed to. If you have any additional questions before then, please email me at CarlyStevens@my.unt.edu.

Please hit next to complete the survey.
Interview and Final Member Check Protocols

Initial Interview:

Thank you for your time today. As stated in the informed consent, this interview today will take approximately 60 minutes. I will be asking questions about your polyamory and your counseling experience. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. How did you come to identify as polyamorous?
2. Did you ever share how you came to identify as polyamorous with your counselor?
3. What brought you to counseling initially?
4. Describe your counseling experience.
5. What did you most appreciate about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory, if anything?
6. What would you choose to change about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory, if anything?

That concludes our interview for today. You should be hearing from me in 2 weeks at which time, I will schedule our second interview. Do you have any questions for me?

Second Interview:

Thank you for your time today. As stated in the informed consent, this interview today will take approximately 60 minutes. I will be asking questions about your polyamory and your counseling experience and follow up questions derived from the initial interview. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. Have you had any thoughts about our last interview that you would like to share with me?
2. What new or additional thoughts do you have about your polyamorous identity?
3. What new or additional thoughts do you have about the experience of sharing your polyamory with your counselor?
4. What new or additional thoughts do you have about what brought you to counseling?
5. What new or additional thoughts do you have about your counseling experience?
6. What new or additional thoughts do you have about what you most appreciated about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory?
7. What new or additional thoughts do you have about what you would change about your counselor’s approach to your polyamory?
8. What would you have wanted your counselor to know about polyamory before you started your counseling?

That concludes our interview for today. You should be hearing from me in 2 weeks at which time, I will schedule our third interview. Do you have any questions for me?
Third Interview:

Thank you for your time today. As stated in the informed consent, this interview today will take approximately 30 minutes. I will be asking questions about your polyamory and your counseling experience and follow up questions derived from the two previous interviews. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

1. Have you had any thoughts about our interviews that you would like to share with me?
2. What new or additional thoughts do you have about your polyamorous identity?
3. What new or additional thoughts do you have about the experience of sharing your polyamory with your counselor?
4. What new or additional thoughts do you have about your counseling experience?
5. What new or additional thoughts do you have about what you would have wanted your counselor to know about polyamory before you started your counseling?

That concludes the interview process. You should be hearing from me in the next 3 months at which time, I will schedule a member check, the final meeting where I will review the findings of the study with you. Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Member Check:
Thank you for your time today. As stated in the informed consent, this member check will take approximately 30 minutes. I will be reporting the findings of the study to you today. I would like to receive your feedback and reactions to the findings as a part of this process. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

(Report Findings)

This concludes the member check. Thank you so much for your participation in this process. Please know that if you have any additional thoughts or reactions you can reach me at XXXXX@XXXXX.XXX.

(I will provide the $20.00 Target Gift Card at this time.)
Recruitment Flyer

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

The UNT Department of Counseling and Higher Education is Conducting a Research Study on

The Counseling Experiences of Clients who are Polyamorous

In North and Central Texas

If you are over 18 years old, have been in counseling in the last 3 years, and identify as Polyamorous, you may be eligible to participate in a research study examining the lived counseling experiences of polyamorists eligible subjects will participate in a survey, 3 interviews and a member check, for a total of 3.5 hours.

Completing participants will receive a $20 Target Giftcard.

Supervising Investigator: Dr. Lisa Schulz

Student Investigator: Carly Stevens, MA

For more information, please go to http://tinyurl.com/XXXXX
COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE LIST


Ritchie, A., & Barker, M. (2006). ‘There aren’t words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up’: Constructing polyamorous languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy. *Sexualities, 9*(5), 584–601. https://doi.org/cc9m2h


