



The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families

Elisabeth Sheff

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Marriage and monogamy are not what they used to be, and today many couples are opting to start families before getting married, or deciding not to get married at all. At the same time, gay couples in states that recognize same-sex marriage are getting married in droves. Some people prefer non-monogamy and have relationships that include swinging and polyamory. The landscape of American marriage and relationships is changing, and a variety of family systems are developing and becoming more common. *The Polyamorists Next Door* introduces polyamorous families, in which people are free to pursue emotional, romantic, and sexual relationships with multiple people at the same time, openly and with support from their partners, sometimes forming multi-partner relationships, or other arrangements that allow for emotional and sexual freedom within the family system. In colorful and moving details, this book explores how polyamorous relationships come to be, grow and change, manage the ins and outs of daily family life, and cope with the challenges they face both within their families and from society at large. Using polyamorists' own words, Dr. Elisabeth Sheff examines polyamorous households and reveals their advantages, disadvantages, and the daily lives of those living in them. While polyamorous families are increasingly common, fairly little is known about them outside of their own social circles or of the occasional media sensationalism. This book provides information that will be useful for professionals with polyamorous clients, educators who wish to understand or teach about polyamory, and especially people who wish to better understand polyamory themselves or explain it to their potential partners, adult children, or in-laws.

The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families Details

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Zcat says

Gives Sheff's qualitative take on data from poly relationships. Sadly, she doesn't have data on people who have left the community, so it doesn't indicate the likelihood of poly relationships to work relative to monogamous. If you want a description of the poly community and some common strengths/problems they face, this is good (if dry).

Stefanie says

I would give this a 4.5, and actually recommend it to people who are NOT polyamorous, in poly/mono relationships, or if they are poly, then the ones who would enjoy an academic / "step outside" look at polyamory and poly families. For the subject matter alone this is groundbreaking, but in case you are concerned this will be fairly dry, Sheff also brings in her own personal "brush with poly" that makes the information presented resonate even more deeply.

This is a pretty amazing work - based on 15 years of research, and it shows. It is laid out like book-length dissertation: the first half of the book goes over the different type of poly relationships possible (a bit of review if you've read books about polyamory before) and the demographics of who's in the poly community. Sheff then details strengths and pitfalls of poly relationships, using her own attempt at poly as a "case in point" example. The last half to third of the book focuses on how different poly families operate (turns out, not that much different than other families, especially blended ones). All throughout Sheff includes direct quotes from poly folks and family members she interviewed, and she closes by detailing how monogamous families may have some lessons to learn from poly families about resiliency, as well as with a few policy recommendations that would acknowledge and allow for poly families in current society.

Sheff considers herself monogamous (not a spoiler as it's in the intro), which makes her exploration of this relationship style - personally and academically - fascinating and even more convincing when she talks about its strengths even when she would not personally choose it. And while I consider myself fairly well read on the topic, in reading this book I was delighted to learn a new concept: "polyaffectivity" - which denotes significant emotional but not sexual connections between partners. (Apparently triads with a woman and two men [where the men aren't sexual with each other] are some of the most stable types of poly relationships out there. Who knew?!) Plus - some of the info on demographics of the community is straight fire: I don't know any other author who has so clearly pointed out how white and privileged poly community members tend to be (as well as tending toward heterosexual men and bisexual women).

There's so much here to dig into. Definitely worth the read if you're looking for a descriptive analysis of polyamory, with a unique focus on poly families. If you want an insider look at poly families in their own words, I think Stories From the Polycule: Real Life in Polyamorous Families may be the better bet.

Carl Stevens says

Novelists need to know polyamory.

João Martins says

A qualitative study of polyamory and polyamorous families with a focus on tending to children. From an academic point of view, this was much needed. While I tend to prefer quantitative studies since they are more easily verifiable, the qualitative analysis was performed with hundreds of subjects and there should be some statistical legitimacy to this.

There will always be obvious biases when people volunteer to self-report, but that said, the impartial analysis was pretty interesting. Since the book relies heavily on personal stories, the bulk of it is a relatively light read.

I am personally happy to hear the conclusions. The problems that affect children in polyamorous families are largely those of children in the regular modern family - sometimes slightly exaggerated by the more complex dynamics of poly families. The benefits of living in a family that is intentionally poly are many, from a lot more access to emotional resources, a diversified group with which to interact more intimately, a focus on honesty. I was struck by the confidence displayed by some of the kids and teenagers, and their capability to understand complex social dynamics and relations of cause/effect.

A significant portion of the problems that do occur are related to the stigmatisation of polyamory by society at large.

Some loose thoughts that occurred to me while reading:

- The author emphasises the sexual nature of the connection between adults in polyamory. She only redeems herself nearer the end by her focus on polyaffection (affection without sex). In general, I didn't feel like there was enough of an adequate separation between sexual and romantic relations, but that's a subject that I am rather passionate about and YMMV :)
- A lot of the benefits from polyamory are derived from the fact that those who practice it do so consciously and intentionally; not by default. Polyamory by default, with no attempt to work on and develop the emotional skills necessary is a recipe for crashing'n'burning.

All in all, a book that won't blow any minds, but that provides a true insight into the lives of polyamorous families, children included, from a pretty unbiased, academic perspective.

Conor Murphy says

Information wise this was 4.5 stars. Writing wise it was probably 2 stars, maybe 3 if I'm being generous. Wasn't too hard to get through though, the subject matter was fascinating and I learned a lot.

Sarah says

4.5 stars, mostly for being the first to tackle a topic that needed more info on it

A good introduction to research on families involving poly people. This includes both mixed families with more than 2 parents, and 2 parent families in which the parents have outside romantic/sexual relationships.

Includes many statistics and was approached from an anthropological ethnography style of research and writing. The book necessarily has some limitations because the author herself was involved in the poly scene, and because she interviewed only families in a certain local region, where there was a large poly community. Still remains a good introductory text. Lots of interviews, reprinted word-for-word (honestly, these could have been cleaned up a bit, she even included the 'ummm's of her interviewees).

Overall conclusions: poly families provide more stability (extra income, additional homecare) and additional adult role models for children. Children have more trusted adults of various age ranges to go to with their problems. The biggest challenges come from judgments by the childrens' friends who might visit. Some children were ashamed of having a different family, some were proud--it basically boiled down to the personality of the child. Teens in poly families were asked if they thought they would grow up to have poly relationships. Most said they weren't sure, but felt monogamous currently. Overall, children of poly parents showed a better, more mature understanding of interpersonal relationships at an earlier age when compared to their peers.

Though not the focus of the book, there is some good research on how the gay (male) community and the poly community intersect and how norms differ for gay poly men vs from the hetero poly community. Because gay culture for men already includes an element of multi-partner "promiscuity", and because there are many married couples looking for bi-women in the poly community, it is very difficult to be a gay man looking for long term relationships within the poly community.

Jacqueline Koyanagi says

This book operates on the assumption that romantic relationships are necessarily sexual, implicitly denying the existence of ace spectrum polyamorous folks. I found it alienating for this reason, and undoubtedly I am among the queer non-monogamists the author often states are not represented in the book. Outside of this issue of narrow scope, a lot of the content is solid. I especially appreciate that the author touches on issues of race and class, and that many (most?) polyamorous communities can be unpleasant and alienating for WLW.

Holly says

While More Than Two is a good guide to poly life, The Polyamorists Next Door is more of a research-based dissertation. I found it unreadable cover-to-cover, but more because the concepts were mostly so basic than for academic language. However, it is the only poly book I've found that speaks extensively about poly families with children, and it includes individually great passages to read and refer to as reference material.

Alissa Thorne says

Ok, so I don't know much about how sociology research is typically done. But it seems that the research for this book was mostly collected through interviews of volunteers. If I was predisposed to think that polyamory is harmful to relationships and families, I would be skeptical of evidence to the contrary gathered from a self-selected, self-reporting group of advocates. But I guess you've gotta start somewhere.

With that caveat, this was a worthwhile read, albeit dry. (As I suppose one would expect from an academically oriented book.)

A lot of the content would be unsurprising to anyone with poly experience, such as the sections on the challenges that poly people face (jealousy, unicorn hunters, couple's privilege, etc) and the techniques for dealing with them (communication, honesty, agreements, etc). There were a few sections that framed issues differently than I'd thought of them before--for example, distinguishing between people who identify as poly versus people who "do" poly.

The quantitative aspect was interesting. While not terribly surprising, I was disappointed to learn how prevalent what I think of as outdated and unhealthy models of polyamory are practiced. For example, Sheff says that the majority of the people that she interviewed practice some form of hierarchy. (I do wish she had distinguished with a bit more nuance there--between descriptive versus proscriptive hierarchy and hierarchy versus priorities. But that is probably more of a statement on the state of poly nomenclature than it is on her research.)

I learned the most in the chapters dealing with poly families--that is to say, poly people with children. I had already done a fair bit of research on the subject from other sources and had previously learned that the primary challenges tend to be from social stigma--friends, parents of friends, other family members, the children themselves, and in extreme cases, loss of custody. The commonly mentioned up-sides include having more loving and supportive adults around and exposure to good communication skills.

Sheff's research included all of those, but also mentioned a number of other aspects that I hadn't heard about before. For example, children wishing for more space and privacy in larger joined poly households, the difficulty of merging complex poly households, challenges surrounding financial dependency and legal guardianship, and how to approach the close relationships that have formed between children and partners after a breakup. Most of these new-to-me issues came up in cohabiting configurations and (as Sheff points out) many of them are not unique to polyamory.

As a side note, I disliked the narration on the audio version of the book. Most of the book was read in a monotone that was almost robotic. But when reading quotes from the study participants, the narrator would switch into accents including a Texan man's drawl, the giggle of a young girl, and an African American woman's emphatic attitude. And yes, it's just as cringe-worthy as you're imagining.

NormaCenva says

Great book. Research well is done but can be a bit outdated in parts. The demographics are restrictive but it is understandable that it was probably done for the control of the quantitative research. I still think it is well worth the read even when it is dry at times as the topic is very important!

Lisa says

This book is based on Elisabeth Sheff's extensive grad school research , as well as her personal experience with the polyamory lifestyle. I found it to be extremely informative and useful in my own understanding and knowledge of this very growing segment of our population.

Elisabeth shared her own experience with both honesty and integrity. I was impressed with her ability to organize her countless interviews of families ; which must have been a very grueling and time consuming project.

Up to this point, my own studies were limited to journal articles. Families come in many shapes and sizes. Even here in Frisco, Texas, polyamory families exist and seek and deserve a competent and compassionate therapist.

On a personal note, I could never be poly. . . It would drive up my own anxiety already present in intimate relationships. I enjoy monogamy and the closeness I feel with my one partner.

Poly lifestyles certainly aren't for everyone, but they do work for many people. In fact, statistically, they have the same chance of working out as your average monogamy couple. So no need for judgement!

Thank you Ms, Sheff. . . I appreciate all of your hard work and dedication in sharing your knowledge with me. :-)

Kelly says

An academic investigation that gives an honest and fair look at poly relationships.

Jai says

This book came about from 15 years of research in the poly community from the author. For those who continually say "What about the kids" when it comes to poly people Elisabeth gave those real life important answers. I felt like her research was ground breaking in the sense that very few books focus on poly households and the day to day lives of those families. I really liked that the author included LGBTQ people and their families as well in her research as well. One thing I can say that I was disappointed with is that there was virtually no representation of poly people of color. Which I brought up to a friend who's doing research on poly people of color. He stated and I agree that the poly community is divided along the color lines. Which I feel is very sad. All in all I'm happy that I read this book.

Adie Marg says

I enjoyed the rich qualitative data gathered here but I didn't feel like Sheff took the analysis far enough.

There was not enough insight or original thought and the mix of very personal emotional experience and qualitative research did not make for very objective observation.

Shawn says

Fascinating reading

The width, breadth, and depth of human sexuality is formidable. This book looks, admittedly clinically, at multiple partner relationships in an ethical and consensual framework. Time will tell if this approach will be successful in our ever changing world. Excellent read.
