More Different than the Same: Customary Characterization of Alternative Relationship Groups and Types

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Abstract: This essay argues that non-monogamous relationship types exhibit enough continuity, artistry, and variation for the relationship types themselves to be considered folklore (rather than merely folk groups that generate folklore). Across variations, non-monogamous practices share much, including a tendency to both resist and reinforce dominant ideals. In this paper we focus on the ways members of one group perceive another to serve to anchor the definer simultaneously as more in and more out of the mainstream. Participants use their relationship configurations, as well as more common types of folklore such as narrative, costume, and folk speech, to communicate their messages about who they are. Often this message is packaged with an example of another group to demonstrate their proximity to mainstream values either through rebellion or by embracing these values.

Preface

I was on the far side of divorce and looking rather cynically from the shore at the whole institution of marriage. It happens. Disillusionment is an inevitable stage of the mourning process. My cynicism led me to ponder the viability of other relationship models. Living in a new state and beginning a new life, I set about exploring these possibilities. I began by attending “meet up” (http://www.meetup.com/) groups where I met practitioners of polyamory. Several failed dalliances, culminated by one in which I was essentially told I was fifth in the hierarchy of partners in a particular man’s life, led me to decide polyamory was not some alternative nirvana. I then became curious, though wary, about swingers (who usually prefer to refer to themselves as “part of the lifestyle” and
thus will be referred to as such for most of this paper). I was guilty of carrying trite stereotypes about this group in my head, linking them to the 1970s, Quaaludes and “key parties.” When one of them turned out to be a respected academic colleague, I reevaluated my preconceptions. But, in the end, I found the lifestyle was not for me either. However, I was already mentally cataloguing the folklore the two groups produced and assessing them from the perspective of an ethnographer.

In a flash of synchronicity, an unusually bright and perceptive student appeared in one of my classes—one that was otherwise marked by a distinct lack of engagement on behalf of the other class members, exhausting me and making this student stand out more. Their final paper was on the tattoos acquired by trans women and many of the subjects of their paper, one of whom was their partner at the time, also identified as polyamorous. That was Megan, who first became a research assistant and then a full collaborator on this project. Megan identifies as genderqueer and uses the singular pronouns “they, them, and their”. Between the two of us, we had a diverse array of contacts in these communities to draw upon for interviews. Interviews with our friends led to interviews with their friends. We drafted a set of questions but left the interviews largely open-ended and tried to allow the participants to take initiative in sharing what they wanted to about their lives. Each person was given the choice to be represented by pseudonyms or their own names. In most cases they chose the former, or solely their first names, because of the sensitivity of the subject matter and the complications that could arise because these relationship types are not widely accepted by the public.

We also drew upon our knowledge as community members ourselves, reflecting upon lived practice. Keeping our methodology open-ended and exploratory, reflecting on our own experiences in these communities as well as what we knew of our subjects through genuine relationships, we were able to see how membership in alternative lifestyle groups reflects not just one compartmentalized aspect of a person—a faith, a sexual orientation, a gender identity, or a type of relationship, for example—but lends perspectives that tend to permeate all aspects
of a person’s life. (All information included in this article was then reviewed by the subjects themselves to ensure accuracy and fidelity to how each wished to be portrayed, except in a few instances where they declined to be a part of the review process). We found that relationship groupings—both the way they were characterized, named or described by others and the groupings themselves—were informal, unofficial, and traditional creative acts. They were folklore.

**Introduction to Non-monogamy**

As we have come to understand the terms used by practitioners, the lifestyle is generally practiced by couples who engage in sexual relations with others with full consent of their primary partners. Polyamory can be understood as a practice wherein individuals have multiple romantic and sexual partners with all involved aware and consensual.

Elliot Oring introduced the concept of “dyadic traditions”—examples of folklore that emerge from folk groups consisting of just two people, radically changing our understanding of the nature of folk groups (Oring 1984). These dyads are often those comprised of people in “conjugal relations” (Oring 1984, 19). Conjugal relations—i.e., sexual relationships between spousal partners—are socially assumed to be dyadic, however, the currently proliferating variations on the dyad among non-monogamous communities raise the question of whether conjugal dyads themselves are not just folk groups but a form of folklore themselves. We contend that they are.

Whether folklore is constituted as “examples of human expression [that] become pervasive and commonplace” (Georges and Jones 1995, 1) or “artistic communication in small groups” (Ben Amos 1972, 13) or “the traditional, unofficial, noninstitutional part of culture” (Brunvand 1978, 4), we will demonstrate that non-monogamous relationship types and the discourse around them, both becoming more visible over recent decades and expanding in variety, fit the definition of folklore. Creativity and artistry exist in the variety of relationship types within the
non-monogamy spectrum (as well as further proliferating in the terms, narrative, dress, and events constructed by participants). Categories of non-monogamy express creativity by drawing upon traditional forms and stating something new about socially normative relationships. It is this expressive quality to the groupings, their implicit and sometimes explicit challenge to the traditional dyad, that makes them critical to categorize as not just folk groups that produce folklore but as a form of folklore itself.

To establish what within non-monogamy constitutes folklore, we will touch upon an array of forms: folk speech, characterizations of one group by another, personal narratives about participant experience in these relationships, costume, and the individual relationship configurations themselves.

Non-monogamous communities have created language to articulate their experiences that expand the traditional lexicon of relationship categories. Common types among non-monogamous relationship arrangements include the “triad,” (in which all three parties may be romantically connected), the “vee” (in which one person is connected to two, but those two are not connected to each other, and the “quad” (in which all four parties may be romantically linked). Relationships can be further delineated by levels of involvement, designating individual partners as having a “primary,” “secondary,” or “tertiary” role. Relationships may be exclusive, i.e., “polyfidelitous,” or simply not open to additional partners due to being “polysaturated” (Veaux 2014). The relationship types and terminology for them continue to evolve and specialize.

Different kinds of non-monogamous communities have a lot in common. Our research has shown that a tendency to both resist and reinforce dominant ideals is present in both lifestyle and polyamorous communities. One community tends to negatively characterize another in order to anchor the definer paradoxically closer and further away from mainstream relationship ideals. This perspective is reflected in previous work by Bauman on differential identity (1971), by Jansen on the
esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore (1959), by Bucholtz on negative identity practices (1999), and by Goodwin on gay and straight communities (1989, 2000).

An apt example of the tendency of one group to misunderstand the other, as well as of the artistry and creativity applied to characterizations of non-monogamous couplings can be found in John Good’s chart, “A Few Common Love Polygons,” which lists several types of polyamorous unions followed by the “Swinger Trapezoid” and the comment “I have absolutely no idea how swinging works” (Good 2012). This type of misunderstanding and characterization of lifestyle relations in comparison to polyamorous relationships is common when members of one community characterize the other. Although, in this case, we are operating under the assumption, based on his perspective, that the artist is polyamorous rather than lifestyle because his perspective shares much in common with other examples we found both in our interviews and in existing scholarship. It is also characteristic of the creativity applied to relationship types and their characterizations.

**Existing Literature**

As early as 1976, Betty Fang heralded the death of swinging as a lifestyle in “Swinging in Retrospect” (Fang 1976, 49), yet contrary to that death knell, forms of non-monogamous relationship types span a spectrum from polyamory to swinging and have proliferated in recent decades. As Bergstrand and Sinski noted in 2010, “Although the swinging subculture continued to exist in subsequent decades, almost no attention was paid to them by academic researchers” (49). It is unclear whether the reason for this was the taboo nature of the topic. Possibly the need for identities and affinities to be covert in many instances prevented researchers from accessing data. The lack of research on the topic may have led to the perception that these folk groups had ceased to operate or decreased rather than multiplied.

In a 2000 study, Bergstrand and Sinski found swinging still prevalent enough to generate over 1,000 responses to an online survey (2010, 17). Terry Gould's 1999
book *The Lifestyle: A Look at the Erotic Rites of Swingers*, suggests the number of people active in the lifestyle to be more in the realm of three million, according to the conjecture of Robert McKinley, president of the Lifestyles Organization, who came up with the figure based on the “number of clubs, the roster of club memberships, attendance at parties, and samples of parties in selected cities.” (Gould 1999, 76) With growing visibility for non-monogamous communities, it is likely today’s numbers are even higher.

In the realm of polyamory, a number of popular guidebooks exist, ranging from *Polyamory in the 21st Century* (2012) by Deborah Anapol to *Pagan Polyamory* (2005) by Raven Kaldera. One scholarly collection, *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (Barker and Langdridge 2010a), includes two articles on swinging among the many on polyamory. Nonetheless, despite the ostensible popularity and endurance of these subcultures over at least four decades, these forms and choices continue to be regarded as unsavory, or at least odd, by the general public.

Both our experience and existing literature point to the fact that the choice of identification with a particular community based on relationship type seems to have as much to do with alignment with non-sexual associated practices and economic strata as it does with the type of sexual or relationship ideology enacted. Polyamorists tend to be more inclined to be a part of other alternative subcultures. As Aviram notes of the Bay Area polyamorous community, they draw from “radical and countercultural scenes, such as 1960s counterculture, the science fiction/fantasy scene, alternative spiritualities, and geek cultures” (2010, 88). People in the lifestyle place a high value on careers and upward mobility. Summing up the demographics of theirs and previous studies, Bergstrand and Sinski in *Swinging in America* write, “The majority of studies report that the predominance of swingers are white with above average education and hold professional career positions” (2010, 21).

Though bound by as much commonality as difference, our data will show that in different ways people in the lifestyle and polyamous people distinguish
themselves from each other in a manner that gives each a grounding tie to mainstream values: people in the lifestyle by accentuating their commitment to one emotional partner and polyamorous people by accentuating the primacy of love over sex in their relationships. Each group emphasizes this by pointing out how they are different from the other group. As Bauman explained, “difference of identity, not necessarily sharing, can be at the base of folklore performance” (Bauman 1971, 35). The practice of concretizing identity by distancing oneself from another group can be compared to the negative identity practices within Mary Bucholtz's research around the language practices of girls in the nerd group in their school. Bucholtz offers this definition of negative and positive identity practices:

Negative identity practices are those that individuals employ to distance themselves from a rejected identity, while positive identity practices are those in which individuals engage in order to actively construct a chosen identity. In other words, negative identity practices define what their users are not, and hence emphasize identity as an intergroup phenomenon; positive identity practices define what their users are, and thus emphasize the intragroup aspects of social identity. (Bucholtz, 1999, 211-212)

Distinctions made by both lifestyle and polyamorous communities to distinguish themselves from the other group are examples of negative identity practices. The lines they draw simultaneously accept and reject mainstream values around sexuality in relationships. This idea extends the earlier concept identified by Jansen as “the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore” in which “the esoteric applies to what one group thinks of itself and what it supposes others think of it. The exoteric is what one group thinks of another and what it thinks that other group thinks it thinks” (Jansen 1959, 206-207). One of the three major factors that Jansen identifies as lending itself to the development of the esoteric-exoteric is isolation, which
ranges from geographic to “other not-so-obvious forms of isolation” (209). In the case of non-monogamy, while they may not be isolated physically from the rest of society, they may feel the isolation due to negative perceptions of them by outsiders. Barker and Landridge note that a “common theme in research is the distancing of forms of non-monogamy from one another, particularly swinging and polyamory” (2010b, 758).

The negative discourse around forms of non-monogamy and their purported differences is sometimes perpetuated by the literature on them as well as by the interview subjects themselves. Published volumes either preference one or the other form rather than focusing on their commonalities. For example, of the 26 chapters in Barker and Langdridge’s *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (2010a), only two have the lifestyle as their central topic whilst the others largely deal with aspects of polyamory. One of the two essays is by a therapist and lifestyle participant and presents a largely positive view of the topic, but early on, the essay finds it necessary to acknowledge that “even advocates of some non-monogamous social structures (e.g. open relationship-type communes and polyamorous relationships) find swinging difficult to accept, due to its apparent lack of interest in emotional connection with playmates” (71). In a separate 2010 essay published in *Sexualities*, Barker and Langdridge note that swinging gets a celebratory treatment less often in the scholarship than polyamory and point to such celebratory treatments as “unusual since swinging is often regarded as the form of consensual non-monogamy which is most heteronormative and apolitical and remains closest to conventional coupledom” (2010b, 754). While they cite contrary reports, they do not question the value that sexual activity must be political in order to be celebrated.

From the other side, Bergstrand and Sinski’s *Swinging in America* further confuses the issue by repeatedly illustrating that the authors are unaware of models of non-monogamy apart from swinging, broadly defined. For example, they quote an informant who refers to “compersion”—the polyamorist’s word for the opposite of
jealousy—and state, “Notice that the person in this last narrative has created a new word to describe feelings associated with jealousy,” (2010, 73) seemingly unaware that the word has fairly widespread use in the polyamorous community. Likewise, Gould’s treatment of the lifestyle demonstrates a clear preference for swinging over polyamory, using hundreds of pages to establish their relative normality, then toward the end includes a chapter on polyfidelity which is painted as somehow more deviant from social values (1999, 265-294).

Because of the misunderstandings that are perpetuated both in participant perceptions and writing on the topic, the rest of the essay strives to focus equally on both polyamory and the lifestyle and is structured as an exploration of intergroup perceptions to bring further understanding to “the complex and largely misunderstood relationship between monogamy, non-monogamy and swinging” (MacDonald 2010, 71). First, we will establish existing commonalities between the groups and then illustrate how they distinguish themselves from one another.

**Methods**

We conducted interviews with individuals who self-identify as either polyamorous or in the lifestyle. Our interviews lasted between one and three hours with questions being open-ended. An emphasis was placed on participants controlling the direction of the interview and providing information that they felt was most relevant to painting a picture of their experiences. Participants were found through snowball sampling techniques. We intentionally began with contacts close to our own lives in order to promote openness and trust in the data. These initial contacts helped spread the word about the research, and we gathered interviews from a diverse range of participants. Many of our fifteen interviewees identify along the queer and gender non-conforming spectrums and come from a variety of class backgrounds.
**Interviews and Discussion**

Beyond relationship type, practitioners of polyamory and people in the lifestyle tend to group themselves with people who share things in common with them. It is these relationships, the friendships rather than the sexual or romantic partnerships, that seem to be at the center of non-monogamist practice as much as non-monogamy itself. As queer and polyamorous student and nonprofit employee Kari, age 25, described it:

The thing that surprised me, and this was a really fantastic, exciting surprise, was the relationship that I have with my partner's other partners. It's become a thing that's very important to me and that I value a lot. That I have these people who share a partner with me and that sort of gives us a connection and a basis for friendship that's very different from just a normal friend who I don't have any kind of connection like that with or the way that I interact with just a partner.

Meg, 32, a medical professional self-described as lifestyle, explained:

So, I would say our life now, as far as relationships go, even if we stopped playing with other people, we would describe ourselves as being in the lifestyle, because for us it’s become more of a mentality and a way of looking at things, not just, “It's Friday night, let’s hook up with somebody. So, our best friends are lifestyle play partners, our group of friends are all involved in it, we vacation with these people, we do, you know, nights out with these friends, so, it’s definitely something that’s just ingrained as part of us now.”

Both of these participants emphasize the friendships as much as or more than the sexual components of non-monogamy. Ultimately, both Kari and Meg have formed a
community through their non-monogamous experiences and that community is a sustainable piece of their lives. This theme recurred throughout our interviews.

The relationship between polyamory and the lifestyle and between both and the world of the monogamous correlates with Goodwin’s 1989 analysis:

The gay community’s unique position in relations to the straight world is also reflected in the ways the subculture uses its folklore. Although gays are marginal members of the dominant culture and can function at least as easily in the straight community as in the subculture, they nevertheless maintain a sense of territoriality. Folklore is used to define territory by inhibiting outsiders’ understanding of information; in this way nonmembers are excluded and the community is protected. Folklore aids in yet another aspect of territoriality—“mating” rituals—although in the case of the gay subculture, mating does not contribute to the preservation of the species through offspring. Rather folklore functions like a mating ritual through maintenance, transmission, and validation of culture. (Goodwin 1989, 79)

Non-monogamous communities use language to create community and to separate from the mainstream monogamous community. Distinctions between jealousy and envy carry more weight in non-monogamous communities. Feelings resembling jealousy may be analyzed more closely than in monogamous relationships because it is assumed to some degree that jealousy destroys relationships. Monogamous communities may consider jealousy a natural part of a healthy relationship. Our participants defined envy as feelings associated with wanting what another person has, while jealousy comes from a place of ownership and insecurity around losing what one has. Among polyamorists in particular, new terminology is used to describe and disempower feelings of jealousy. For example,
“wibble” is used to describe “A feeling of insecurity, typically temporary or fleeting, when seeing a partner being affectionate with someone else” and “compersion” or “frubble” to describe “A feeling of joy when a partner invests in and takes pleasure from another romantic or sexual relationship.” Even “the partner of one’s partner” has a special term of affection, the “metamour” (Veaux 2014).

This language, like the term “lifestyle” is a form of coding that can be used while occupying monogamous community space in order to make room for discussing non-monogamous community experiences without being noticed. As with the gay community:

...through coding, ambiguity, etc., queer space-time can occupy the same physical space-time as heterosexual space-time. That is, queers can simultaneously occupy both "normal" space-time and a different conceptual space-time through the use of their esoteric knowledge. (Goodwin 2000, 5)

Language is also used to create subgroups. Those identifying as polyamorous often talk about other groups with some amount of disdain, as noted in our research. This is especially true of lifestyle communities. As Goodwin explains, this territoriality is used to exclude outsiders and to build community values in relationships.

Cohesion is a very strong need felt by many people; it is a desire for a sense of belonging, a means of relating to others based on a sense of commonality that results in a sense of group identity. Before cohesion can develop, one must be able to identify those with whom one has something in common and to communicate with them to ensure that there is indeed a basis for some sort of relationship to proceed. Homosexuality provides an instant basis for this interaction, even
though people may have nothing else in common, since being gay is a stigmatized identity and as such is generally an intimate secret shared only with one’s closest friends. Therefore gay people feel a heightened need for cohesion. (Goodwin 1989, 29)

Goodwin’s passage above reflects a lot of the experiences of the non-monogamous folks interviewed for this research. As with being gay, many people are hesitant to share their relationship style with anyone but those with whom they are closest to. Society does not directly reward people for having more than one partner and the experience carries social stigma. This marginalization promotes a need for community, and a large part of community building is finding common ground. It is here that distinctions between polyamory and swinging are made. Goodwin writes, “Among gay men this covert conflict (in this case, racism and misogyny) is intensified because of a strong need to feel superior to some group of people. Popularly viewed as the lowers of the low, gays respond by asserting that there are people inferior even to them” (Goodwin 1989, 61). Our research did not uncover the same influences of racism and misogyny discussed here (though they may indeed exist), but while the targeted group differed in our data, the behavior described is similar. Goodwin continues, “A reluctance to accept female impersonators and flaming queens is also common in the subculture, since many gays feel that such people are ‘politically incorrect,’ reinforcing straights’ stereotypes of gays and thereby hindering the cause of gay liberation” (61).

The idea of political correctness is covertly represented by the interviews we conducted. In many of our interviews casual sex was described as less valuable than committed relationships. This idea of commitment is rooted in monogamous culture in a way that is comparable to how femininity in gay culture is seen as less valuable than masculinity. Both casual sex and femininity are seen as behavior that puts the community’s movement towards acceptance at risk (Goodwin 1989, 61-62). It is clear that language is used both as a vehicle for community cohesion and
differentiation in non-monogamous groups. In order to build community and to be taken seriously by outsiders, non-monogamy becomes a hierarchical system of subcategories with the most committed relationship styles at the top and the most sexually promiscuous at the bottom.

In practice, both populations counter negative perceptions of their respective life choices by delineating a clear distinction between a one-night stand and a recurring sexual partner who is elevated to companion status. By emphasizing the emotional relationship over the purely sexual, they thereby ground themselves in more mainstream values. In both communities, there is an emphasis placed on the friendships that lead to sexual partners or the friendships that develop out of a sexual encounter. More than not, it is this friendship dynamic that is the focus of anecdotes relating to community member’s sex lives.

Kari, for example, shares a story about a partner’s partner who she bonded with when the other two had sex for the first time:

My partner, I think IM’s me and tells me this. And it makes me really excited, I’m really happy for them, I’m feeling really good and I go: How can I tell your partner that I want to give her a high five without being creepy about it. And my partner of course immediately passes that message along. And she responds 48 high fives! And so I immediately make a little note because I make notes for things all of the time so I can keep track of things in my brain that she owes me 48 high fives. And the bottom, I have like a tab where like people borrow ten bucks or something and I write it down. So at the bottom of the tab is that this girl owes me 48 high fives, and then I go out of town for a while and we don’t see each other and it’s like two or three weeks later and we’re finally hanging out at the same place. Um, and some people across the room like, try to give each other high fives, like this is what people do sometimes and that jogs her memory that we have
like 48 high five debt. And so we immediately sit down and count out 48 high fives to each other. I don’t expect that anyone else in the room, our mutual partner obviously knows what’s going on, but nobody else has any clue. Um, and there was just this like, really nice excited moment of acknowledging that this cool thing happened for these two people that I care about a lot and that I was really excited about it. And we got to be kind of silly and playful and that was really great, but yeah, there’s the story.

Terry Gould makes note of the dominant paradigm privileging the non-sexual in his own account of why lifestyle participants generally incite negative and disparaging accounts in the popular press:

...with the partial exception of Tantra (which has its own idiosyncratic orthodoxy), each of the world’s major religions, their mystical traditions, and even some humanist schools of thought, have for the betterment of humanity arranged the pursuits of life along a vertical scale, with those that encourage lust at the hellish bottom and those that encourage chaste love at the heavenly top. From the seven spinal chakras of the Hindus to the seven rungs of Jacob’s ladder in the Bible, and from the seven links of the Elizabethans’ great chain of being to the seven tiers of the psychologist Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs,” the directional arrows are all the same: saturnalian pursuits lift one downward to the lowest sphere of genital instinct, selfishness, and evil; spiritual pursuits lift one upward to the godly crown of superconsciousness, selfless service, and goodness. (Gould 1999, 110)

Phillips cites the same quote, above, but contends that while “non-monogamy, as it is practiced by polyamorists in particular, absolutely speaks against the notion that
this world must be paired off into twos” (Phillips 2010, 83). He continues, lifestylers “provide an altogether different discourse that both rejects and reinforces dominant understandings of how we are told to get along” (83). This argument, however, fails to take into consideration the vast array of practices that constitute both polyamory and swinging and how both reject and reinforce dominant ideals. While polyamory may indeed challenge the normativity of partnering in pairs, it does not challenge the primacy of the emotional relationship over the purely sexual relationship. The primacy of the emotional relationship is sometimes used by polyamorists to consider polyamory superior to swinging, which more in reputation than reality, is thought to be more concerned with sex divorced from emotional attachment. None of this is meant to dismiss the prioritization of relationships before sex as a value, but instead to highlight that our society tends to consider the valuing of emotional relationships over sexual both “natural” and “right,” largely without questioning, even in polyamorous and lifestyle communities that in many other ways challenge the dominant norms.

In truth, both groups report a range of activity from casual sex to deeply committed and enduring emotional relationships. It is not uncommon, for example, for polyamorists to take part in more casual sexual encounters. As Kari states, “I very much enjoy casual sex, um, I have no trouble finding partners for casual sex. Um, and again, that’s a thing I sort of do on my own. Well I’ve got some free time this week I’ll go and see if I can’t find someone to hook up with.” Raclaw (2007) observed this range within his field group of polyamorists and noted, too, how by critiquing their own more casual sexual activity they reinforced their own ideological stance as primarily polyamorous: “the policing of boundaries surrounding each form of non-monogamy provided a productive site for polyamorous identity-making” (Raclaw 2007, 5). In both the scholarship and interview data, the misunderstanding persists that people in the lifestyle value casual sex more highly and polyamorists value emotional relationships more highly. Ana, a 27-year-old singer who identifies as bisexual and polyamorous said, “It’s a
different community and I feel like it has a lot more to do with sex than with loving, committed relationships. And I prefer all of my relationships to be meaningful.” Even Kari, who lauded the pursuit of casual sex, explained that “polyamory for me means that you are interested um, not just in having sexual relationships with multiple people concurrently, but that there’s a romantic and committed aspect to that.” This is not, of course, a universally accepted set of definitions for swinging (the lifestyle) or polyamory, and the definitions are in flux depending on the background and agenda of the definer.

Tess, a 27-year-old artist, refers to herself as “lifestyle” but clarifies that to encompass “anything different than the Christian standard” of relationships. This definition could thus encompass both lifestyle and polyamory and other relationship forms in their contemporary contexts. And, in practice, there is little difference between the behaviors of polyamorists and lifestyle practitioners—as noted earlier, both report instances of a range of sexual connections ranging from the strictly casual to deeply emotional. There is a great deal of crossover between the two communities in practice. However, in defining the other community distinctions are drawn which may over exaggerate an assumed lack of emotional commitment in the other group.

Isaac, 32, identifies as “a queer Jewish individual...As far as gender I actually tried to identify as a dandy but that’s not a terribly legible gender so I default to a male.” He explained that “I really like the term polyfidelity as like a self descriptor because it incorporates the fact that you are in a relationship a romantic relationship or an emotional relationship with more than one person in the sense that it is poly but there is also a sense of fidelity that you would have with traditional monogamy.” Note that in neither the case of “poly” or “fidelity” is either part of the term seen to point to sex. “Poly” refers to romantic, emotional relationships in the plural and “fidelity” refers to faithfulness to those partners. It can be seen that there is a clear contention that what is important—first and foremost—is intimacy, commitment and accountability with one’s partners. Isaac
described how he carries his sexual orientation beyond whom he is attracted to and takes it also to mean how he describes spaces he holds. Sexual orientation becomes inclusive of behavior and conduct in his definition. Isaac is describing the political implications of a “Queer” identity manifesting in social interaction. Politics and social negotiation play a large role in Isaac’s gender identity as well. Finding a place in society for his gender and orientation led to challenges with his relationship style. Isaac explained that he felt out of place when he entered lifestyle clubs and spaces, particularly in terms of feeling free to engage sexually with men:

Poly communities seem more accepting of openly bi, queer men. In fact Denver in particular, uh, has it’s own gay poly community and...and you know there’s a lot of overlap and interchange between that and the rest of the poly community for lack of a better way of putting it. Through, through men who engage in relationships with women too.

As a member of the kink community, Issac admits that, “A lot of my kink revolves around destabilizing patriarchal and like reli...dominant religious practices and destabilizing power structures in our societies. Like a lot of my hottest hottness is centered around upsetting that balance and fucking with those systems.” We see here that sexual interactions are themselves political statements as well as pleasurable creative acts.

Arch, 30, a student who worked at a GLBT student services office (at the time of this interview) on a large public university campus and who majored in Queer Studies through the university's individualized degree program, identified as “genderqueer and poly-minded.” They (Arch uses mixed pronouns, i.e., “They went to the store to buy some milk because his partner forgot to buy it for her.”) explained differences between terms this way:
Polyamory allows for a little bit of that emotional connection that I think is fairly organic that happens with a lot of people when they initially have romantic relationships regardless if they are in a primary relationship or not. I think people tend to have that initial latch on to ‘ooh’ new person, new thing, um, while they’re getting to know them. So I like that polyamory incorporates that into its identity a little bit...So I think non-monogamy is more conducive to having less consistent sexual partners and swinging, from everybody I know that identifies as swinging, that’s primarily with their partner or with other people that identify in couples as swingers.”

Arch’s description of swinging emphasizes a couple in an open relationship versus the definition given for polyamory, which allows for commitment amongst multiple individuals. Arch seems to suggest that people in the lifestyle are monogamous in the aspects of their relationship that are non-sexual. We might take from this description that polyamory in their view is a more “true” kind of non-monogamy in that the emotional commitments at the core of the relationship are with multiple people.

It’s interesting because I’ve been non-monogamous in a polyamorous relationship before...It wasn’t always easy, because I was the secondary partner...so figuring out what that actually meant was kind of an interesting process. And then, you know, now it just sort of depends on the relationship because there are some relationships that I would be very very happy being non-monogamous in, they’re are some relationships that I would be happy being poly in, and then there is relationships where I think it wouldn’t really work for our dynamic.
For Arch, non-monogamy, polyamory, and swinging are further from being an identity and closer to a relationship style. We asked him to clarify the differences between polyamory and non-monogamy, and she said that, “...Polyamory lends itself more to having multiple relationships that are erotic and romantic, whereas non-monogamous has more of a focus on just the erotic component with multiple partners.” Arch’s perspective on this matter is important because they do an excellent job of emphasizing identity and relationship styles as being on a spectrum.

Alex, also 31, a mother and student who identifies as bisexual and a cisgender female, saw the distinction between terms somewhat differently, but still saw a clear divide between swinging and other terms:

With polyamory, polyfidelity and non-monogamy I don't see a distinction. With swinger I do. The distinction I see is in privilege; giving privilege to partners or not. So in swinging what I see is that partners give permission to do certain things and in polyamory and ethical non-monogamy its partners don’t even need to give permission because each person is a whole person within themselves to have their own permissions.

Practitioners of the former three are thus seen to be respectful of the wholeness of the individuals they are in relationship with while lifestyle participants are not. She further stated that “What I’ve read about the difference between swinging and polyamory is that swinging is much more confined in the box of society while in polyamory and non-monogamy it’s further outside, if there’s a box at all.” Thus, within polyamory, there tends to be a valorization of polyamory as a higher form of relationship than monogamy or other forms of non-monogamy such as swinging. Early in the interview, Alex identified herself as a mother and throughout the conversation it became clear that both family commitments and freedom were important themes in her life. As her husband and her initial boundaries around non-
monogamy changed they became more centered around what was necessary for the health of their family unit. Alex’s confession of the difficulty in seeing how her relationship style may sometimes impact her children shows her struggling with the combination of the freedom of her own self and the family she cares for. It seems that sometimes these two core parts of her identity can conflict, and to hear her explain how she grapples with this shows a complex side of the discussion of non-monogamy.

Whether an advocate for polyamory or a part of the lifestyle, it would seem that while “randomly hooking up” may happen, it is played down, perhaps because of the privileging of more enduring relationships in society as a whole. In neither case, however, do proponents seem to see it as a defining part of their practice but may see it as a defining part of the practice of outsiders or of their practice as defined by outsiders.

For John, who identified as “lifestyle” and a real estate developer, 38, the distinction is fairly subtle: “the concept of polyamorous tends to take it to another level, its more involved you know love based relationships with multiple people. I think for the most part we have good friendships with people we have sex with.” Again, even here, the emphasis coincides with dominant values, placing the relationship, be it friendship or love-based, before sex. Though it seems that the non-monogamies discussed here reinforce societal values that privilege relationships more than sex, they also challenge dominant ideal on relationships is by allowing sexual relationships to develop outside of coupledom.

Ana, the bisexual, polyamorous singer, inserted marriage into her description of lifestyle participants:

...first of all, I feel like swingers are pretty much married people, and I’m not married. I am, I am...not single obviously, but I have, I am not far enough along in my relationships to be married, um, I have a life, I have a life partner, you know. [name omitted] is my boyfriend and we
don’t even live together yet, so... I dunno, the swinger thing I feel like is for people who are, I dunno, it’s for married people and they wife swap. That’s just how I’ve always known what that is. It’s a different community and I feel like it has a lot more to do with sex than with loving, committed relationships. And I prefer all of my relationships to be meaningful. I prefer connecting with people not just sexually, but also as people.

On the surface, it seems that Ana’s description is contradictory. She places emphasis on the married aspect of couples in the lifestyle, a legal contract that socially symbolizes the epitome of relationship commitment, but then argues that people in the lifestyle are less committed in their relationships than (in her view) the often unmarried polyamorous. However, the description is actually situating those in the lifestyle into position in a relationship hierarchy. It is not that she thinks swingers have no committed relationships, but that in terms of partners beyond the central unit of the married couple, there is little commitment. Ana places the polyamorous as seeking not only sexual exploration from additional partners, but also a committed relationship.

A folkloristic perspective can enhance the ethnographic lens when it comes to phenomena like polyamory and the lifestyle because of the emphasis on informal culture and the role of creativity in the everyday. That there is a range of language to represent non-monogamy is itself a testament to the creativity of individuals and their ability to construct an array of terms and definitions to characterize the subtleties differentiating similar worldviews. This creativity goes well beyond language, incorporating sexual and relationship worldviews into the artistic, spiritual, and political expressions of participants. Ana is a notable example. A member of an a cappella band wherein each member takes on a fairy persona: “I incorporate sexuality into every aspect of my life including my stage performance,” claimed Ana. She continued:
We perform for nerds and geeks and people who are other kin and people who are furries, and people who basically have something else, something different from mainstream. And because that is our fan base, I feel like, my being a fairy character who has a sexuality that is different from what the mainstream is used to seeing is a really good way of connecting with my audience. I don’t go up on stage and strip naked, you know. I don’t seduce people from on stage, but nor am I going to hide the fact that I’m bisexual, the fact that I’m poly. The fact that my sexuality is actually quite fairy in the sense of the Avalon fae, in the sense of, you know, they don’t have to abide by mortal rules and I feel like our audience connects with that. Also I feel like our audience has a lot of folks from the BDSM scene who are also very open to that. And so, connecting on that level, I mean, any band, if you’ve been to the Renaissance Festival, you know that any bawdy act will have references to BDSM, to sex. I have no reason to hide all of that. I almost don’t even find it comical anymore; I just find it a way of connecting with people that makes sense to me.

Ana’s sexuality, relationship orientation, and her creativity are inextricably intertwined. Creativity also plays out in aspects of the social interactions of those in the lifestyle, who have a fondness for themed parties. In the words of artist and lifestyle participant, Tess:

Themes are fun. It’s how you get out of your box. You’ve got to dress up. For one, it’s a great ground-breaker for a lot of people. A lot of people are shy. A lot of people have a really hard time getting out there and even something as simple as ok, everyone needs to dress in
blue...you see all these people, all these different people and all these different personalities, all with this one commonality.

Costuming facilitates the building of an initial sense of connection to people who are otherwise strangers. Participants can bond over the shared experience of a theme and their participation provides a conversational starting point. In keeping with Heather Joseph-Witham’s observations about costume art at Star Trek conventions and Renaissance fairs, costumes at a lifestyle event serve to temporarily change the rules of society, referring to a wide range of behaviors not normally acceptable in a public or semi-public setting. For example, Joseph Witham argued, “Fans know they are in a certain reality, but they suspend the rules of everyday life for a little while and enter a forum for play” (Joseph Witham 1996, 30). In lifestyle parlance, “playing” can take on an additional sexual meaning to connote sexual acts (“What is a Swinger?” 2014), demonstrating the adaptation of language to fit their worldview. While emotional relationships are paramount, neither is sex itself vilified. However, a sexual relationship on its own may not hold the same value as play within the context of an emotional relationship.

Play can also refer to the role of folklore itself as creative expression that is in constant dialogue with mainstream values negotiating space for the subversive by reinforcing some values that are more acceptable in order to make the subversive aspects themselves more acceptable. In this case, two similar folk groups navigate mainstream culture by positioning themselves in contrast to the other in order to reinforce their own acceptability, all the while maintaining a sense of autonomy: “this is my body,” Ana asserts to her boyfriend, “and I share it with whomever I want, and I share it with you because I love you. We connect that way and it’s great. My sharing it with other people does not diminish my love for you and my sharing it with you” But, even Ana acknowledges, “you know, it’s hard for people to see it that way.” And so the dialogue and negotiation continues, as practitioners play with language, costume, relationship types and characterizations, all while they play with
each other, in an attempt to find space for their personal values within the acceptable parameters of society as a whole. The relationship configurations themselves are part of the play, part of the folklore itself, rather than simply folk groups.

**Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research**

Not all folk groups are folklore. However, the way non-monogamous communities create a language to play with the traditional form of the dyad creatively expresses a socio-political stance about relationships while simultaneously expressing the principles of folklore. If we look at common elements of contemporary definitions of folklore (tradition/continuity, change/innovation/dynamism, creativity/artistry, unofficiality/informality, communication/message), not all folk groups demonstrate, all of these, particularly with regard to creativity and artistry. Non-monogamous relationship formations all use creativity with a traditional form (the dyad) to express a message about the constituents’ worldview, to affirm their values, and to make a statement about what in contemporary society they reject.

Non-monogamous communities are dynamically creating new values and reinforcing mainstream perspectives around emotional and sexual aspect of relationships. These communities are under researched not only in folklore studies but across academic fields. Additionally, further research with these communities will create a more in-depth understanding of the ways that race, class, sexuality, gender, ability, etc. influence the folklore of non-monogamy. Looking at these intersections is immensely important to understanding these communities; however, this analysis was out of the scope of this paper.

In looking then to the future, we must not only do what folklorists have been doing from the beginning: looking for creativity in unexpected, informal places, but also expanding the definition of folklore to include the folk groups themselves, as these groupings of people are a critical piece of the creativity as it is expressed. If we
do not, we miss the opportunity to see significant artistry and sources of meaning in people’s everyday lives.

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**Interviews**

Meg, Interview, August 29, 2012.

Mike, Interview, August 29, 2012.


“John,” Interview, undated 2012.


Arch, Interview, January 3, 2013.

Siren, Interview, February 5, 2013

Isaac, Interview, February 7, 2013.

“Alex,” Interview, February 8th, 2013


Sable, Interview, February 26, 2013.


Interviewees with names in quotes are pseudonyms. Those not in quotes wished to be identified by actual first name.
References


