

## The Reluctant Polyamorist: Conducting Auto- Ethnographic Research in a Sexualized Setting

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It is 3:00 a.m. I am lying half naked on a sea of cushions on my living room floor. "Rick," my partner with whom I have been madly in love for 10 years, is lounging beside me wearing nothing but his boxers. There is some soft-core "chick porn" on the television, and we are sharing a bottle of wine. Our kids are asleep in their bedrooms. It is the first time we have spent more than 20 minutes awake and alone together in at least 10 days, maybe more. We kiss, enjoying the relaxing moment.

I hear a sound and, grabbing my shirt, turn as the door opens. Our good friend "Dylan" enters the front door. She has recently split up with her husband and has a key to our house for those nights when she is couch surfing. We are used to her coming in late at night, but we have never been in this position when she entered before. I blush and say something inane.

"Oh, I've seen this one before. It's a good one," Dylan says, settling on the pillow beside me. "Hey guys, what's up?" she asks, smiling, and then guffaws, "This part is so stupid—like anyone would ever really do that!" We sit and watch the movie for a while, our cuddling becoming steadily more sensual. It is not, however, going the way it had in my fantasy of this moment, this event. Instead of captivating and erotic, it feels awkward and uncomfortable to me. I begin to develop a stomachache. A few minutes later I realize I need to pee, rise from the pillow pile and head to the bathroom, feeling distinctly queasy. I muse to myself, "Teaching that class tonight just wore me out. Makes sense, though. I've been up since yesterday at 7:00 a.m. and the baby woke me up twice last night. No wonder I'm exhausted."

I return to the living room to find the two of them on the pillows, heads turned towards me, smiling. "I'm bushed, you guys. I think I'm just gonna go to bed. Goodnight," I say, blowing them a kiss and heading into the bedroom I share with Rick. A few moments later, Rick enters the room. "Are you okay, honey? What's up?" he asks, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I'm just wiped out, babe, I just want to go to sleep. Everything's fine. I'm really okay with this," I say. "I'm not so sure that this is a good idea," Rick says, frowning. "I think I'll just tell Dylan we're going to sleep and she can have her usual couch." I respond "No, honey. I'm really fine with this. Go ahead."

We chat for a few minutes, Rick asking me several more times if I am sure that this is okay with me. I am certain, at least, that it is time to try it. We have been moving at a glacial speed towards a polyamorous relationship for 10 years now, and neither of us has ever before come *even close* to actually having sex with someone else. I am tired of hanging on the verge for so long and ready for something, anything, to happen. At least I think I am, I hope I am. I want to be, that is for sure. We had always imagined that it would be both of us together with the same woman, but suddenly that does not seem as appealing as it did before. "I am sure about this, honey." I tell Rick, "Get out there and have sex with Dylan!" He hesitates for a second, and then says "Okay, if you're sure that you're sure," and, kissing me, rises to go. "Do we have any more condoms?" he asks. "This one is expired." "Under the bathroom sink, next to the tampons," I reply. He says "Thanks, babe," and leaves the room.

idea. I felt hurt that he wanted additional lovers, fearing that it meant that he saw me as too fat or insufficiently skilled as a lover. Rick's attempts to comfort me offered some small solace, especially his assertion that he had always been non-monogamous and his desire for other lovers was not specific to his relationship with me.

Rick and I discussed opening our relationship to another woman regularly for several years. As the marathon conversation wore on, I began to place greater stock in his assurances that he was completely committed to me. I also found Rick's arguments in favor of polyamory increasingly compelling. While I was not eager to try multiple-partner relating, I sincerely wished to remain in my relationship with Rick, and this topic was clearly of great import to him.

One bleak winter evening during my second semester of graduate school, I heard two people interviewed on National Public Radio. They were discussing their practice of polyamory, the exact sort of relationship Rick had been advocating. An Internet search revealed that the radio interviewees hosted support groups and informational meetings in my local area. Rick and I attended several large group meetings and potluck picnics, and I became increasingly interested in these friendly, open-minded people and their unconventional lifestyles. They appeared nonjudgmental of my hesitation to engage in polyamorous relationships, and I discovered that I had many other areas of mutual interest with them.

During this early phase, Rick and I primarily attended sporadic organized polyamorous events and began slowly to socialize occasionally with local polyamorists. About once a month, Rick and I would attend a polyamorous event, such as an informational community meeting in the library, a support group, or a potluck party. I began to understand how these relationships worked for some people, and conversations with Rick took on a completely new tone of possibility now that we had role models actually practicing multiple-partner relationships. My social role in the setting had become one of friend/seeker, someone who

sought to explore polyamory in order to decide whether to participate. Our sporadic attendance at polyamorous functions and socializing with local polyamorists went on for roughly a year prior to my transition to an active research role.

### *The Shift into Active Research*

The more time I spent with the polyamorists, the more I liked them. As I became more familiar with setting members, I recognized the potential for sociological analysis of this previously unexamined group. About a year and a half after my introduction to the local polyamorous community, I took a graduate ethnography course and chose the polyamorists as a subject, embarking on "opportunistic" research (Riemer 1977) that was later to become "auto-ethnographic" (Hayano 1979).

My initial role of friend/seeker easily expanded to include a research component. Setting members were comfortable with me because they already knew that I was a graduate student. They willingly participated in the research, explaining concepts and allowing me to ask questions during support group meetings. I frequently asked openly research-oriented questions, though I initially refrained from taking notes in front of setting members. I became increasingly close with several local polyamorists, whom I found like-minded and friendly. At this point, I began to attend the monthly meeting for polyamorous women.

The transition from civilian to researcher was sometimes challenging; occasionally I felt uncomfortable in groups, knowing that I would later take notes on the interactions and that some group members might have been unaware of my status as a researcher. Fox felt similar discomfort when she felt compelled to "tread a line between overt and covert roles" in her investigation of a punk social scene (1987: 341; see also Adler 1985; Henslin 1972). Although I enjoyed socializing with polyamorists, I remained "acutely aware of differences between members and [myself]"

of people with whom I was able to speak when I traveled to the California Bay Area to collect data. Thus, my sample was composed almost exclusively of a specific class of people who could afford home computers and Internet access, and had the leisure time to interact with others via email, peruse polyamorist websites, or attend weekend conferences. While this email method of recruitment gave me access to a wider range of people than I would otherwise have had, they were mostly the same *type* of person, namely those who own and are comfortable using computers. These people tended to be overwhelmingly white, middle- or upper-middle class, and university educated. This issue could be mitigated, however, since this population appeared to compose the vast majority of members of the communities that I studied. Nonetheless, I fear that I was unable to access marginal polyamorists, especially those without computer access.

A final difficulty involved my Human Subjects Committee (a board that approves and monitors research involving human subjects) agreement. I was prohibited from speaking with anyone younger than eighteen years of age. Thus, this research reflects the view of parents involved in polyamorous relationships, but the views of the children are largely absent. Some parents did report on their children's feelings and thoughts, but this second-hand reporting is obviously incomplete.

### *Comparison with Other Types of Sex Research*

My discomfort with being viewed as a potential sexual partner mirrored that of other researchers who have examined sexual minorities and similarly reported difficulties navigating settings with "considerable sexual tension and display" (Warren and Rasmussen 1977: 25). Golde (1970: 6) observed that women in field research settings tend to be perceived as sexually provocative, especially when they are unmarried. My long-term partnership was the equivalent of quasi-marriage, but

conferred no "protection" (Warren and Rasmussen 1977) on me in this multiple-partner setting.

My ongoing concern with protecting my partners' and my own privacy is also a common theme among ethnographers, especially those who engage in participant observation with sexual minorities or members of other "deviant" groups. Fine (1993: 380) acknowledges this tension between disclosure and privacy, explaining that "the question is whether we can preserve our privacy while we reveal the impact and relevance of our behavior, both public and private." This question was especially salient for me as I discussed my personal involvement in the setting, and I asked Rick to read the introduction to this article before I decided to submit it.

In establishing a romantic relationship with one of my respondents, I joined the dubious and often covert ranks of ethnographic researchers who have romantic or sexual relationships in the field. Some obscure this fact and it emerges only posthumously (e.g., Malinowski 1967). Others mention it briefly but accord it little analysis (e.g., Turnbull 1986). Another segment discusses it as an integral component of their research (e.g., Irwin 2003). A minority make sexual interaction in the field the focal point of their ethnography (e.g., Ronai and Ellis 1989). The majority of researchers who discuss sexuality in the field, however, tend to focus on their experiences of sexual harassment rather than their own sexual relationships (e.g., Conway 1986).

There is undoubtedly a large contingent of researchers who engage in romantic or sexual relationships in their field settings and refrain from mentioning it at all because sexual contact stigmatizes academics, especially women academics (Whitehead and Price 1986: 302). These relationships may offer some redemptive value, however, as Goffman's (1989: 129) observation indicated (with a heterocentrism characteristic of his generation), a researcher knows she or he is incorporated into the research setting when "the members of the opposite sex [in the setting] become attractive to you."

ostensibly composed of two couples was so common. She said she was:

Focused on my mom's birthday. You know, I did not feel a need to make a statement about 'We are here together' or something like that. And I could not believe it, she was up on stage thanking everyone for coming and she called us all up and she said 'I want to introduce you to my children' and that was it. Everyone knows that me and my sister are her only *biological* children, so some of them had no idea what she was talking about. But now we were all her kids and that was that! I was really touched; for her to do that meant a lot to me.

Polyamorous parents also deal with decisions around coming out to their children and the potential impact of that revelation. For instance, polyamory could affect child custody if an ex-spouse finds out and raises the issue in court. Again paralleling people in same sex relationships, some polyamorists have lost custody of their children because of their involvement in multiple partner sexual relationships.

Many polyamorists see multiple parents as a great benefit to both the children and other parents as well. One respondent observed that:

There's more attention for the kids. I really think it takes five adults to have one child, and I say that without any kind of humor. It takes five adults and one of those adults is just around to take care of mom. Anyway, it's big time stuff and our culture treats monogamy and heterosexual relationships as the only way to be. And lesbian and gay people who are fighting for the right to marry and I'm looking at them going I just don't get it. It takes more [people] than that!

Others felt greater difficulty parenting in polyamorous relationships than they did or imagined they would in monogamous partnerships. For instance, one respondent related a story in which her son, upset by the departure of his mother's boyfriend, lamented, "I know he is breaking up with you, but why does he have to break up with me too?"

Polyamory is a challenging and complex relational style, and researching this community of

sexual minorities was difficult and complex as well. My ethnographic experience changed my life and forced me to confront my own deeply-held views and insecurities. While I no longer identify as polyamorous and feel considerable reluctance to try multiple-partner relating again, I see polyamory as a legitimate relational style that gives some people the freedom to honestly have multiple partners. Many of my respondents reported that becoming polyamorous had dramatically changed their lives for the better. Some even saw it as an innate sexual orientation against which they had struggled for years before "coming out" as polyamorous.

Similarly, many polyamorists felt the desire to redefine relational norms and roles to better fit their needs, though some found that real life did not work out the way the relationships did in their fantasies. Inclusion of polyamorous people enriches the spectrum of recognized relationship styles and augments sociological understanding of sexuality. Similarly, awareness of the polyamorous possibility may allow some people to conceive of new modes of relationship previously unimagined. It is this proliferation of choice that could contribute to social change.

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