



# Polyamorous Parenting in Contemporary Research: Developments and Future Directions

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Anne: What do you think requires further research  
[about polyfamilies?]

Pete: Apart from everything? (PolyVic polypar-  
enting group)

Children raised in polyamorous families (or *polyfamilies*) have parents who may identify with any sexual or gender orientation, are of diverse cultures and social classes, are in openly negotiated intimate sexual relationships with more than one partner, and may or may not cohabitate, share finances, or expect sexual exclusivity among a group larger than two (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, & Hunter, 2013; Sheff, 2013, 2016a). Parents who agree to only be in sexual relationships with each other and closed to relationships outside the group are in *polyfidelitous* families. Many *polycules*—chosen family networks of people associated through polyamorous relationships (Creation, 2019)—have members that

maintain *polyaffective* relationships that are emotionally intimate and nonsexual (Sheff, 2016b). Because polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamies (CNM) are becoming increasingly common in both LGBTIQ+ (especially among gay male and bisexual folks, see Levine, Herbenick, Martinez, Fu, & Dodge, 2018) and heterosexual populations in the twenty-first century (Moors, 2017), researchers and family service providers require more information to adequately understand and serve these multiple and sometimes shifting configurations of multiparent families (Anapol, 2010; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Sheff, 2013). Most polycules contain LGBTIQ+ members, and research has documented an especially strong link between bisexuality and polyamory (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014, 2016a). While polyamorous parenting is gaining momentum in research, it remains under-researched and under-resourced in health services and education sectors (Goldfeder & Sheff, 2013; Raab, 2018).

This chapter begins with an overview of academic research and theoretical development on polyparenting since the 2013 edition of this book and then focuses on the authors' ongoing research. Given the continued dearth of existing research on polyfamilies, we take care to identify what remains unknown or understudied and con-

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clude with a brief discussion of some directions for further research and implications for practice in education, healthcare, and the law.

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### **Erasure, Exclusion by Inclusion, and the Absence of Intersectionality: Ongoing Polyparenting Research Issues**

There are four larger issues that form the backdrop for the academic and social conversations about polyfamilies. These are very similar and often interwoven with the concerns summarized by Pallotta-Chiarolli (2016b) in relation to bisexualities in health and education policies and practice. First, the *erasure* of polyfamilies in academic discourse continues to reflect and influence the similar ignorance of polyfamilies in social, legal, health, and educational realms. Some scholars adapt to the absence of theorizing and data about polyfamilies and their children by utilizing research on children from same-sex parent families to help articulate and explain what children from polyfamilies experience (Sheff, 2011). While understandable, this second issue of *exclusion by inclusion* is also problematic because the experiences of polyfamilies are distinct and children in polyfamilies may face even more heightened levels of invisibility and stigmatization, compared to children of same-sex parents.

Third, extant research continues to be severely limited by its reliance on White middle-class samples. Both Pallotta-Chiarolli (2006, 2010b) and Sheff and Hammers (2011) recognized this *absence of intersectionality* as a major limitation in their own earlier research, reflecting the ongoing concern that most research methods fail to access larger representations of people of diverse and intersectional socioeconomic, cultural, and religious locations, as well as transgender, intersex, and gender diverse identities (Cardoso, 2019; Noel, 2006; see Haritaworn, Chin-ju, & Klesse, 2006). Most participants in polyfamilies research continue to be White, middle-class, college-educated individuals who identify as cisgendered male or female and who have high levels of

cyberliteracy which allows them to participate in social and support groups and thereby find themselves participating in our research. While Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2010a, 2016a) research provides specific sections on cultural and religious diversity (see also the personal stories by Raven and Anthony Lekkas in Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2018), we recognize and acknowledge the impact that a predominantly homogeneous privileged group of people has on research findings and the implications for practice.

Fourth, another issue of erasure and exclusion is the absence of the perspectives, experiences, and insights of children and adults who have grown up in polyfamilies, as well as the ways in which growing up in a polyamorous household affects children's well-being, later relationships, and education. Scholars such as Strassberg (2003) have long considered this lack a major hindrance to the development of legal, health, and educational policies and practices that support these children and their families. As this chapter will outline with preliminary findings, Sheff's (forthcoming) current wave of data addresses this to some extent, though her longitudinal sample continues to consist mostly of White participants.

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### **Comparison to Monogamous Families, Bisexualities, and Clinical Research: Recent Developments in Polyparenting Research**

Despite the above identified concerns in research with polyfamilies, there have been significant strides toward establishing the study of polyamorous and other consensually non-monogamous (CNM) families. This section first provides an overview on recent polyfamily research and then summarizes the authors' contributions to that field.

It is evident that since 2013 (the first edition of this book), researchers have expanded their examination of polyamorous families in comparison to the experiences of monogamous families. Klesse (2018) provides a comprehensive review of the available research on polyfamilies and

identifies three themes that structured many of the findings in the available research: the wider range of parenting practices, the experience and impact of social and legal discrimination, and parental response to stigmatization. Other recent research includes the ways in which polyamory could “oxygenate” marriage (Conley & Moors, 2014), the lessons the same-sex marriage debate holds for polyamory (Aviram & Leachman, 2015), and the issues that arise in the dissolution of polyamorous families (Argentino & Fiore, 2019). An example that covers the identified themes and issues is Boyd’s (2017a, 2017b) Canadian study of the demographic characteristics of polyamorous families. Boyd found that polyamorists are younger, better educated, and have a higher income than the national norm; they tend to make decisions together as a family; and they have challenges with family laws and institutional regulations. For instance, in many nations laws prohibit more than two people from becoming legal spouses or adopting children together.

Two other themes are increasingly appearing in polyfamily research. First, there is a greater awareness of bisexual polyparenting within polyfamilies and CNM research (Bartelt, Bowling, Dodge, & Bostwick, 2017; Delvoye & Tasker, 2015; see chapter “What Do We Now Know About Bisexual Parenting? A Continuing Call for Research”). Second, and particularly pertinent for practice implications, is the research undertaken by clinicians and other health service providers. Therapists have documented the pernicious effects of therapeutic bias and sex negativity with polyamorous clients (Henrich & Trawinski, 2016), the critical incidents that assist or hinder people from developing polyamorous identities (Duplassie & Fairbrother, 2018), and family therapists’ attitudes toward polyamorous relationships (Sullivan, 2017). Bevacqua’s (2018) instructional case study equipped nurses who want to provide competent and informed care for children from polyamorous families with the data they require to do so.

The four research issues we identify and the literature we review also draw attention to how polyfamilies face significant discriminations and

hardships and mostly rely on the assistance of their communities and resilient relationship practices. Pallotta-Chiarolli and Sheff are among the primary long-term researchers in this field, contributing foundational studies. In a quantitative analysis of the *Loving More Polyamory Survey* of over 1000 participants from the USA), Pallotta-Chiarolli (2002, 2006) examined the educational experiences of children, teachers, and parents from polyfamilies. This was followed by the US and Australian qualitative research with 29 bisexual and/or polyamorous adolescents and young adults, 40 polyparents, and 14 adolescents and young adults who had polyparents, in relation to their educational, health, sociocultural, familial concerns, contexts, and strengths (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2010b).

Beginning in 1996, Sheff’s *Longitudinal Polyamorous Family Study* (LPFS) has undertaken four waves of qualitative data collection and thematic analysis on children growing up in polyamorous families. Via interviews, participant observation at polycommunity events, and interacting with the Internet polyamorous community online, the LPFS has completed the children’s interviews and half of the adults’ interviews for the fourth wave. Overall, Sheff interviewed 206 people in polyamorous families, 37 of them children. Building on the findings from waves one through three (Sheff, 2010, 2011, 2015a), emerging findings from the fourth wave of data collection indicate these parents tend to employ a free-range parenting style, sustain permeable family boundaries, and use flexibility to create resilience over time. Other research themes include people’s experiences in polyfamilies (Sheff, 2015b), coming out to family of origin as polyamorous (Sheff, 2016a), polyparenting strategies (Sheff, 2010, 2013), a comparison with same-sex families (Sheff, 2011), legal issues facing polyfamilies with children (Goldfeder & Sheff, 2013), endings and transitions in relationships (Sheff, 2014), and polyamorous family resilience (Sheff, 2016b). Sheff’s emerging findings continue to indicate that polyamorous families, while not perfect, can be positive environments that support adults

across the life span and raise confident, healthy children.

Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. (2013) conducted the *PolyVic study*, collecting data with members of the PolyVic parenting group (a support and social group in Victoria, Australia). Upon invitation to participate in an audio-taped group discussion, 13 polyparents (9 cisgender women and 4 cisgender men aged 35–50 years, of unspecified sexualities) attended. More recently, as part of the *Women with Bisexual Male Partners (WWBMP)* study with 68 sexually diverse women between 2002 and 2012 (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014, 2016a; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003), Pallotta-Chiarolli (2016a) conducted semi-structured interviews with four heterosexual and six bisexual mothers who stated they were in polyfamilies raising children with bisexual men. Three primary themes emerged from the findings of Pallotta-Chiarolli's PolyVic and WWBMP studies: (a) managing disclosure and exposure to children and external systems such as schools, (b) parents' concerns regarding their polyfamilies, and (c) the strength and resilience of polyfamilies against external stigmatization.

In the next section we present a more detailed overview of the similar and differing themes from the fourth wave of Sheff's (forthcoming) LPFS, Pallotta-Chiarolli et al.'s (2013) PolyVic study, and Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2016a) WWBMP study. While Sheff's research predominantly explores the workings of polyfamilies themselves, Pallotta-Chiarolli's research predominantly explores the strategies required of polyfamilies in the management of their external worlds.

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## Emerging Findings: Inside the Polyfamily

### Free-Range Parenting Style

Most polyparents report using a parenting style that some would label as *free-range* (Skenazy, 2009). Free-range parenting involves allowing children to make choices and have age-appropriate freedoms while gaining the tools or skills to navigate the world. Thus, via free-range parenting,

polyparenting is closely akin to the ways in which previous generations were parented, in contrast to the highly safety-conscious and restrictive parenting style popular today, termed "helicopter parenting," in White affluent families (Darlow, Norvilitis, & Schuetze, 2017). The LPFS data shows that one of the ways in which polyparents encourage free-range children is to allow them to make age-appropriate choices. This can involve anything from allowing a 4-year-old to select their clothing for the day to letting a teenager spend the night at someone else's house. Sometimes this extends to homeschooling, which can also emphasize the learner's choice in directing their own search for knowledge. Significant for the polyfamily version of free-range parenting, polyparents also tend to emphasize the consequences of children's actions. For instance, allowing a tween to select their clothing for the day also means that they must bear the discomfort if they select something that is too warm or too cold for the weather. Contrary to the helicopter parenting style in which a parent would make the child dress in a specific way or deliver more appropriate clothing to the school (Darlow et al., 2017), the free-range parent would require that the child endure the discomfort in order to learn to make more appropriate choices in the future. The degree and severity of the consequences change as the child ages—older children can make more complex and higher stake choices, but the consequences for young children's choices should not be too severe.

### Collaborative Parenting

One of the primary ways in which polyparents practice free-range parenting is to share responsibilities among a group of adults, what Pallotta-Chiarolli et al.'s (2013) PolyVic research participants identified as *collaborative parenting*.

Bronwyn: It takes a village to raise a child. They have input from a variety of adults with a variety of beliefs, a variety of religious backgrounds, of political views, just all sorts of things that they bring as an adult to children's life.

Eve: The [mainstream] attitude's kind of, "Oh why aren't YOU looking after YOUR child?" whereas in this kind of poly community I think you often

find that it's "these are our children". . . collaborative parenting.

The sharing and distribution of parenting duties among a group of adults has thus far revealed two functions: (a) access to free time and privacy, something that is crucial for managing the complex schedules which may arise among people with multiple partners, metamours (partners' partners who are not sexually or romantically involved), and other chosen family members and to pursue individual careers and interests and (b) to encourage free-range children to be responsible for themselves and still have access to adult assistance when required. Collaborative parenting requires not only scheduling the adults' time to ensure there is always someone available to the children but also for the adults to discuss their individual boundaries of interactions with the children. For example, discipline was especially important for polyparents and their wider communities of care to agree upon, and many supporting adults preferred to let the primary parents (usually the biological parents) handle consequences as much as possible (Sheff, 2015a, b).

Thus far the LPFS, VicPoly, and WWBMP data indicate that this collaborative parenting is mostly positive for both children and adults. Research participants generally report that self-directed play, peer and sibling interactions, and self-directed activities produce independent young people capable of making choices and dealing with social interactions. Undoubtedly, some disadvantages emerge which require ongoing navigation and negotiation, such as multiple contestations over child-rearing practices and the blending of step-siblings, but they have not yet clarified as trends or patterns in the data at this point beyond what serial monogamous blended families experience.

### Permeable Family Boundaries and Extended Kinship

Parents' permeability is most evident in two ways: admitting additional adults and adopting children. Much like LGBTIQ+ parent families,

some of which are polyamorous, polyfamilies tend to construct their emotional intimates following a chosen kinship style in which biological and legal relationships are not necessarily the hallmark of "real" relationships, but rather family is built around those who prove to be reliable, loving, trustworthy, and helpful (Weston, 1997). These families of choice can include biological and legal family members, current and former lovers, metamours, and close friends. Polyfamilies can offer adults who have not had children the opportunity to become important in a child's life and, as previously presented, can offer children a range of adults for advice, role models, and support. Sheff (2013) has described these chosen adults as otherfathers (akin to othermothers, Burton & Hardaway, 2012), and Pallotta-Chiarolli's PolyVic research participants label them oddparents (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013). The construction of new kinship terms or the reintroduction of pre-Industrial or non-Western kinship terms is possibly sparked by the growing Western awareness and appreciation of traditional precolonial First Peoples' diversity of families, communities, and lifestyles (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019).

Lisa: [Being a] tribal aunt's been a really cool thing and very empowering.

Eve: [My child] has an oddfather, not a godfather. . . and he's a fairy oddfather.

The above discussion on the expansion of family members and the invention or reintroduction of kinship terms or "queer bonds" indicate a significant facet of polyparenting which requires much more research (Anapol, 2010; Iantaffi, 2006).

Polyfamilies' permeable boundaries extend to adopting children, both socially/unofficially and legally. The LPFS found that, in some cases, children befriend a peer who has a negative family environment or is homeless and bring that peer home to the polyfamily. Initially the peer is usually "just staying for a while," and eventually it becomes clear that the family is taking the child in as nonlegal kin. In other cases, the adults notice a child in need or a child approaches the family to ask for admittance. While some polyfamilies proceed to officially adopt the child, oth-

ers simply integrate the child into the family and do not necessarily use the term adoption. Not all adoptions and integrations are absolute or long term, with some lasting for a period of time and/or living separately and others lasting for years and including putting the child through college.

## Flexible Resilience

Resilience theory is a strengths-based perspective that emphasizes the role of communication, flexibility, and emotional intimacy as key elements that distinguish those families able to face significant hardship and come through stronger together, from those families which are distant and/or dissolved during or after facing similar heartache (Patterson, 2002). In addition to the importance of communication skills for family function and positive parenting, communication skills allow parents to retain evolving relationships with children as they age into young adulthood, or shifting life circumstances bring new familial configurations. Using the skills refined in their romantic relationships in developing resilience against external risks, polyparents attempt to communicate with children in honest and age-appropriate ways that change over time as the child matures. When this communication works well, resilient polyfamilies are able to provide each other with the kind of support, flexibility, and wide safety net that helps children and adults survive difficulty and thrive through adversity. Of particular importance to family resilience is what Sheff (2016b) terms *polyaffectivity* wherein adults retain emotional and kinship connections when no longer sexually connected. This enduring connection outside of sexual interaction allows for positive co-parenting and continued reliance and resilience for both the adults and children.

When considered together, the above three themes emphasize the optimistic side of polyfamily life, which is often erased from external mainstream critiques of polyparenting (Kurtz, 2003; Marquardt, 2007). From inside the polyfamily, while some participants in the LPFS experienced significant life hardship, family con-

flict, and nasty divorces, it is important to note that none assigned polyamory any culpability in their various catastrophes. Rather, most emphasized the role of lovers, metamours, children, and other chosen kin in helping them navigate and survive the above and other vagaries of life. There are (at least) three possible reasons for this optimism. First, these respondents could be engaging in image maintenance in front of a researcher, using the most positive interpretation in order to make polyamory seem more socially acceptable against overwhelming external negativity and stereotyping. Second, the volunteer nature of the samples, and in particular the ones who stayed connected to Sheff's study and remained willing to discuss polyamory for 23 years, may have resulted in a bias toward optimism. Those long-term respondents, who Sheff (2015a, b) labels "the persistent polyamorists," are more likely to have positive experiences than those who no longer identify as polyamorous or are less willing to respond to requests for another interview. Third, respondents might emphasize the positive elements of polyamory because it really does work for them, contributing support, intimacy, love, sex, and a wide social safety net to help when things go wrong. Terry, age 16, from the WWBMP research (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016a) felt disillusioned and angry that his parents' livelihood could be severely jeopardized if he spoke about his bisexual father and polyfamily at his school within their small rural community. Thus, he passed his family as hetero-monogamous while he stated that his "real education" was occurring outside the school gates:

I feel lucky to tell you the truth, that I've got such an open family and I look around and see all these people who are living with this very small mind, and I can look around with this wide-open view and see the real world.

## Emerging Findings: Outside the Polyfamily

In the PolyVic (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013) and WWBMP (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016a) studies, the following themes arose in relation to disclos-

ing to children, and these were inextricably linked to the reactions of disclosure and exposure from the polyfamilies' external communities, services, and schools. First, telling the children was essential and wanted in order to foster family health and closeness, foster the child's understanding of sexual and family diversity, and develop confidence and resilience in the wider world. Second, telling the children required negotiating the child's level of outness with others such as peers, schools, health service providers, family members, and the wider society. Third, when to tell the children was determined by a range of factors such as the child's age/maturity, gender, health status, resilience to external discrimination, and closeness of the relationship with the parents and parents' partners. Fourth, for some polyparents, disclosure to children was not an option due to the inherent risks this would evoke for the children and parents from external sectors such as the law, custody arrangements, and child protection agencies. The following conversation from the PolyVic group exemplifies these various positions:

Juliet: It's nothing that the school has to know about.

Bronwyn: If I had a comment I would address it. The children haven't been asked any questions [when they say something about their family at school].

Nigel: One of my children was told [at secondary school by the year level co-ordinator] not to discuss poly or my bisexuality with any school friends or on the school grounds. . . they would be ostracised or they'd be picked on, that it was not relevant for school. . . The advice was ignored [by my daughter] (laughter) which I'm quite proud of. . . We actually contacted the teacher and said "No, that's wrong. We will be encouraging our daughter to be herself and to do what she wants."

Confirming the findings of earlier researchers (see Constantine & Constantine, 1976; Davidson, 2002; Strassberg, 2003), Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a) found that preschool youngsters can handle disclosure in a more matter-of-fact way, while school-age children, who have had exposure to monogamist constructions of families within schools and among a wider range of peers and mainstream media discourses, tend to experience

varying degrees of embarrassment and discomfort and may feel conflicted when hearing outsiders' discriminatory remarks about their parents. Adolescents are likely to experience the strongest anxieties and confusions as they are facing puberty issues in regard to their own sexualities, relationships, and identities and may feel heightened sensitivity to peer attitudes against non-normative sexualities and families. They are also the most likely age group to keep their polyfamilies secret, given that they are also more aware of wider dominant moral, political, or social discourses that construct cultural understandings of what constitutes a healthy family (see Weitzman, 2006, 2007).

### Passing, Bordering, and Polluting

Overall, a major anxiety that most polyparents talked about in Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2010a, 2010b) research is the fear that being out about their families would lead to harassment and stress for their children. Many tried to prepare their children for the consequences of their public disclosure and provided them with verbal, mental, and emotional strategies to counteract or deflect negativity so that they would be active agents rather than passive victims in educational and health institutions. Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a, 2010b, 2016a) has theorized and explored how polyfamilies will border, pass, or pollute in external settings like schools. In other words, how and to what extent do polyfamilies undertake self-surveillance and self-regulation for protection from external surveillance and regulation?

**Passing** Some families will endeavor to pass as heterosexual or same-sex couple parent families, using commonplace normative labels such as "auntie," "godparent," or "friend" for polyfamily members to avoid external scrutiny of and discrimination against their polyhome. These strategies of editing, scripting, and concealment may provide protection and the ability to live out family realities with little external surveillance or

interference. Likewise, many polyfamilies will pass as monogamous to their own children in order to protect children from the cognitive and emotional dissonance inherent in keeping secrets.

**Bordering** Many polyfamilies and their children feel like border dwellers, on the margins of multiple spaces and contexts, constantly navigating and negotiating their positions and degrees of outness between home and various sites in the external world in order to minimize harm and discrimination. Thorson (2009) uses Petronio's (2002) work on communication privacy management (CPM) to offer some insight into the negotiation of these border zones. Parents and children negotiate "information ownership" and privacy rules and enact "protection and access rules" (Thorson, 2009, p. 34) for any processes of disclosure. Jeremy, a PolyVic father of two school-aged children, discussed the outcomes of CPM strategies: "They'll [our children] get to the point of going, 'With this person I can share this, and with this person I don't' . . .we trust in their commonsense."

Thus, polyfamilies need to negotiate which forms of CPM may work best in harm minimization: withdrawing from potentially harmful external settings and engaging in affirming settings; compartmentalizing, segregating, or bordering the worlds of home and external settings; cloaking certain realities so that they are invisible or pass as normative; or fictionalizing certain aspects of one's life and family (Richardson, 1985).

**Polluting** Some polyparents and their children see themselves as polluting outside worlds (Douglas, 1966) by coming out and presenting their relationships as legitimate and worthy of official affirmation. Thus, they not only claim public space but compel institutions to adapt to new and expanding definitions of family. This resonates with how Cardoso (2019) demonstrates "the political is personal" (p. 1), whereby polyactivism is shaped by the personal experiences and strategies of polyfamilies as well as what is collectively possible within their environments.

Proactive polyparents undertake subversive strategies such as gaining positions of parent power and decision-making in schools and other communities or establishing solid working relationships and friendships within neighborhood, church, and school communities. These strategies consolidate their security, provide access to policy making, community thinking, and action, as well as making it possible to forge strong trusting bonds with other "deviant" minority persons in the community. Nevertheless, polyparents need to weigh up the dangers and the positives of having children polluting their schools with knowledge and "sassiness" about their polyfamilies. In summary, most polyfamilies need to weigh up passing, bordering, and polluting strategies according to context, setting, and time, as is evident in the following section of conversation from the PolyVic parenting group:

Anne: [Passing] Not having to deal with the judgement of people outside about the impact that your polyamory is having on your family.

Robyn: [Polluting] It's good to teach your child that she should do what she wants and. . .not be worried about what other people think of her.

Daryl:[Bordering] I know at least three of the [schoolfriends'] families are okay but at least another one of them I'm thinking, they might be a bit weirded out about it.

Sometimes, the best a polyparent could do was minimize the potential for harm by selecting the better of bad options. Rosemary, a heterosexual mother in the WWBMP study (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016a), voiced her decision not to send her children to a religious school to protect her children from "screwed up" religious beliefs, on top of mainstream social values:

We feel that would probably be one of the worst environments for them to go to in terms of the church's stand on a lot of these things....I just don't want my children paying the price for somebody else's screwedupness.

## Polyfamilies and Schools

What negotiations and silences surround polyfamilies within school communities? How do



children from polyfamilies experience school? Apart from Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2006) research, these questions remain unasked in most recent research with polyfamilies. The little research there shows that sensationalized stereotypes about polyrelationships conspire with silence about diverse family realities to perpetuate ignorance, misrepresentation, and stigmatization in school settings.

### **Surveillance in Health, Welfare, and Legal Services**

The pathologization and problematization of polyfamilies by legal, welfare, and health service providers and government agencies, and the lack of substantial research into what polyfamilies require from these services and systems has been a continuing research and practice concern (Firestein, 2007; Weber, 2002; Weitzman, 2006, 2007). For polyfamilies, their assumed pathology is often closely linked to actual or feared surveillance via city, county, and state mechanisms such as Child Protective Services.

A related theme that has consistently arisen in research since the 1970s is the question of whether disclosure may risk having children taken away from their families by Child Protection Services (see Anapol, 2010; Sheff, 2010; Walston, 2001; Watson & Watson, 1982). Many parents in our research stressed the need for polyfamilies to collect documentation and legal papers in order to protect themselves and their children should any situation arise with child and social welfare services. Child welfare service providers could also benefit from additional education regarding children of sex and gender minorities, among them children from polyfamilies.

The above consistent findings across studies raise a major question which requires further research and awareness of its implications for practice: To what extent is the low rate of visibility of polyfamilies due to their concealment from outside structures such as health, education, and family services for fear of the ramifications of disclosure?

### **Polyfamilies in the Media**

Another parental concern that has been consistent throughout the available research is the need to incorporate positive representations of polyfamilies in texts, arts, media, and popular culture for both polyparents and their children (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2016a). These representations will then provide public points of reference and examples that would facilitate both wider societal visibility and polyfamilies' confidence to disclose to their own children and the external society (Smith, 2015; Taormino, 2008; Trask, 2007). Many polyparents and their offspring also called for novels and picture books for children. Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2008) novel for adolescents, young adults, and adults, *Love You Two*, with its multicultural, multisexual, and multipartnered characters, is based on her research over 15 years. These findings again raise the question requiring further research: To what extent is the ongoing low degree of disclosure to one's children and outside social institutions due to the erasure or absence of positive images in popular culture which provide a discourse that affirms polyfamilies and thereby the emotional and social health and well-being of their children?

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### **Toward Visibility, Inclusion, and Intersectionality: Directions for Future Research and Implications for Practice**

Throughout this chapter, we have provided an overview of the available research on polyfamilies since 2013 and summarized our recent findings from three studies—Sheff's LPFS, Pallotta-Chiarolli et al's PolyVic study, and Pallotta-Chiarolli's WWBMP—which concur with previous findings. Our studies demonstrate striking similarities and consistency in our findings regarding erasure, exclusion by inclusion, and the absence of intersectionality even though the data were collected by separate researchers, continents apart, in widely different social contexts. For example, the connection between lack of polyfamily visibility and poly-

families' fear of both surveillance and disclosure was significant. We also discussed how this theme was manifested in interactions with education, health, and legal services and the erasures and absences in the media. We conclude that the above themes require further research from the perspectives of both the polyfamilies and the above sectors in order to develop comprehensive and useful resources for practice in service provision.

Another major similarity between our studies is the emphasis of our research participants on the optimistic side and strengths of polyfamily life. While some research participants in all of the studies experienced significant life hardship, family conflict, and dissolution, none assigned polyamory any culpability. Rather, most emphasized the role of extended kinship and children in helping them navigate and survive the above and other vagaries of life. In this chapter, we posited three reasons for this optimism and recommend addressing two questions in future polyresearch methodologies: (a) Are respondents engaging in image maintenance in front of a researcher and why? and (b) How do we broaden our samples and develop methods so that volunteers who have experienced difficulties with polyamory feel able to divulge their experiences and trust that the researchers will provide empathy and empowerment?

Further research with children will also be useful in deepening the understanding of polyparenting and its outcomes and may address the above methodological concerns. However, given the difficulty of gaining Human Research Ethics (HRE) or Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval for research on children in general, much less children in sex and gender minority families, it is not a surprise that few academics have focused on children. Sheff's experience with the IRB was emblematic of this challenge: After 3 years of almost weekly meetings with IRB compliance specialists in which Sheff painstakingly addressed all of the IRB concerns regarding including the children of polyfamilies in her research, Sheff and the chair of her department were summoned before the entire board to account for the need to include children in the

sample. During this meeting IRB members commented to Sheff that "The parents will tell you what the children think, so you only really need to talk to them," and that "We already know about kids in gay families, why do we need to know about kids in polyamorous families, too?" Sheff maintains that parents do not always know what their children truly think and that polyfamilies and gay families are so distinct as to merit individual examination. Nevertheless, strategies such as undertaking family history and ethnographic research with young adults who were raised in polyfamilies are increasingly possible, given that this is a numerically increasing and visible cohort (Creation, 2019; Smith, 2015).

This chapter also highlighted the major concerns that reliance on participants who are almost always White and middle class results in exclusion by inclusion: A potentially wider variance of insights are collapsed or subsumed into White-centric and middle-class universalisms. We strongly recommend adopting and creating research designs with an intersectional lens which addresses the interweavings of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, indigenities, socioeconomic status, age, and (dis)abilities. We also recommend challenging Anglocentrism in research publication and a stronger engagement with innovative and groundbreaking research being undertaken beyond the Australian, Canadian, UK, and US assemblage. For instance, Vasallo (2018) from Spain intersects a critique of monogamy with a critique of Islamophobia; and researchers from Brazil explore the positioning of polyfamilies within domestic partnership laws (Sá & Vecili, 2014; Santiago, 2015; Silva, 2014). Related to an intersectional approach is the need to adopt a decolonizing approach whereby we engage with non-Western countries which may have had their precolonial diversity of genders, sexualities, and familial relationships erased or stigmatized in historical colonialism and contemporary neocolonialism (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019; Smith, 2012).

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