# The Everyday Oppression of Polyamorous People: Microaggressions, Minority Stress, and Stigma

## Ryan G. Witherspoon, M.A.

www.RyanWitherspoon.com

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# The Plan

- 3 Main Points:
  - Polyamory is a subordinated and stigmatized sexual minority group.

  - Stigma and social stress can have significant negative consequences.

  - More attention needs to be paid to the effects of social stress on poly populations.

# Poly Research Thus Far

- Primarily qualitative.

- Mostly descriptive.

- Focused on combating negative stereotypes.

- Refuting assertions of pathology.

- Comparisons to monogamy & infidelity.

- Asserting moral parity with monogamy.

# Problem #1

- Ignoring the social *context* of being poly.

- Dominance of monogamy in Western culture subordinates polyamory.
    - eg: Monogamism, mononormativity.

- Cultural imperialism as a "face" of oppression. (Young, 2013)

# Cultural Imperialism

- "The universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (Young, 2013, p. 42).

- Subordinated group treated as invisible while simultaneously stereotyped, inferiorized.
  - Internalized oppression? (eg: internalized homophobia)

- Subordinated group defined as "Other," contrasted with dom. group. Differences explained by stereotypes.

- Dominant group's ideologies pervasive & rarely examined – implicit assumption of normality (Pratto & Stewart, 2012).

# Cultural Imperialism and Poly

- Monogamism influences convo about poly:
  - Polys must refute monogamist stereotypes.
  - Ideologies, assumptions of monogamy reified and rarely questioned.
  - Polyamory inferiorized by being negatively contrasted with monogamy.
  - Privileged position of monogamy uncontested.
- Mononormativity influences poly expression:
  - Dyadic-containment (Finn & Malson, 2008).

# The Other Problem:

- Lip service paid to stigma, discrimination, etc of poly people – but little investigation.

- But....polyamorous people *are* stigmatized.
  - 43% of a large poly sample experienced negative bias or prejudice against poly (Weber, 2002).
  - Poly families face sig. prejudice risks (Sheff, 2014).
  - Therapists often biased or ignorant (Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2012; Witherspoon & Wilson, 2013)
  - Pervasive, strong stigma against CNM relationships found compared to monogamous ones, across broad social groups in a large sample (Conley et al., 2013).

# Stigma, Minority Stress, and Poly

- *"One's reputation, whether false or true, cannot be hammered, hammered, hammered into one's head without doing something to one's character."* (Gordon Allport)

- Research on minority stress within LGB populations can serve as inspiration.
  - LGB & poly experiences *not* analogues, but…
  - Both are *invisible* sexual minorities.

# The Role of Minority Stress

- **Minority Stress:** Excess stress which individuals from a stigmatized group are exposed to:
  - Conflict between the individual and their experience of society.
  - Components of minority stress:  (Meyer, 2003)
    - Experiencing prejudice events.
    - Expectations of rejection.
    - Hiding and concealing.
    - Internalization of negative societal attitudes.
    - Ameliorating coping processes.

# Assumptions about Minority Stress

- Minority Stress is:
  - **Unique** – Additive to general stressors.
  - **Chronic** – Related to relatively stable social and cultural structures.
  - **Socially Based** – Stems from social process, institutions, and structures beyond the individual.

  (Meyer, 2003)

# Stress and Identity

- Effects of minority stress influenced by:
  - **Prominence** of minority identity to person.
    - Greater salience of an aspect of identity = Greater impact of stressors that occur against that identity.
  - **Valence** of one's identity: Level of self-validation.
    - Susceptibility to internalized stigma/oppression.
  - **Integration** with other aspects of identity:
    - Racial/ethnic, gender, SES, etc.
    - How complex is person's identity structure?

# Stigma Consciousness

- Extent to which one expects to be stereotyped & stigmatized due to minority status (Pinel, 1999).
- Linked to higher psych. distress, depression, intimate partner violence (Berghe et al., 2010; Carvalho et al., 2011; Kelleher, 2009).
- Can lead to avoidance of opportunities to challenge/disprove stereotypes.
  - Do poly people do this?
  - May lead to perpetuation of unchallenged stereotypes.

# Stereotype Threat

- Fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group.
  - Concern centers on one's own behavior.
  - Can lead to cognitive interference.
    - Eg: African-American math students.
- Polys face this all the time!
  - How might stereotype threat affect poly behavior?
  - Stereotype threat exacerbated when we also feel we are "ambassadors" of our minority group.

# Internalized Stigma

- Cultural imperialism – Acceptance of dominant group status quo.
- Internalized stigma a major concern for LGBT people – linked with number of difficulties.
  - Relevance for poly people?  Does this happen?
- Prelim. evidence of CNM internalized stigma:
  -  Recent research found that CNM people ALSO rated monogamy & mono relationships higher on perceived positive relationship qualities.
- Could internalized stigma be a possible source of stress, tension within poly relationships?
  - eg: Constant questioning of poly identity and health.

# Coping with Minority Stress

- Minority Coping – "In-group" support.
  - Allows reappraisal & validation of identity.
  - Social reassurance and support are crucial!
  - Unfortunately, in-group vectors of stigma exist….

- Invisibility and "Passing"
  - Polys have thrived thus far primarily by ability to pass as monogamous when/where necessary.
  - Passing as an act of forced compliance.
    - Feeling of "selling out" to avoid punishments.
    - What are the costs of hiding one's poly identity?
  - Growing visibility of poly will make this harder.

# Microaggressions

- Expressions of bias or discrimination communicated via subtle or seemingly innocuous words or actions.

- May be communicated via looks, gestures, expressions, comments, vocal tones, etc.

- *Covertly* attacks a person's self-esteem, leaving feelings of discomfort and confusion.

- Microaggressions found to reduce self-esteem, generate feelings of anger, sadness, shame.

- When perceived by clients from therapists, predicts weaker therapeutic alliance → poorer tx outcomes.

# Types of Microaggressions

Microassaults
- Conscious, purposefully discriminatory or derogatory.
- e.g. Name-calling, deliberate avoidance, discrimination.

Microinsults
- Subtle communications that convey insensitivity.
- Often unconscious, verbal or non-verbal bx.
- e.g. Snubs, facial expressions, off-color comments.

Microinvalidations
- Excludes or invalidates person's feelings, experience.
- Nullifies/dismisses person's subjective sense of reality.
- Sometimes considered most harmful microaggression.

# Microaggressions & Polyamory*

| Theme | Example |
|---|---|
| Assumption of pathology | *Conflation of poly w/ sex addiction.* |
| Avoidance/minimization of polyamory | *Constant redirection of convo. away from other partners/poly.* |
| Attempts to over-identify with poly people/clients | *Inappropriate therapist self-disclosure.* |
| Stereotypical assumptions | *All about sex ? (hypersexualization)* |
| Assuming poly is the cause of presenting issues/problems | *Assumption that poly indicates a weak/failing primary relationship.* |
| Expressing sexuality-related biases | *Assumption of monogamy.  Poly = easy, more STIs, etc.* |
| Failure to do independent research/consultation | *Expectations that ppl. can ask you probing questions about sex life!* |

*Adapted from Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2012*

# Effects of Microaggessions

- Linked to a number of harmful effects:
  - Lower self-esteem, increased negative self-perception.
  - Decreased subjective well-being, life satisfaction.
  - More health-related problems.
  - Enhanced difficulty reconciling sexual identity.
  - Mental (eg: cognitive) and emotional exhaustion.
  - Generate feelings of anger, sadness, shame.
  - Therapist microaggressions against clients linked to weaker therapeutic alliance, higher attrition, poorer treatment outcomes.

(cf: Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2012; Sue, 2010)

# Coping with Microaggressions

- Reducing ambiguity of experiences by learning about microaggressions.
- Social support, validation, reassurance.
  - Positive minority group identification.
- Preparation & practice in dealing with microaggressions.
  - eg: Planning in advance how to respond to common microaggressions.
- Self-care and validation-seeking, esp. in response to microinvalidations.

(Sue, 2010)

# Let's Review

- We've talked about:
  - Cultural imperialism of monogamy.
  - Stigmatization of polyamory.
  - Minority stress.
  - Stigma consciousness.
  - Stereotype threat.
  - Internalized stigma.
  - Microaggressions.

# Remember….

- 3 Main Points:
  - Polyamory is a subordinated and stigmatized sexual minority group.

  - Stigma and social stress can have significant negative consequences.

  - More attention needs to be paid to the effects of social stress on poly populations.

# Where do we go from here?

- Recognize cultural oppression of polyamory/CNM.

  - Do our domains of privilege invalidate our oppression?

- Manage and counter stigma (Sheff, 2014):

  - Honesty: Demonstrate self-acceptance.

  - Rejection of stigma: Knowing & refuting stereotypes.

  - Normalization of poly: Compare advantages/disadvantages with monogamy.

  - Shift stigma with patience, education, empathy.

- Empower yourself with education.

  - Language & concepts to speak about our experiences.

  - Be able to *name* the offenses, understand our oppression.

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