

Abstract This article explores polyamorous men's potential to both enlarge and reinforce the concept of hegemonic masculinity through their emotional expressions and management, as well as their sexual expressions and relationships. Polyamorous people openly engage in romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships with multiple people simultaneously. Polyamory differs from swinging with its emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships; and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to additional partners in polyamorous relationships, distinguishing them from polygynous ones. My ethnographic analysis expands sociological understandings of hegemonic masculinity by investigating this previously unexamined area of men's sexual and romantic interactions. Employing R.W. Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity, I analyze some of the ways in which the polyamorous men in my sample are complicit with, marginalized by, subordinate to, and resistant of hegemonic codes of masculinity. I thus expand Connell's configuration of hegemonic masculinity to include active defiance to its requirements and conclude that, to varied degrees, these poly men attempt to redefine their masculinities and resist the strictures of hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords hegemonic masculinity, masculinities, men, polyamory, sexuality

Elisabeth Sheff

Georgia State University

Poly-Hegemonic Masculinities

Polyamory, frequently termed simply 'poly'¹ by many practitioners, is a form of relationship in which people have multiple romantic, sexual, and/or affective partners. It differs from swinging with its emphasis on long-term, emotionally intimate relationships, and from adultery with its focus on honesty and (ideally) full disclosure of the network of sexual relationships to all who participate in or are affected by them. Both men and women have access to multiple partners in polyamorous relationships,

distinguishing it from polygyny. Outside of my research (Sheff, 2005, 2006) and that of the other contributors to this volume, very few scholars have examined polyamory. The scant previous scholarship (Rubin, 2001) mentions polyamorous relationships only in passing and provides no in-depth analysis of the gendered implications of participants' experiences.

Inflected by social characteristics such as race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and class, the men in my sample occupied varied positions in hierarchies of masculinities. Employing Connell's masculinity framework, I am able to attend to the 'multiplicity of situational[ly] specific masculinities' (2005: xx) enacted in the poly contexts. In this article I first detail the ways in which many of my male respondents expressed forms of complicit masculinity, some tinged with the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant US culture. Then, as sexual minorities and members of a subculture that highly valued women's (bi)sexuality, they struggled with the stigma and attendant diminished power associated with marginalized masculinities. Finally, as non-traditional men involved in an alternative form of sexual relationship, they were both subordinated to and defied hegemonic masculinity. I conclude that the majority of my male respondents ultimately resisted hegemonic strictures to a greater degree than they complied with them.

Literature review

Social theorists began to problematize masculinity in the mid-1980s, and in 1987 a wave of theorists (Brod, 1987; Connell, 1987; Kaufman, 1987; Kimmel, 1987) argued that, rather than being an essential and thus static trait, masculinity was instead socially constructed. Many placed special emphasis on interrogating the composition of hegemonic masculinity, as well as those who transgress its mandates (Anderson, 2002; Brod, 1987; Chen, 1999; Connell, 1987, 2005; Kimmel, 2004; Yip, 1997). Scholars such as Luke (1998) and Malin (2003) analyzed previously unquestioned white male heterosexuality, a primary referent of hegemonic masculinity, and others scrutinized queer masculine heterosexualities that 'disrupt homophobia and heteronormativity' (Heasley, 2005: 320; see also Smith, 2000). A larger contingent investigated male homosexualities (Anderson, 2002; Chen, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001; Yip, 1997), some of which both resist and reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Yeung et al., 2006).

In this article I utilize Connell's (2005) framework of multiple masculinities to analyze poly men's emotional and sexual interactions. Connell partitions masculinities into hegemonic, marginalized, and subordinate components. He defines hegemonic masculinity as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken

to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (2005: 77). Versions of hegemonic masculinity are constructed in relation to subordinate and/or marginalized men and women, though these categories 'name not fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure' (Connell, 2005: 81). Hegemonic masculinity is thus a dynamic power structure that attempts to legitimize patriarchal relations, ensure the cultural authority of specific forms of masculinity, and guarantee the subordination of women.

Connell termed marginal masculinities as those that are 'relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group' (2005: 80–1, italics in original). Various masculinities are marginalized by their interactions with other social structures such as race, class, sexualities, gender performance and the forms of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) embodied or expressed by men who fail to fit or reject the narrow confines of hegemonic masculinity. People of color and/or those who are working class, gay, or womanly are denied the sexual, emotional, and personal privileges granted hegemonically masculine men.

In contrast, subordinate masculinities 'relate to cultural dominance in the society as a whole' that valorizes a narrow version of hegemony based on heterosexuality and male dominance (Connell, 2005: 78). Although the connection of authority with masculinity sustains gendered power structures, the 'denial of authority to some groups of men, or more generally the construction of hierarchies of authority and centrality within the major gender categories' complicates and contradicts masculine dominance (Connell, 2005: 109). In the USA, the continued prevalence of racism, gay bashing, increasing economic inequity and the vastly disproportionate representation of white people in positions of governmental and cultural power attest to the subordination of men (and women) who have been 'symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 2005: 78). This marginalization and subordination of specific masculinities maintains and reinforces the dominance of hegemonic masculinity.

Because many of my male respondents consciously refused to comply with the mandates of hegemonic masculinity, I extend Connell's framework of masculinities to include resistance to these strictures. While numerous respondents reaped the benefits of their complicity with hegemonic masculinity, their collusion was undermined by their introspection and active refusal to sustain hegemonic conventions. Thus far, polyamorous men have been absent from the increasingly diversified discussion of hegemonic masculinity and men's broader gendered social interactions. With an examination of poly masculinities, this research begins to address that gap in literature.

Methods

This article is part of a larger project based on participant observation, content analysis, internet research, and in-depth interviews I conducted in the western USA over a seven-year period (1996 to 2003). Originally I approached the group not as a researcher, but rather to investigate the potential impact of polyamory on my own relationship. My partner introduced the idea of engaging in a relationship with another woman shortly after we met in 1993. Initially I was quite resistant to the idea but eventually became more comfortable with it and began to seriously consider a polyamorous relationship. During data collection I attended monthly women's and coed support group meetings and two national poly conferences, as well as socializing at poly parties, potlucks, picnics, camp-outs, and movie nights. My partner and I ultimately attempted a poly relationship that ended in disaster.² While I no longer identify as poly, I continue to view it as a valid relational choice for others.

Reflecting mainstream poly communities in the western USA, the majority of my respondents were in their 30s to late 50s, middle or upper middle class, college educated, overwhelmingly white,³ and frequently employed as professionals in computer or counseling/therapy fields and thus enjoyed a host of social privileges. Male respondents also had gender privilege, and the majority had heterosexual privilege as well. The rarity of people of color in my sample could have a number of explanations. It may reflect the relatively higher rates of stigma and resultant lower rates of reported non-normative sexual behaviors among African Americans and other people of color (e.g. Boykin, 1996, 2005; Laumann et al., 1994) or experiences of racism and/or racist structural biases in research conducted solely by white people (e.g. Andersen, 1999; Phoenix, 1994). These issues are most likely complicated by the racism in the broader US culture that discourages people of color from joining groups populated primarily with white people and dissuades white people from seeking people of color as friends or romantic partners.

Data in this article come primarily from the 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (20 with men and 20 with women) I conducted between 1998 and 2002.⁴ Employing inductive data gathering methods (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) and constant comparative methods (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I analyzed interview and field data and adjusted analytical categories to fit emergent theoretical concepts. Once theoretical concepts emerged, I constructed clusters of participants' experiences to further develop my theories. Subsequent interviews and field observation allowed me to verify the validity of these theories, as well as to evaluate boundaries and variations of common themes (Glassner and Hertz, 1999).

Poly-hegemony

My analysis indicates that the men in my sample constructed multiple, and often incongruous, relationships with and expressions of their masculinities. As a group of largely white, well-educated, primarily heterosexual, middle- and upper middle-class men in a patriarchal society, they benefited from the extensive privileges associated with their positions in social hierarchies and sometimes engaged in or embodied what I term *poly-hegemonic masculinity*.

I define *poly-hegemonic masculinity* as the idealized form of masculinity valorized by the communities I studied. This poly-hegemonic masculinity was ‘constructed in ways that realize[d] the patriarchal dividend without the tensions of the risks of being on the front line troops of the patriarchy’, what Connell terms *complicit masculinity* (2005: 79). The majority of the men in my sample occupied conventionally privileged positions in hierarchies based on race, class, sexual orientation, and gender. Others fit additional norms such as hypermasculinity, hypersexuality, and/or competitiveness (Anderson, 2002; Connell, 2005; Luke, 1998). Poly-hegemonic masculinity was reflected in these men’s sexualities and emotion management, both of which enlarged the codes of hegemonic masculinity found in dominant US culture. With their emphasis on emotional intimacy and multiplistic relationships with women who had other lovers, these men eschewed the most blatant forms of hegemonic masculinity and expressed a desire for gender and sexual equality.

Sexualities

While the rhetoric of the communities I studied actively promoted certain forms of multiple partner relationships, their actual practices indicated lingering reliance on or reproduction of traditional patterns of gendered interaction. Some of the men expressed aspects of hegemonic sexuality, such as a desire for sex with multiple women and hypersexuality. Few of my male respondents, however, successfully fulfilled the seemingly pervasive heterosexual male fantasy of having sex simultaneously with multiple women, the proverbial ‘Hot Bi Babe’ (HBB)⁵ scene depicted so frequently in pornography produced for heterosexual men (Jenefsky and Miller, 1998; Roof, 1991; Swedberg, 1989). Some of these men were in triadic sexual relationships with two women; others had sexual encounters with bisexual women and were occasionally joined by the women’s female lovers.

This arrangement of triadic sex between one (heterosexual) man and two (bisexual) women was the most popular relationship form sought by the poly men who attended support groups, frequented online chat rooms and discussion boards, and wrote personal ads in polyamorous online or print publications. Although most of these men did not have regular

access to simultaneous sex with multiple women, enough of them were able to occasionally fulfill that fantasy to keep the hope of its occurrence alive for others. This popular desire encoded hypersexuality in the idealized, iconic triadic relationship, and served as a distinguishing feature of poly-hegemonic masculinity among these poly men.

This seemingly ubiquitous fantasy may enrich these poly men's senses of masculinity with the notions that they can either 'please' many women, or that a substantial cadre of women could become enamored with them. Jenefsky and Miller (1998: 384) discussed this desire for sexual contact with two women and concluded that 'Two-for-the-price-of-one yields greater than a double victory: the phallus is wanted by not just one woman, but two (or more); not only do these women desire it, but they desire it despite their knowledge of, and access to, other options.' In a polyamorous context, these 'options' include not only other women, but men as well. Attaining the coveted role as the phallic center of sexual attention among multiple women endows the heterosexual man with definitive evidence of his desirability. This value is accorded not only by the multiple women, but in contrast to other men who are unable to garner as much attention, thus demonstrating the man involved in the triad's mastery over (hetero)sexuality. While the women are bisexual, their triadic sexual interaction is encoded as heterosexual through the iconic, hegemonic sexual narrative projected onto female-female-male sex. Thus the man in a sexual encounter with two or more women attains, at least symbolically and possibly in reality, both his ultimate fantasy of sexual satisfaction and supreme proof of his sexual prowess.

Certain poly men were accomplished at establishing relationships with multiple (usually female) partners. Chad, one such sexually successful white man in his late 40s, attended a poly camp-out with two women, Kristi and Rebecca. Adrienne, his third lover, did not attend, because she and Chad had recently broken up. According to Chad, 'She did not get along well with the other two.' He did some 'relational arithmetic' and decided, 'Lets see, one on this side having a hard time with the other two on this side – one or two? I'll take the two over the one anytime!' Dissolving his relationship with Adrienne required Chad to move out of her house, and in with Rebecca. His quasi-parental role with Adrienne's adolescent son was also disrupted.

Chad's success at establishing relationships with multiple women appeared to work well for him in this instance. He moved from one woman's house to another, and showed little emotion as he discussed his transition. I wondered if Adrienne and her son were as sanguine regarding his departure as he appeared to be. Chad's success at developing multiple sexual relationships appeared to entail concerted effort and inconvenience for all. This inconvenience might have been greatest for Adrienne, a

reflection of the hegemonic masculine tendency to structure relationships in a manner that, above all, benefits men (Kimmel, 2004; Connell, 1987).

Emotion work

Hochschild (1983: 7), a pioneer in the sociology of emotions, defined *emotion work* as the labor required to ‘induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ and concluded that it is primarily the domain of women. Because polyamory is such an intensely emotional form of interaction, these poly men had to negotiate emotionality on a regular basis. While many men accomplished this arduous task with aplomb, poly-hegemonic men frequently managed their emotions and emotional interactions with fumbling and trepidation. This was evident in their avoidance of emotion work, emotional ineptitude, and power disparities in intimate relationships.

Scheduling Many poly relationships required rigorous scheduling; a task that sometimes became an almost full time job for large or especially complex groups. Morgan, a 29-year-old white accountant and mother of one, acted as scheduler for her moresome,⁶ comprised of her husband Carl, her boyfriend Josh, Josh’s wife Jessica, Carl’s girlfriend Vicky, and Carl and Morgan’s daughter Heather:

I’m a flexible person, but I also feel if you’re gonna have this kind of lifestyle, you do have to have a schedule . . . Like over the weekend we were driving home from the picnic, Heather, Carl, Vicky and me. I’m saying ok, I want to spend the night with Josh and then Josh will come over to our house on Saturday night because Carl and I are going away to Santa Fe for the Memorial Day weekend, so I thought it would be nice if I could spend more time with Josh before we left, and Carl could be with Vicky. And they all agreed . . . Sometimes it feels like a burden, but I think it works out.

While Morgan reported she just, ‘kinda got the job, I don’t know’, acting as central scheduler for such a complex familial grouping took a tremendous amount of her time and ‘sometimes it feels like a burden’. Although men acted as schedulers in a minority of respondents’ relationships, it was primarily the women who accomplished that task. Because emotion work such as scheduling has generally been a gendered task (Duncombe and Marsden, 1995; Hochschild, 1983), it is no surprise that managing the calendar for the complex webs of relationships most often fell to women.

This gendered division of labor had mixed consequences for poly relationships. On the one hand, the ability to shape partners’ schedules was a source of power for those women who could arrange times and dates for others that best suited their own needs. On the other, this power was

unstable, since it existed at groups' discretion and could be revoked or reassigned at members' whims. Such an erratic and generally female source of power was not a true rival for men's average greater economic and social cache in a patriarchal culture. Although the majority of my interviewees reported cultivating egalitarian relationships, many imported some of those same gendered power relations into their own relationships.

Emotional ineptitude Probably the most traditionally gendered aspect of a minority of poly men was their emotional ineptitude. Male privilege excuses traditional males from emotion work while denying many of them the skills to navigate emotional intimacy. While most poly men relished the affective components of their relationships, some exhibited the hegemonic patterns of emotional avoidance and ineptitude. Alexander, a 39-year-old white machinist/mechanic and father of two, connected his hurt and confusion regarding the end of a relationship to his heterosexuality – a defining feature of hegemonic masculinity:

So actually it was the other person who called it quits and that was really confusing to me, because, being a typical hetero male, I can't really read people's emotions that well. I mean, you, you put me in an alley late at night and I could read the other guy's emotions real well, but you put me in a café with like six different women and I'm floundering. Put me in a café with *one* woman and I'm floundering [laughs].

While Alexander enjoyed the sexual freedom inherent in a polyamorous lifestyle, the quality and quantity of emotion work involved befuddled him. Even worse, he realized his ineptitude's negative impact on his complicated relationships and appeared unsure of how to respond more effectively.

Power disparities Victor, a 36-year-old African American artist and psychotherapist, acknowledged an emotional power imbalance in some of his relationships. Although he felt he was 'a fairly egalitarian person', and that the financial side of his relationships was 'pretty much fifty-fifty', when it came to an emotional balance of power he admitted:

I would say kind of a hard thing to say I know that for myself, one of my defenses in relationships if things are feeling overwhelming is to sort of distance myself so that, I've been in relationships where if they've gotten sort of neurotic where I was distancing and the person I was with was more of a, an advancer, um, so and that feels kind of, there's a . . . gender stereotype of men that's kind of shutting down emotionally and women going 'please tell me more' and um, so I mean that's, that's power plays.

Although Victor guarded himself emotionally by engaging in the hegemonic male 'power play' pattern of 'distancing', he mediated his complic-

ity with an introspection that allowed him to be alert to the phenomena and thus more self-reflective than the average hegemonic male.

Some men who easily relinquished the expectation of sexual fidelity with the women they loved encountered great difficulty facing a lack of emotional exclusivity. Emmanuella, a 43-year-old Chicana web designer and mother of two who had been poly for her entire adult life, related her concerns regarding her new lover, John.

I think that the sexual aspect of it entices John as it does many men, especially in that I'm bisexual. He has no qualms about me being sexual . . . He's not worried that I'm going to have sex with someone else. He's more worried that I'm going to go to the movies with somebody, fall in love and just not have enough for him. Love – he's very worried about love . . . So for him, sex is other. It is so far outside the realm of love that he can't seem to understand that they can be combined and that it can be separate.

John retained his equanimity in the face of Emmanuella's numerous sexual relationships by employing the hegemonic device of categorically separating sex from love or emotion, something traditionally masculine men are socialized to do. This type of composure was of little utility in dealing with the impacts of emotional risks inherent in multiplistic relationships. Poly-hegemonic men both adhered to and transgressed hegemonic masculine power norms by defying the mandate of controlling their partners' access to other partners while concurrently employing the hegemonic device of distinguishing between emotional involvement and sex.

Some of the men in my sample contrasted themselves with monogamous (or infidelitous) men and perceived those in openly multiplistic relationships to be more open, authentic, and egalitarian. However, a covert socio-biological narrative relying on essentialist views of dominance systems and the alpha males that command them (Wilson, 1975) underlay some of these claims of equity. Norman, a 39-year-old African American writer, commented that:

In monogamous relationships, all men get to be is territorial and jealous. In a poly relationship an alpha male can willingly allow someone else in and compromise, the dominance is not as strong, so at least they can pretend it is okay. [Laughs.]

While this greater flexibility allowed men more latitude in relationships than did hegemonic masculinity, the 'alpha male' tended to remain just that. He could 'willingly allow' others to share power, but Norman's comment indicated this sharing occurred at the alpha's discretion and was thus revocable. Even so, their willingness to divide dominance with other men indicated a complicity that undermined their full participation in hegemony. Many poly-hegemonic men paradoxically sought egalitarian relationships and simultaneously retained traditional gender roles.

Even those who reported an egalitarian relationship with their lovers could find themselves embroiled in emotional competitions with other men. Carl, a 37-year-old white landscape architect and father of one, expressed mixed feelings regarding Josh, his wife Morgan's lover:

Oh, I like him. I don't think we are ever going to be best friends. We just don't have that particular connection . . . He's good for Morgan and there's a little bit of competition there, I think from a male ego stand-point . . . There aren't a lot of rules in this society on how to deal with your wife's lover.

While Carl wished to engage in a poly community norm of openness to partners' lovers, he related his lingering feelings of competition with Morgan's lover to masculinity as 'a male ego stand-point', evincing his complicity with a hegemonic masculine perspective.

Although many men in my study devoted themselves to challenging gender inequality and sacrificing some hegemonic advantage, they consistently struggled with relinquishing power disparities and managing emotional difficulties. As a result, they were occasionally unsuccessful with the rigorous poly ideals to which they aspired, even while diminishing their traditional hegemonic power.

Marginalized poly masculinities

Many of my respondents experienced the disadvantages due to their marginalized status. Some of these men bore the brunt of homo and bi-phobia and viewed their traditionally masculine personas as a hindrance.

Homo and bi-phobia

In marked contrast to the perceived social value accorded bisexual women, some bisexual men reported fearing potential disapproval when considering disclosure of their sexual orientation. Men who engaged in sex with men raised the specter of homo or bi-phobia (Kimmel, 2004; Tucker, 1995), even among these polys that consistently reported being less homophobic than mainstream monogamous society. Sven, a 42-year-old white father of three and computer network manager, sought a bisexual man for seven years with whom he and his wife, Shelly, could form a triad (three-person erotically intimate relationship). Eventually Sven and Shelly established a triadic relationship with Jason, a 29-year-old white customer service specialist in a computer firm. Sven, however, remained cautious of identifying himself as bisexual to new members of his poly community:

When I meet someone new in the community or a new person attends the support group meeting I am always careful what I say at first until I can see what they are like. I don't want a negative reaction, so I use pronouns like 'they' and 'we' instead of saying 'he' when I am talking about me and Shelly and Jason, just in case.

Sven's caution was not shared by the majority of bisexual women who, far from concealing their bisexuality, enjoyed the highest social status in these communities.

Much like monogamous society and swinging subcultures (Gould, 1999; Jenks, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c, 1986), members of the communities I studied often viewed sex between women in a positive light, partially because of many men's desire to 'get in on it' (Jenefsky and Miller, 1998; Roof, 1991; Swedberg, 1989). This dynamic devalued bisexual men as it valorized and even fetishized⁷ bisexual women. The greater social acceptance of sex between women, stigma of bisexual men, and scarcity of available female partners combined to produce a social setting in which bisexual men were devalued and bisexual women became fetish objects.

Traditional masculinity

Despite the benefits associated with hegemony, some men in these poly communities perceived themselves to be disadvantaged by their traditionally masculine personas. As a working-class, blue-collar laborer who fit such key hegemonic ideals as heterosexuality and a hyper-masculine persona, Alexander was a minority among poly men. He lamented the fact that 'I could be *invisible* and everybody's ignoring me because everybody there is into the femme/non-masculine type of men and um, I'm not that'. Ironically, the valuation of hypermasculinity that confers power upon hegemonically masculine men in ostensibly monogamous societies became a liability for Alexander in these poly community settings.

His feelings of being undervalued were compounded by the tremendous contrast he perceived between himself and his wife Yansa, a 29-year-old African American health care provider and stepmother of one, who seemed to him replete with endless suitors and sexual possibilities.

She has all the attention from everybody, um, she's got the novelty thing of usually being the only tall, Amazon-style Black woman there and, um, everybody wants to play with her, and sometimes I feel a bit left out. And a little bit jealous.

Alexander's characterization of Yansa as an 'Amazon-style Black woman' appears to reinforce the stereotype of African American women as one-dimensional, hypersexual, exotic others, an aspect of hegemonic masculinity that consumes women's sexuality as a commodity for male (and in this case, female as well) pleasure (Hill-Collins, 1990), further possible evidence of Alexander's complicity with hegemonic masculinity.

While 'play parties'⁸ were not the only arena in which Alexander felt 'left out', they were, however, the setting in which the inequity appeared most blatant to him. Alexander and Yansa would arrive together, and Alexander perceived that multiple suitors routinely approached Yansa

within minutes of entrance, while he had to ‘scrounge around’. Even worse for Alexander, Yansa’s sexual appetite was often satisfied by multiple lovers at the sex parties, leaving her undesirous of sex with him when they returned home. Alexander reported feeling terribly dismayed when he became aroused at a party and Yansa was no longer interested in having sex. ‘Like, come on honey, I’ve been hard *all night!* And she is wiped out, all she wants to do is sleep!’

Alexander repeatedly connected his hegemonic male status with heterosexuality. Because so many of the other men in this setting also identified as heterosexual, it is possible that Alexander’s working-class status exacerbated his sense of marginality among the upper-middle class men and women who exuded and/or desired a ‘femme/non-masculine’ persona. While he discussed his discomfort with humor, he was clearly frustrated by his perceived marginalized status within his poly community. In Alexander’s case, traditional masculinity did not bear the fruits of privilege usually reserved for those in hegemonic roles. Despite difficulties with phobias, diminished social status, and resistance to traditional masculinity, these marginalized poly men retained many privileges, and some were able to fulfill cherished sexual and relational fantasies.

Poly subordination and resistance

Although they consciously relinquished hegemonically masculine identities, nearly all the men in my sample held institutional power through their race, class, and gender privileges, partially determining their location in poly social structures. What distinguished poly subordinate and resistant masculinities from dominant hegemonic masculinity was that these poly men espoused, and to varying degrees practiced, more egalitarian, sex-positive, and gender-neutral relational styles than are characteristic of dominant hegemony. This was evident in their sexualities and styles of emotional interaction.

Sexualities

Poly men’s revisions of hegemonic (hetero)sexuality sometimes included an acceptance of male bisexuality, as well as an expansion of other aspects of masculine sexualities such as a flexible definition of heterosexuality and sharing female partners with other men. Some communities I studied, such as the decidedly sex positive communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, appeared to have greater acceptance of bisexual men. While collecting data in the South Bay, I attended a ‘bisexual coffee night’ in a local coffee shop. There was jovial conversation and flirting, and at one point, two men sitting on a couch at one corner of the circle of attendees began kissing passionately. Conversation died out amongst the rest of the group

as we sat watching the men kiss. Slowly they became aware of the silence around them and broke their embrace, followed by cheering and applause from their impromptu audience. Clearly, the group had appreciated the erotic moment. Even in the Bay area, however, some reported that bisexual men were not as highly valorized as were bisexual women.

Some of the men in my sample discussed their awareness of differing community standards regarding bisexual men and women and the apparent homophobia it revealed. Acknowledging the double standard, the majority of both male and female respondents nevertheless opined that polyamorists were far less homophobic and more tolerant of men who engaged in a wide variety of non-hegemonic activities than was general society. Norman explained that poly men tended to be more open minded than monogamous men, especially when it came to men having sex with men:

Poly men are more comfortable with bi and homosexual men than straight men usually are. Even if you don't wanna have a man touch your ass, you're still cool with the fact that they like to touch other men's asses.

Nevertheless, Norman recognized a double standard that glorified sex between women far more so than sex between men, especially when the sex between women was 'entertaining' to men.

Some of my male respondents expanded sexuality by both broadening their definitions of heterosexuality and expressing what they perceived as a more honest version of masculine sexuality. These respondents mirrored Heasley's (2005: 310) conception of a queer heterosexual masculinity in which straight⁹ men engage in forms of masculinity that are 'outside hetero-normative constructions of masculinity [and] disrupt, or have the potential to disrupt, traditional images of the hegemonic heterosexual masculine'. For instance, Steve, a 45-year-old white educator, employed a flexible definition of heterosexuality. Though he maintained heterosexual romantic relationships, he had fallen in love with a close male friend. Beyond a single kiss, Steve did not act on his feelings. While the two remained dear friends, and Steve thought a future sexual relationship possible, he did not think of himself as bisexual. David, a 50-year-old white psychologist, similarly retained a heterosexual identity even though he had 'experimented with a male partner . . . I continued to see women and on a few occasions with him I would have another woman join us'. Victor laughingly commented:

On any given day I feel between 87 and 95 percent heterosexual . . . I'm attracted to women, I seek relationships with women emotionally and sexually and when it comes to sexuality with a man, there's certain things that I can imagine myself doing, but it seems like it would take a lot to get me there.

Steve, David and Victor shared broad definitions of heterosexuality and, since heterosexuality is a primary hallmark of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 2005; Kimmel, 2004), their willingness to expand such a rigidly controlled element of masculine sexuality – even while adhering to it – marked these men as failures in the eyes of the hegemony.

Other men in my sample cast poly sexuality as an act of bravery, redefining male sexuality from devious and controlling in its covert infidelity to openly multiplistic, with all of the relational shifts that implies. Christian, a 39-year-old white travel agent, opined that men who were willing to engage in poly relationships were more courageous than were those who chose to cheat on their partners.

Men are men in many ways. Some men have very high sexual needs and if they are not being satisfied, many go out and *get* them satisfied, often clandestinely. Few men are brave enough or open enough or willing to risk doing it honestly and openly for fear of losing their primary relationship.

Christian's courageous and honest poly protagonist redefined sexuality and offered an alternative to solely hegemonic options.

While some women in my sample were vulnerable to the personal effects of possessiveness, the men reported struggling with jealousy more frequently. Mark, a 39-year-old white manager of a software company and father of two, commented that:

While poly men tend to seek multiple sex partners, they are also willing to share, defying social norms. And this isn't a point to be taken lightly . . . I think women are socialized more to share and get along, where men are more socialized to be territorial and confrontational. So this sharing thing is, I think, a bigger deal than that they seek multiple partners. By the way, I was one of those that had trouble sharing, for a long time.

Like Mark, some of my male respondents realized that they were socialized to be 'territorial and confrontational' people who had 'trouble sharing'. This reflexivity undermined the grip of hegemonic masculinity by propelling them into self-examination and, ultimately, personal transitions. Some other men also had 'trouble sharing for a long time' and frequently attempted to cloak their jealousy. When men in support groups I attended spoke of their dissatisfaction with female partners' male lovers, they routinely linked it to the other men's personal failings rather than their own difficulties sharing. These references to 'sharing' imply ownership of the item to be shared, in this case, women. Such commodification of women as objects to be shared at men's discretion reinforces hegemonic masculinity, which stipulates that dominant men control subordinate women's sexuality, thus eclipsing female agency. This interpretation is complicated, however, by the fact that many poly women also used the language of 'sharing' when discussing their relationships with men and

each other. In a poly context, then, 'sharing' appears to have multiple meanings and can be seen as more than simply reinforcing men's power over women's sexuality. Poly women did not see themselves as passive sexual pawns to be bartered and frequently had far more control over sexual interactions than did the men.

Some men's willingness to share a female sexual partner with others, especially other men, was a serious breach of hegemonic standards that require men to retain control of 'their' sexual property. Hegemonic masculinity allows, and even encourages, men to have multiple (female) sexual partners, but sharing those women with other men undermines the celebrated alpha male position. Despite that, the majority of men with whom I spoke had extensive experience sharing female lovers with other men, with varied degrees of success. Both men and women used the ostensibly possessive language of 'sharing' with the intent to demonstrate a lack of possessiveness, some with greater validity than others.

Emotion management

Men who wished to engage in lasting polyamorous relationships could not operate on emotional 'auto pilot' as could some traditional men who relegate the responsibility for relationships' emotional maintenance to women. Poly relationships are so complex and require so much effort to maintain that no one involved can rely on others to completely manage the emotional intricacies. Those men who desired successful poly relationships were frequently compelled to listen to other's feelings and disclose their emotions to their own lovers, and commonly their lovers' lovers as well. While these subordinate and resistant men benefited from hegemonic masculinity, they also attempted to subvert hegemonic power distribution and relationship structures by engaging in emotion work (Hochschild, 1983), acknowledging their own emotional needs, and cultivating emotional connections with other men and women.

Some poly men sought multiple relationships to meet not only their sexual, but their emotional needs as well. Thaddeus, a 35-year-old white musician, asserted, 'I've never been satisfied with relationships that were simply sexually based'. He detailed his extensive emotional needs, which propelled him into seeking poly relationships:

I know what my needs are, I think it is utterly unreasonable to expect any one person to meet all of those, and nobody has that amount of time or energy . . . The reason that I'm interested in pursuing that one relationship with multiple individuals is because of my insecurities and the sort of nurturance that I need, which is a lot!

Similarly, Steve observed his emotionally non-hegemonic behavior. 'When I'm upset the first thing I do is reach for the phone and call a friend to

help me process the feelings. I talk on the phone a lot! [Laughs] I am such a girl that way.' He listed his emphasis on emotional intimacy and disappointment at his girlfriend's lack of interest in foreplay prior to intercourse as additional evidence of his 'girlie self'. The equality implied by his embodiment of a variety of gendered traits eroded the foundation of the hegemony, which requires adherents' absolute rejection of anything feminine. Repudiating hegemonic strictures, some poly men attempted to enlarge the emotional code of masculinity. Although many men identified a high sex drive as instrumental in their choice of polyamory, others simultaneously cited their great need for emotional contact and nurturance as the most salient factor in their desire for poly relationships.

Marcus, a 43-year-old white customer service manager for a software company, felt that polyamory offered men an avenue to greater levels of emotional intimacy with one another. He lamented the fact that men in monogamous society seemed '... flat, somehow. There is so little range available to them, they can't even hug!' Marcus saw polyamory as centered on inclusiveness rather than dichotomy, and opined that it was positive for men to feel warmth for each other.

In the poly scene men can touch other men without them thinking I am coming on to them. There is this relaxed ability to feel – like I can ask for a hug or sit down next to someone and have my thigh accidentally touch his while we are talking and I don't have to get all freaked out about it 'cause I know he's not either. It is a closeness that is not necessarily sexual, though I know it is for some guys.

Decreased levels of homophobia in these communities granted Marcus permission to be more comfortable relating with his comrades. Marcus felt that poly men were different from other men because they could relax the hyper-vigilance of practiced homophobia and had, 'already dealt with their fears of intimacy more than most men. They can have deeper conversations with each other than sports cars and drinking.' He saw this increased tolerance for intimacy as evolving from the way polyamory required participants to 'look at themselves and then interact more authentically with others'.

This intimate emotional connection between men is a feature of some alternative masculinities such as polyamory, queer straight masculinity, and homosexuality (Heasley, 2005; Weeks et al., 2001; Yip, 1997), but not of hegemonic masculinity, which generally limits men from emotionally intimate friendships (outside of the battlefield or sports field). Other than anger, strong emotions are cast as the purview of women, and men's friendships tend to focus on instrumental activities to build relationships. 'Men are more reserved in their emotional patterns, and less likely to disclose personal feelings, lest they risk being vulnerable to other men; women tend to be comparatively more open and disclosing' (Kimmel, 2004: 218).

Poly men's ability to establish polyaffective¹⁰ relationships with each other is thus counter-hegemonic, especially because homosocial relationships among heterosexual men can be infused with homophobia. 'Homophobia is one of the central organizing principles of same-sex friendships for men, and virtually non-existent for women' (Kimmel, 2004: 221). These men's conscious rejection of homophobia, in tandem with their transgression and resultant enlargement of hegemonic masculine roles, extended options of manhood and intimacy.

Emphasis on emotional intimacy eclipsed the import of sexual connection for some men. Mark put far more energy into emotional maintenance of relationships than sexual conquest. While he was 'delighted' that he had a wife and four girlfriends at the time of the interview, he routinely spent months or even years 'courting' the women in whom he was interested prior to engaging with them sexually. Even once he did have sex, it was not the primary focus of his relationships. He discussed his bond with one of his girlfriends, Luna, in which they:

... have a very deep, very strong intellectual connection, but our sexual connection is something that we both have to work on, and it's very difficult. So we were talking and lying on her bed and we were sort of kissing and stuff, but it really wasn't working very well.

Even so, next to his wife Evelyn, Luna was one of the most important people in Mark's life. His connection with Luna exceeded the bounds of their sexual relationship, which was something that they both 'had to work on'. While initially sex was:

... a big part of why [Evelyn and I] are poly, or more precisely, it's a big part of how we got here. But the current set of relationships are less about that per se than they are about more emotional aspects, part of why it sort of helped lead us here is the fact that, um, that I have had a really large sexual appetite. And for the longest time it was the focus of why I was poly. But now I find the emotional connection more fulfilling.

Some men who entered a poly community seeking a triad with two women changed their focus once it became clear that such a relationship was exceedingly difficult to find. Mark had originally sought the HBB relationship with his wife, Evelyn, to no avail:

When we started this we were sort of invested in the idea of finding the mythical hot bi babe who would come and join our relationship, and what happened instead was the first person that she [Evelyn] got involved with, this lover in Seattle that she'd been involved with before who certainly – he didn't fit the hot bi babe category as we had discussed it, so at this point while we sort of had this vision of the larger family, we are no longer attached to any particular geometry of how it will occur.

Mark and Evelyn altered their expectations when it appeared their 'mythical' HBB was unlikely to materialize. Some men who appeared to have attained the hegemonic ideal of sex with numerous women were primarily focused on the non-hegemonic aspects of emotional connection, even to the exclusion of a facile sexual relationship.

Many of my male respondents reported consciously expanding their masculinities and prided themselves on being open-minded. Some of my female respondents agreed, such as Louise, a 37-year-old white astrologer and photographer with three children, who reported that poly men 'just think differently'. She explained:

They are much more non-traditional. They aren't looking . . . for a relationship with a woman they can control or be in charge of. They like independent women who are highly sexual, who are exciting. That's why they're attracted to this kind of lifestyle is because they like strong women . . . they're looking for an equal relationship in most cases.

Some men similarly noticed one another's propensity for authenticity. Norman opined that most poly men were not only more 'understanding' than monogamous men, but 'more fun to hang out with' as well.

Their vibe is more free. They don't have as much societal baggage. They don't seem to like talking about bitches and pissing on things. They are more intellectual and sensitive, like artists and musicians.

The markedly increased gender flexibility available to these poly men both contributed to their desire for equality in their relationships and allowed them to resist and transform hegemonically masculine roles.

Conclusions

Contemporary masculinities' shifting norms and meanings require arduous navigation from virtually all men, and poly men's transgression of hegemonic boundaries occurs within the context of these manifold and evolving masculinities within the broader culture. While awareness of masculinity as an increasingly flexible social construct confers additional choices upon men who elect to reconsider traditional masculine standards, changing roles simultaneously erode cherished hegemonic traits and attendant privileges. In this article I have discussed polyamorous men's varied forms of hegemonic, marginalized, subordinate, and resistant masculinities.

The men in my sample both engaged in and eschewed hegemonic masculinity, with mixed consequences for their identities, as well as their sexual and social interactions. Their complicity with hegemonic masculinity and subsequent enactment of poly-hegemony reinforced traditional power structures by buttressing race, gender, heterosexual, and class

privileges. These advantages most likely shielded them from some consequences of their transgression of social norms. Akin to other men who claim to desire equitable power relationships with women but fail to fully enact their espoused ideals, some of the poly hegemonic respondents recreated patriarchal power structures in their relationships. Some poly men's reliance on socio-biological narratives makes sense in light of its seductive legitimization of the status quo, a status quo that enshrines white men as the pinnacle of evolutionary achievement. Those who deign to 'share' their female lovers similarly subtly reinforce the traditional conception of women as men's property able to be transferred at men's discretion.

Conversely, with their propensity to defy the strictures of hegemonic masculinity, expand the boundaries of heterosexuality, and redistribute gendered social power, poly relationships have innovative potential. Many of these men's conscious attempts to cultivate emotional and relational characteristics considered transgressive by the mainstream US culture enlarged the confines of their masculinities and heterosexualities. Numerous male respondents sought women as equals, revealing the progressive potential for power sharing often absent from traditional relational practices. The majority of my male respondents focused more on this defiance of hegemonic standards than engagement in and profit from the privileges bestowed upon traditionally masculine men; their resistance was the primary feature of their masculinities.

These gendered power shifts also hold potentially negative implications for these men, some of whom found themselves in the unnerving position of losing the privileges accorded their social positions through their transgression of one of the primary mandates of hegemonic masculinity – sole control over female partners. In poly sub-cultures, the access to multiple partners is always complicated by the potential for the other partners to have greater success on the relationship market, and the attendant potential loss of relational power (Coltrane and Collins, 2001).

My examination of this understudied group extends Connell's masculinities framework to include poly-hegemony and resistance, while offering a deeper understanding of the implications alternative masculinities hold for constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Like Heasley's queer straight men (2005), my respondents often skirted the fringes of the contested boundaries of masculinities. At worst they were complicit with dominant hegemony, and at best they actively countermanded some of its strictures. Publicly acknowledging polyamorous relationships enhances their transgressive capacities by enlarging options for masculine expression. Ultimately, the majority of the men in my sample attempted, with varied degrees of success, to resist the demands of hegemonic masculinity in their sexual and emotional lives. Even as some might have appeared to be the foot soldiers of the patriarchy, these poly men's

embodiment of masculinities above all represents another chink in the armor of hegemonic masculinity.

Notes

1. Polyamorists often use the term *poly* as a noun (a person who is a poly engages in polyamorous relationships), an adjective (to describe something that has polyamorous qualities), and an umbrella term that also includes polyfidelity, or relationships based in both sexual and emotional fidelity among a group larger than a dyad and whose members frequently consider themselves family members.
2. For a more extensive methods' discussion please see my article 'Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity, and Power' in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2005, 34(3): 251–83.
3. Of the 40 people I interviewed, two were Asian American (one woman, one man), one was a Latina, one was Latina and white, and three were African American (two men and one woman). The woman who identified as a Lebanese American did not define herself as a person of color and I respected her self-definition. I intentionally sought out people of color to interview whenever possible, and all accepted my invitation. There was a similar racial and ethnic mix of polyamorists I interacted with at social gatherings.
4. For a more complete discussion of polyamorous women's perspective on race and ethnicity, please see my article 'Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity, and Power' (Sheff, 2005).
5. The term 'Hot Bi Babe' is frequently used in polyamorous settings to describe a bisexual person, almost always a woman. I abbreviate it to HBB for ease of discussion.
6. A moresome is a relationship composed of five or more sexual and/or affective partners.
7. For a more complete discussion of polyamorous women's perspective on bisexuality and the fetishization of bisexual women, please see Sheff, 2005.
8. In this sentence 'play' means to engage in either BDSM scenes or varied acts of sexual intimacy up to and including intercourse, depending on the setting and the type of sex party.
9. I have coined the term *polyaffective* to describe emotionally intimate, non-sexual relationships among polyamorists
10. Here I employ Heasley's (2005) concept of 'queer straight men', though others who define queerness in opposition to straightness may contest this term, viewing it as oxymoronic.

References

- Andersen, M. (1999) 'Studying Across Difference: Race, Class, and Gender in Qualitative Research', in A. Bryman and R. Burgess (eds) *Qualitative Research* Vol. IV, pp. 34–52. London: Sage.
- Anderson, E. (2002) 'Openly Gay Athletes: Contesting Hegemonic Masculinity in a Homophobic Environment', *Gender and Society* 16(6): 860–77.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boykin, K. (1996) *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Boykin, K. (2005) *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America*. New York: Carrol & Graf.

- Brod, H. (ed.) (1987) *The Making of Masculinities; the New Men's Studies*. Boston, MA: Allen and Unwin.
- Chen, A. (1999) 'Lives at the Center of the Periphery, Lives at the Periphery of the Center: Chinese American Masculinities and Bargaining with Hegemony', *Gender and Society* 13: 584–607.
- Coltrane, S. and Collins, R. (2001) *Sociology of Marriage and the Family: Gender, Love and Property*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Connell, R. W. (1987) *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Connell, R. W. (2005) *Masculinities* (2nd edn). Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Duncombe, J. and Marsden, D. (1995) 'Workaholics and Whingening Women: Theorising Intimacy and Emotion Work – the Last Frontier of Gender Inequality?' *The Sociological Review* 43(1): 150–69.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Glassner, B. and Hertz, R. (1999) *Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gould, T. (1999) *The Lifestyle: A Look at the Erotic Rites of Swingers*. Buffalo, NY: Firefly Books.
- Heasley, R. (2005) 'Queer Masculinities of Straight Men: A Typology', *Men and Masculinities* 7(3): 310–20.
- Hill-Collins, P. (1990) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jenefsky, C. and Miller, D. (1998) 'Phallic Intrusion: Girl–Girl Sex in Penthouse', *Women's Studies International Forum* 21(4): 375–85.
- Jenks, R. (1985a) 'A Comparative Study of Swingers and Non-swingers: Attitudes and Beliefs', *Lifestyles: Journal of Changing Patterns* 7: 5–20.
- Jenks, R. (1985b) 'Swinging: A Replication and Test of a Theory', *Journal of Sex Research* 21(2): 199–205.
- Jenks, R. (1985c) 'Swinging: A Test of Two Theories and a Proposed New Model', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 14: 517–27.
- Jenks, R. (1986) 'Swinging: A Review of the Literature', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 27(5): 507–22.
- Kaufman, M. (1987) *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Kimmel, M. (1987) *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Kimmel, M. (2004) *The Gendered Society* (second edition). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kimmel, M. and Messner, M. (2000) *Men's Lives*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Laumann, E., Gagnon, J., Michael, R. and Michaels, S. (1994) *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Lofland, J. and Lofland, L. (1995) *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Luke, B. (1998) 'Violent Love: Hunting, Heterosexuality, and the Erotics of Men's Predation', *Feminist Studies* 24(3): 637–55.
- Malin, B. (2003) 'Memorializing White Masculinity: The late 1990s "Crisis of Masculinity" and the "Subversive Performance" of *Man on the Moon*', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 27(3): 239–55.
- Phoenix, A. (1994). 'Practising Feminist Research: The Intersection of Gender and "Race" in the Research Process', in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, pp. 49–71. Portsmouth: University of Portsmouth.
- Roof, J. (1991) *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rubin, R. (2001) 'Alternative Family Lifestyles Revisited, or Whatever Happened to Swingers, Group Marriages and Communes?' *Journal of Family Issues* 22(6): 711–27.
- Sheff, E. (2005) 'Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity, and Power', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 34(3): 251–83.
- Sheff, E. (2006) 'The Reluctant Polyamorist: Autoethnographic Research in a Sexualized Setting', in M. Stomblor, D. Baunach, E. Burgess, D. Donnelly and W. Simonds (eds) *Sex Matters: The Sexuality and Society Reader*, (second edition), pp. 111–18. New York: Pearson, Allyn, and Bacon.
- Smith, C. (2000) 'How I Became a Queer Heterosexual', in C. Thomas (ed.) *Straight With a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality*, pp. 60–7. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Swedberg, D. (1989) 'What Do We See when We See Woman/Woman Sex in Pornographic Movies?' *NWSA Journal* 1(4): 602–16.
- Tucker, N. (1995) 'Introduction', in N. Tucker (ed.) *Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries and Visions*, pp. 1–4. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Weeks, Jeffery, Heaphy, Brian and Donovan, Catherine (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiments*. London: Routledge.
- Wilson, E. (1975) *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Yeung, K.-T., Stomblor, M. and Wharton, R. (2006) 'Making Men in Gay Fraternities: Resisting and Reproducing Multiple Dimensions of Hegemonic Masculinity', *Gender and Society* 20(1): 5–31.
- Yip, A. (1997). 'Gay Male Christian Couples and Sexual Exclusivity', *Sociology* 31(2): 289–306.

Biographical Note

Elisabeth Sheff received her PhD from the University of Colorado in Boulder and is currently an assistant professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Dr Sheff's work centers around gender, sexuality, inequality, deviance, and alternative family structures. [email: esheff@gsu.edu]