

FRANCISCO HERTEL MAIOCHI

**DEFINING POLYAMORY: A THEMATIC
ANALYSIS OF LAY PEOPLE'S DEFINITIONS**

Orientador(a): Prof.^(a). Doutor(a) Patrícia M. Pascoal

Co-Orientador: Prof.^(o) Doutor Daniel Cardoso

Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias

Escola de Psicologia e Ciências da Vida

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Presidente: Prof.(º) Doutor Mauro Bianchi

Arguente: Prof.(ª). Doutora Ana de Nazaré Prioste

Orientador(a): Prof.(ª). Doutora Patrícia M. Pascoal

Co-Orientador: Prof.(º) Doutor Daniel Cardoso

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Resumo

Este estudo visa analisar definições do público geral para o Poliamor, e comparar as definições apresentadas entre pessoas em relacionamentos monogâmicos (MR) e pessoas em relacionamentos consensuais não-monogâmicos (CNMR), e também entre pessoas heterossexuais e não heterossexuais.

Para a realização deste estudo qualitativo e exploratório dados foram coletados através de inquérito online com uma amostra de conveniência, onde foi perguntado “O que significa Poliamor?”. Conduzimos uma análise temática de forma a encontrar padrões de significados e utilizamos os dados demográficos coletados para realizar as comparações entre os grupos.

A amostra final foi composta de 463 participantes, entre 18 e 66 anos de idade ($M=32.19$, $SD = 10.01$), maioritariamente mulheres (61%) e heterossexuais (60,5%). A maioria dos respondentes se encontravam em relacionamentos monogâmicos (54,2%), seguidos pelos em nenhum relacionamento (21%), e pelos em relações não-monogâmicas (13,2%). A análise demonstra que as pessoas têm uma variedade ampla de definições para o Poliamor, e que a maior parte das pessoas tem um entendimento relativo do termo. Pessoas em CNMR valorizaram sentimentos positivos na relação, e expressaram temas de compromisso, consentimento informado e coabitação, enquanto estes temas foram menos presentes nas respostas de pessoas em MR. Os resultados foram discutidos em relação ao estigma e a desumanização.

Palavras chave: Poliamor, Definições, Análise Temática, leigos

Abstract

This study aims at analyzing lay definitions of polyamory and to compare definitions presented by people in a monogamous relationship (MR) and on a consensual non-monogamous relationship (CNMR), and heterosexual people and non-heterosexual people.

This exploratory qualitative study used data collected from a web survey with a convenience sample, where people answered the question “What does polyamory mean?”. We conducted a thematic analysis in order to find patterns of meaning and used demographic data collected to compare themes between groups.

The final sample comprised 463 participants, aged from 18 to 66 years ($M = 32.19$, $SD = 10.01$), mostly women (61%) and heterosexual (60,5%). Most respondents were in a monogamous relationship (54.2%), followed by no relationship (21%), and a non-monogamous relationship (13.2%). Analysis shows people have a wide variety of definitions of polyamory, and that most people in our sample had a relative understanding of the term. People in CNMR valued positive feelings, and expressed themes of commitment, informed consent and cohabitation, while these themes were less present monogamous people’s responses. The findings relation to stigma and dehumanization is discussed.

Keywords: Polyamory, definitions, lay people, thematic analysis

List of Abbreviations

MR: Monogamous Relationship

CNMR: Consensual Non-monogamous Relationship

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Defining Polyamory: A Thematic Analysis of Lay People's Definitions

Polyamorous relationships have become more visible on the media since the term was coined, around 1990, with the term Polyamory showing a more visible growth compared to other forms of consensual non-monogamy such as swinging, thus demonstrating a growing public awareness around it (Cardoso, 2010; Moors, 2017). Research on the prevalence of polyamorous relationships has been scarce, with most research on polyamory being made with convenience samples, and currently there is no available data on the prevalence of specific forms of non-monogamy worldwide, or in particular countries. Sexually non-monogamous relationships are relatively common, with some data positing that over 21% of USA singles have been in a sexually non-exclusive relationship at some point in their lives, with no association with race, socioeconomic status or education, and positive associations with being male, and with being bisexual or homosexual (Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017). Another recent study measured prevalence of Polyamory in the US and estimates a point prevalence of 0,6% to 5%, and a lifetime prevalence of 2% to 23% (Burleigh & Rubel, 2018)

The term *Polyamory* was coined in two distinct contexts within a two year interval, first by Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart in a newsletter of the neo-pagan Church of all Worlds, in the May edition of 1990, inspired by science fiction book *Stranger in a Strange land*, by Robert A. Heinlein; the second in an mailing list in the beginnings of the internet, by Jennifer Wesp, who was looking for a word that could mean what was understood by non-monogamy in a way that was not negative nor made reference to monogamy, and ended up creating the mailing list alt.polyamory in 1992 (Cardoso, 2010). Since then several definitions were suggested and debated. According to Klesse (2006)

“Polyamory is a contested term”, resisting clear definitions and being debated and questioned by multiple individuals and groups, with different objectives.

Many definitions used in academia are derived from those in popular books on polyamory and non-monogamy, and popular mailing lists and blogs that helped create the term and spread its use. Other sources include glossaries and dictionaries, which in turn had their entries populated by activists such as the previously mentioned Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart. This can be seen in Barker (2005), where polyamory is defined as a “relationship orientation” based on a set of beliefs where it is possible and acceptable to “love many people and to maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships”, and further examples are given based on popular books such as *The Ethical Slut* (Easton & Liszt, 1997), and *Polyamory: the new love without limits* (Anapol, 1997).

Burleigh & Rubel (2018) organized polyamory definitions in four categories: polyamory as beliefs or preferences, polyamory as a relationship status, polyamory as a relationship agreement, polyamory as an identity. In academy there are representations of all of those categories. They tested all four categories separately for prevalence in society, obtaining different results for each definition, with very different ranges depending on how narrow or broad the definitions were. In their study, they argue choosing just one definition would not be representative of the polyamorous community as definitions change and are not wholly embraced and accepted.

The definitions change in multiple levels, such as its characteristics and meanings for individuals, the implications on identity, and managing a public perception of polyamory. Ritchie & Barker (2006) argue that in a social constructionist approach “the language around us shapes our self-identities” and that “our understanding of sexual identity depends on the language of sexuality available to us”. Differences in definitions might mean different possibilities or restrictions for identity and behavior. The definitions

are also contested with those on mainstream culture, where consensual non-monogamy is often represented as cheating, within a context of compulsory monogamy, reflecting a reduced vocabulary for possibilities of identities, feelings and behaviors, validating some identities while not others (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012).

Definition Repercussions

This dispute has societal repercussions, as the practices that are privileged, excluded or reinforced have impact on individuals' identities and societal perceptions of the word. Social perception of the term and correlated identity impacts on the stigma attributed to it. There is evidence that polyamory, as well as other forms of consensual non-monogamy, suffers social stigma, being valued as less desirable or even harmful to people and society (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012; McCrosky, 2015; Séguin, 2017).

Attraction and/or desire for more than one person at the same time is often defined by psychotherapists as harmful for the longevity of relationships and the happiness of those in it, often associating consensual non-monogamy with other stigma bearing topics, such as a supposed higher change of sexually transmitted infections (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012). This assertions are made despite evidence against them, as health and happiness levels reported by people in non-monogamous relationships are equal or higher than those of people on monogamous relationships (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012; Fleckenstein & Cox, 2015).

Stigma could also stem from society's understating of polyamory. A recent study measured lay people's understanding of polyamory, definitions were coded for a basic understanding if they mentioned multiple romantic or sexual partners, or being in love with multiple people, while not implying "that it necessarily involved marriage". Definitions were coded for a comprehensive understanding of polyamory if they mentioned consent in the response. 38,6% of people reported a basic understanding of

polyamory, and 14,7% reported a comprehensive understanding of polyamory (Burleigh & Rubel, 2018).

Research conducted on the perceptions and values attributed by the general population to polyamorous relationships have been made, demonstrating the existence of stigma and negative valuing of different aspects of relationships, as commitment, health and trust, that is, polyamorous relationships are perceived as less committed, less trusting, and more likely to lead to disease. A halo effect, where people draw general evaluations about a person based on a single attribute, was also observed. People on polyamorous relationship were perceived as less likely to take their dogs to walk, and less likely to floss, for example, activities perceived as negative, but not related to relationships (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012; Séguin, 2017).

Stigma and societal devaluation can lead to a group vulnerability and mental health consequences, more specifically, to an increased chance of a mental disorder diagnosis. Meyer (2003) shows that the minority status, along with its identity, adds stressful events of prejudice to stressful events that are common to all. More than that, the expectation of such prejudice events, the expectation of rejection by social groups and the hiding of the minority identity can be understood as stressful events by themselves. That added stress increases the chance of affliction by mental illness. Meyer's model was created to understand the stress suffered by gay, lesbian and bisexual people. People who identify with a form of consensual non-monogamy could be also viewed as a sexual minority and could arguably suffer from minority stress. Interactions with healthcare professionals can be highly stressful for people who are within a sexual minority, as any practice based on a normalizing or normative concepts can lead to discrimination, stress, and potentially abandoning treatment (McCrosky, 2015).

As such, the definitions of polyamory can be made taking in account and trying to manage the potential stigma generated. One example of how this can work is found on Kean (2017), who argues that many definitions of polyamory avoid the inclusion of sexual behavior, or minimize its importance, making polyamory seem less about promiscuity and minimizing this kind of stigma, and thus being generally better received than practices that have a more sexual definition, such as swinging. Depending on how non-monogamous practices are defined, they might be more or less transgressive of cultural norms (Kean, 2017; Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014). Societal perception and stigma also have impacts on social and political rights (Cardoso, 2014). In different legal frameworks around the globe some civil rights are reserved for people within monogamous relationships that are validated by the state, most commonly by means of marriage, such as child custody and the ability to make medical decisions, rights that are available only to legally recognized partners, and withheld for many partners in non-monogamous relationships, consisting on a state incentivized mononormativity (Klesse, 2016) Also, many countries, such as Portugal, Brazil, Canada and the USA not only not allow non-monogamous marriage, but specifically prohibit marriage between more than two people, often by a criminal code (Donoso, 2009; Hooper, 2014; Klesse, 2016). The definitions and their public perception might impact on media narratives and the political process of demanding equal rights.

Beyond the health and societal impacts of the definitions, they are also important on academic research on consensual non-monogamous relationships, polyamory among them. To develop research, clear definitions are needed. Research on polyamory uses definitions created by the researches themselves or by those present in materials and self-help books made by educators and activists within polyamorous communities (Cardoso, 2010; Matsick et al., 2014), or end up using umbrella terms that are broader and include

concepts and practices such as swinging and open relationships, such as “consensual non-monogamy” (Hauptert et al., 2017).

As the motivations of different definitions, the prioritization of some behaviors or feelings over others can carry over and be magnified by scientific research, as investigation is part of a process that returns to a wider society. General healthcare, and mental health professionals are informed by the academia, and the choosing of definitions can have a widespread impact on the identity possibilities and politics, and potential stigma previously discussed. (Kean, 2017; Matsick et al., 2014). Though the academic definitions of poly are mostly grounded on discussions by self-identified polyamorous people it does not show how lay people understand the term. In this study we strive to understand how lay people define polyamory, without seeing any reference of what polyamory looks like, as such, trying to get elements of how polyamory is defined from a bottom-up perspective. As mentioned before, from a social constructivist perspective, people’s experiences, identities, desires and relationships are shaped by the culture they live in, and a lay people analysis may provide insight in how the culture perceives polyamory and informs it. This approach might also reveal distinctions in understanding between lay people and polyamorists, showing whether stigma comes from an understanding of polyamory or a misunderstanding of it. Finally, it might also show which definitions used in academia best represent lay people’s perception of polyamory in the non-monogamous public, and population in general.

Objectives

This study aims to analyze the definitions of Polyamory given by lay people. We also analyze if there are qualitative distinctions on the answers given by people currently on non-monogamous relationships and those currently in monogamous relationships, as well as possible distinctions in the answers by people of different sexual orientations.

This analysis could help sexual health professionals to better understand public perceptions of polyamory and adjust their practice accordingly, minimizing stigma and potential prejudice, as well as diminishing miscommunication. We also aim to inform further investigations on polyamory with definitions obtained from lay people on a bottom-up approach.

Method

The study consists of a thematical analysis of responses to the question “To you, what is Polyamory?”, following the procedure described by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Sample characteristics

The data analyzed on this study was gathered as preliminary qualitative data of a larger study, in development. The only criteria for inclusion were residency in Portugal, and being 18 years of age or more. The survey was presented in Portuguese. Data was collected with a convenience sample, from a web survey form published and shared on social media.

We gathered 609 responses initially. After removing 146 responses that were blank or unintelligible, 463 valid answers remained. Within this public, age varied between 18 and 66 years ($M = 32.19$, $SD = 10.01$). Most respondents were women (68,7%), with men accounting for the other 31,3%. Most respondents identified as heterosexual (60,5%), followed by bisexuals (18,1%), gays (6,9%), lesbians (5,6%), others (5,4%) and queer (1,9%). The most prevalent relationship status was Currently in monogamous relationships (54,2%), followed by people currently not in a relationship (21%), people currently in non-monogamous relationships (13,2%) and people who are casually dating (9,3%). Over half of the respondents had a college degree or higher education (52,3%).

Procedure

The study received ethical and deontological approval by the Comissão de Ética e Deontologia da Investigação Científica da Escola de Psicologia e de Ciências da Vida da Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias. The data analyzed on this study was gathered within the scope of a larger study, that has resulted in previous publication (Cardoso, Pascoal, & Rosa, 2018). This larger study gathered both qualitative and quantitative data. In the current manuscript we conduct a thematic analysis of responses to the question “How would you define Polyamory?”.

The online survey form was composed with the Lime Survey 2.x software, and the link was shared on social media and word-of-mouth, via a snowball method. Before filling out the form, respondents were informed of the anonymity and confidentiality of the data gathering process, that no personal information that could identify the participants was stored (e.g. IP address), the inclusion criteria, the nature and aim of the study, the availability of the research results and researchers’ contact information.

After reading the information about the study participants had to consent to participate in the current study in order to have access to the survey. The question was included in a larger survey that included sociodemographic questions such as age, education levels, relationship state, sexual orientation, gender and living conditions (rural or urban) as well as other questionnaires and scales that are beyond the scope of the current manuscript. Our open question was asked before the sociodemographic questions and before the measures were presented. Participants were instructed not to look online for definitions, and were told our goal was to understand the immediate definition people would think of, without checking online sources.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of analyzing the qualitative data we used thematic analysis, and followed the procedure described by Braun & Clarke (2006). The process of analysis consists in a series of steps. First all the responses are read multiple times, familiarizing the researcher with the data. After these first passes, initial codes are generated. Codes represent the most basic unit in the raw data that can be analyzed in a meaningful way. The researchers code for semantic content that seems relevant to the question at hand. The researchers in this case choose to privilege semantic over latent content, as the size and depth of answers left too wide a margin for possible interpretations of latent content. As the response size was relatively short, the researchers chose to code whole answers as a unit, preserving the context of the response.

After the initial coding, all codes are analyzed and gathered in thematic groups, by proximity and similarity of concepts. These thematic groups are the main unit of analysis, reflecting patterns in the data set. The themes generated are then reviewed in their correspondence to coded extracts that compose them, and against the entire data set. Themes must represent the data extracts properly, helping organize the coded extracts into meaningful patterns within the data set. Finalized themes are organized within a thematic map, showing how each theme relates to the others. Then theme names are reviewed for clarity, as each theme must be clear in what they do and do not represent. Finally, the report is written to show the study's conclusions.

We used the QSR Nvivo 12 software tool to import the data corpus and assist in the coding and analysis process. Initial codes were generated after multiple reads of the data set, organized in a coding guide that was discussed and reviewed between the researchers.

Results

Most answers were short, averaging 20 words ($SD = 17.75$), and included the notion of a relationship or feeling for more than one person. Some answers expanded these short definitions with different characteristics, and some on conditions to establish these relationships or feelings. A minority of answers were very elaborate and had more complex terminology, using specific word such as *compersion* or *queer platonic relationships*. Some respondents made a point of using LGBT inclusive language or used academic and activist language. Some people employed examples with strict gender roles, and a very small amount made criticisms against polyamory, most notably stating they didn't believe in polyamory as real love, or saw polyamory as a way to manipulate people into sex.

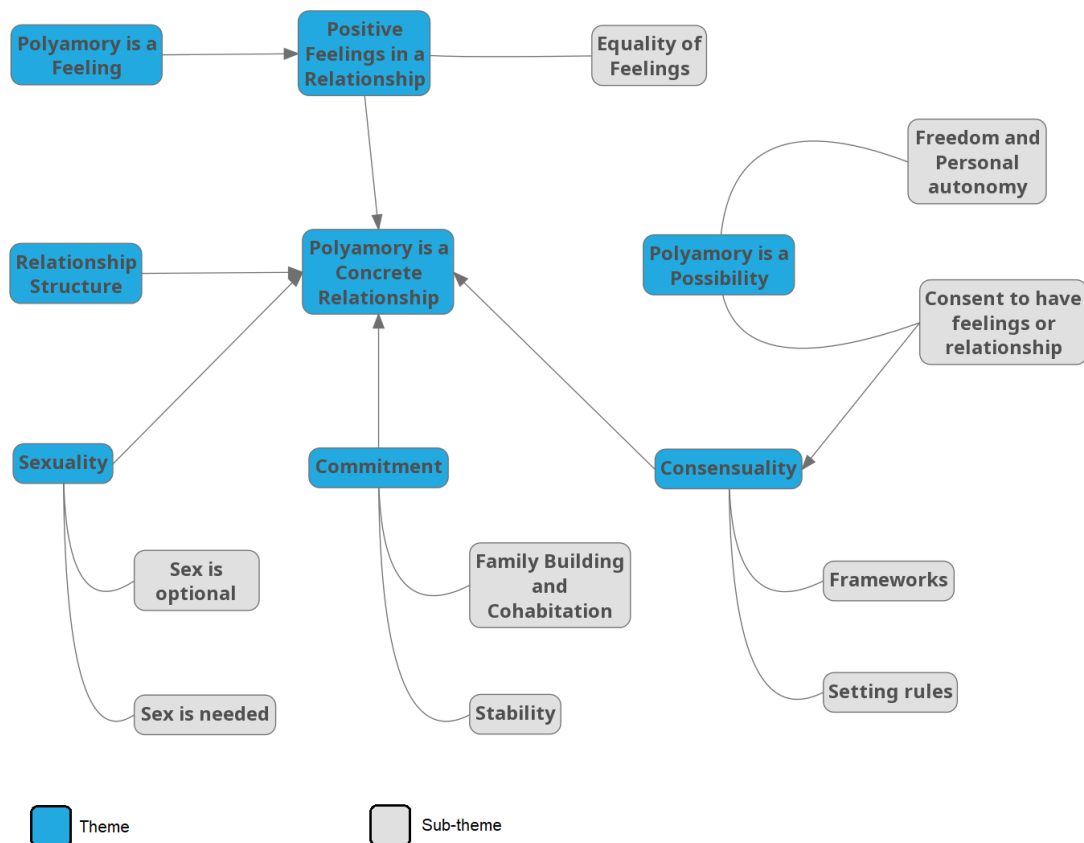


Figure 1- Thematic Map of written definitions of Polyamory

From the initial coding, codes that represented similar ideas were aggregated in themes. The themes found were Polyamory is a Feeling, Polyamory is a Concrete relationship, Polyamory is a Possibility, Positive feelings in a relationship, Commitment, Structure, Sexuality, Consensuality and Essentialism. Only themes and sub-themes will be discussed in the results, while all codes are presented on Table 1.

The Polyamory is a Feeling theme aggregates responses that define polyamory as the experience of feelings in a given context, most commonly feelings of love for more than one person at a time: “loving many people” (Bisexual 40 years old woman in a non-monogamous relationship). A distinction in coding was made between responses that define polyamory as the Feeling itself and the existence of those feelings in a concrete relationship. The later were included in the Positive feeling in a Relationship theme.

The Polyamory is a Concrete Relationship theme encompasses responses that define polyamory as a kind of ongoing relationship, e.g. “a group (more than two people) who have an affective emotional e sexual relationship. Eg: Three people who have a loving relationship between them.” (38 years old heterosexual woman not currently in a relationship). There were more responses in this theme than the previous one, and a small subset of responses included both aspects.

The Polyamory is a Possibility theme encompasses the codes that suggest Polyamory is a possibility, something that someone is open to, or capable of doing or feeling, even if not living or expressing at a particular moment. This theme also has two sub-themes. The first, Consent to have feelings or relationship, includes answers coded for “Ableness” (in Portuguese “Poder ter”, which can mean being capable of, but also being allowed to). This sub-theme suggests some respondents view polyamory as an agreement formed within a relationship, obtaining consent from a current partner that allows for the possibility of other partners. The second sub-theme, Freedom and Personal

Autonomy, encompasses answers that frame polyamory as having freedom to have multiple partners, relationships or sexual encounters with multiple people. Some of these responses equate polyamory with concepts like Relationship Anarchy, while others value personal freedom and autonomy. People that defined polyamory as a possibility more often made critiques to monogamy as a system.

People described polyamorous relationships, concrete or potential, as ones where positive feelings develop. These responses are included in the Positive Feelings in a Relationship theme. These might be feelings of love, affection, intimacy, compersion, romantic connection, and fit the general theme. Some people also mentioned the idea the these positive feelings need or not be equal between the multiple partners, e.g. “Having many intimate relationships at the same time, in an open and consensual way, and consider them equally important” (Heterosexual 34 years old woman, single). These answers were included in an Equality of Feelings sub-theme.

The Commitment theme encompasses answers that convey that polyamorous relationships are committed. Answers were separated into two sub-themes. The first, Stability, includes those describing polyamorous relationships as stable, serious, long term, not casual: “I would only call it polyamory when there’s emotional involvement with more than one person, not simply the act of having sexual relations with different partners” (29 years old heteroflexible woman, in a non-monogamous relationship). The other sub-theme is Family building and Cohabitation, and includes answers were respondents emphasized that polyamory is about building families and living together, e.g. “Freedom to love more than one person, building through friendship, care, respect and love a new Family or enlarging the family that existed previously” (Heterosexual 33 years old woman, in a non-monogamous relationship).

Some people described the Structure of the relationship as part of their definitions, and these answers were gathered in the Structure theme. Some people claim that polyamorous relationships are somewhat monolithic, one single relationship that encompasses all people involved, and everyone in them has a relationship with all others. Others claimed polyamorous relationships can exist in an individual basis, with partners aware of each other's existence, but not necessarily having a relationship with them. Some answers included all of these possibilities as ones that fit in the polyamory definition, e.g. "There's no concrete and correct way to be polyamorous. Polyamory goes from relationship anarchy to exclusive relationships between more than two people" (Heterosexual 37 years old man, in a non-monogamous relationship).

The Sexuality theme describes the polyamory as a relationship that can include sex. Answers were divided in two sub-themes, Sex is needed, and Sex is optional, the former including answers where sex is an integral part of the relationship, the later including answers that value other feelings and practices and state that feelings and sex can happen separately: "It's a relationship format that is non-monogamous, ethical, feminist, where there's equal rights, with a strong family base and stable support system, with commitments that can vary from cohabitation to fuck-buddies, through non-sexual, queerplatonic relationships, where all parts have knowledge of all others and consent to this relationship format, independent of greater or smaller intimacy between themselves" (24 years old woman, biromantic, grey asexual, in a non-monogamous relationship).

Finally, the Consensually theme encompasses all answers that contain mentions to polyamory as being consensual, where all parties are informed of all relationships, where there is respect and honesty. Some answers included specific needs in order for Consensuality to be achieved and were included in two sub-themes: Setting rules and Frameworks. The former refers to answers that state that not only consent, but specific

rules are needed for a polyamorous relationship to function, e.g. “a relationship between at least 3 people with rules defined by all” (31 years old heterosexual woman in a monogamous relationship) while the later refers to answers that say a specific ethical or political framework must be in place for the relationship to exist, such as feminism or religious polygamy.

A very small set of responses were coded in the Essentialism theme, comprising answers that frame polyamory as a natural way for some people, or all people, to behave or relate to others, e.g. “something natural, to fall in love a love many people and keeping with them honest and transparent relationships, accepting that the others can live with this same freedom” (36 years old heterosexual man in a monogamous relationship).

Table 1. Hierarchical Organization of the Thematic Map with Descriptions of codes

	Subthemes	Codes	Description	Examples
Polyamory is a Feeling		Loving more than one	Polyamory is loving more than one person	"Loving many people"
		Attraction to more than one	Polyamory is being attracted to more than one person	"Romantic attraction for more than one partner simultaneously"
Polyamory is a concrete relationship		Concrete Relationship	Polyamory is having relationships with people more than one person	"Having a loving relationship with more than one partner"
	Open Relationship	Open Relationship	Polyamory is having an Open Relationship with a partner	"Open relationships based on consent, knowledge, respect and establishment of rules"
Polyamory is a possibility	Consent to have feelings or relationship	Possibility	Polyamory is something that is possible even when not made concrete	"the possibility of having multiple relationships simultaneously"
		Capability	Having the capability for feelings or relationships	"Being capable of loving many people"
		Ableness	Being able to develop feelings or pursue relationships	"A person that can have multiple relationships, and their partners can also have many relationships"
	Freedom and Personal autonomy	Freedom	Having freedom to feel or pursue relationships	"Freedom to develop loving relationships"
Positive feelings in a Relationship		Intimacy	The relationship is an Intimate one	"When the person is available for intimate relationships with many people"

Table 1 (Continued)

		Romance	The relationship is a Romantic one	"When a Romantic relationship is kept with more than one person"
		Affection	The relationship is affectionate	"A form of affectionate and/or sexual relationship"
		Compersion	There are feelings of compersion, or absence of jealousy	"Consented love between many people, without jealousy"
		Love	The relationship is a loving one	"Loving relationship with many people"
	Equality of feelings	Equality of feelings	People are supposed to feel equally about all their partners	"A person in many relationships, equally in love with those people"
Commitment	Family building and Cohabitation	Family and Cohabitation	Relationships are about building families and living together	"An open relationship between more than two people living together"
	Stability	Longevity	How long relationships should last	"Accepting the possibility of having long-lasting loving and intimate relationships"
Structure		Stability	Relationships are stable, serious or committed	"Many intimate, serious, relationships"
		Structure	Concerns about relationship structure, and how different partners interact with each other	"Having many loving partners, who might or might not be involved with each other"
Essentialism		Essentialism	Polyamory is described as natural or intrinsic to some people	"Innate"
Consensuality		Knowledge	All people involved know of each other	"loving many people at the same time with the knowledge of all of them"
		Consent	All people involved consent to be in the relationship	"People capable of having consensual loving relationships with many partners"
		Respect and Honesty	Mentions to respecting partners, valuing honest communication and trust	"Having intimate relationships based on respect and consent"
	Frameworks	Ethical and Ideological Frameworks	Mentions to ethical or ideological frameworks, such as Feminism, or religious ones	"A non-monogamous, ethical, feminist relationship format"
	Setting rules	Rules	Mentions to rules and limitations within relationships	"A relationship between at least 3 people with rules defined by all of them"
Sexuality	Sex is Needed	Relationship is sexual	Relationships involve sex and physical contact.	"Having loving and sexual relationships with more than one person"
	Sex is optional	Sex is optional	Relationships can be sexual, but also could not be.	"Having intimate relationships with many people, independent of sexual acts"

Two codes were attributed to multiple themes: the “more than one” code was given to answers that included mentions to more than one person. The “relationship” code was given to mentions of a relationship. Since their meaning depends on context, whether it relates to concrete relationships, feelings, or potentiality, these codes are connected to multiple themes, helping convey distinct ideas.

Demographic distinctions

We were interested in finding if different demographic groups gave different responses for their definitions of polyamory. Qualitatively, given the large sample, it is possible to find answers across the spectrum in every demographic group, so themes and sub-themes were analyzed in frequency of occurrence between different groups, and the distinctions analyzed by order of greater to lower, and marked for qualitative review. Since this sample is not representative, statistical comparison between groups is not our objective, and frequency discrepancy served as a guide to pinpoint qualitative distinctions in the data.

People in Monogamous Relationships (MR) and People on Consensual Non-monogamous Relationships (CNMR). People in CNMR view Polyamory as a Possibility more often than people in MR. Within this theme, some wording was used more often by different groups. More people in CNMR had answers coded for Freedom and Personal Autonomy, whereas people in MR had more answers in the Consent to have feelings or relationships sub-theme. People in MR define Polyamory as a Feeling more often, especially using Love as a verb, as in “loving more than one person”.

In the Sex theme, people in MR emphasize that sex is required more often, where people in CNMR wrote more frequently of sex as an option. People in CNMR also made more mentions to Positive feelings in a relationship, citing multiple feelings in the same answer.

There was a large difference in the emphasis of the commitment theme between groups, with people in CNMR referring to it much more, with the biggest difference in the Family and Cohabitation sub-theme, mentioned vastly more by people in CNMR. While both groups defined polyamorous relationships as stable or serious, people on CNMR seem to view their multiple partners as family and plan to live together more often than people in MR.

People in CNMR had more mentions on Consensuality in general, and used more specific terms, making more mentions to specific ethical frameworks, like feminism and relationship anarchy. They also criticized monogamy in their responses more often. However, in the same theme, people in MR made more mentions to polyamory as having or needing Rules setting.

Male – female. We analyzed the data to see if there were significant gender differences in the responses. We found men's responses being closer to those of people in MR than those in CNMR, even though the distribution was very close (there were proportionally more women not in relationships, and more males in CNMR, and similar numbers in MR).

Men defined polyamory disproportionately more as an open relationship than women, made more references to the polyamorous relationship as a sexual one, and less references to Positive feelings in a relationship. Men were more preoccupied with equality of feelings than women, and less preoccupied with asserting that polyamorous relationships were Committed. Men spoke less about Consensuality in general but made more mentions to rules.

Heterosexual – Queer. It is problematic to divide sexual orientations by their negative, as in people who are heterosexual, and everyone that is not. The same thinking applies, to analyzing non-monogamous people instead of all the diverse self-

identifications used by people. Although there is a significant proportion of non-heterosexual people in our sample, if divided among many different identities the subsets would be too small for comparisons between groups. Even though “Queer” was one of the possible sexual orientations available in the demographic part of our survey, here we are using the word to refer to all non-heterosexual respondents of the study.

In our sample, queer people were more likely to be in non-monogamous relationships than heterosexuals, and that overlap is visible when comparing the responses, though with some interesting distinctions. In Possibilities, queer people made more mentions to freedom and personal autonomy. Queer people also made more mentions to polyamorous relationships having Positive feelings in a relationship than heterosexuals. They had more answers coded for equality of feelings, but with some qualitative distinction, as some made a point that feelings should be similar or equal but could not be. Finally, they spoke less of Commitment, going against the trend seen when comparing people in CNMR with those in MR.

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature by analyzing lay people’s definitions of polyamory and tries to show the distinctions in definitions between different demographic groups. We demonstrate people’s general understanding of polyamory, and its implications for academic use of the definition, and analyze the comparative data between people in monogamous relationships and those in CNMR and it’s place in societal stigma towards polyamory.

Understanding

Some evidence (Burleigh & Rubel, 2018) suggests most people don’t have a comprehensive understanding of polyamory. In this study, most people in our sample would meet the criteria of basic understanding (multiple partners or simultaneous feelings

for more than one person) and almost half would meet the comprehensive understanding definition. This might be related to the selection bias of respondents.

As the same authors point out, there are at least for different categories of definitions of polyamory. Most responses had just one definition of what polyamory means, while a significant minority gave broader definitions that gave great latitude for different relationship structures and possibilities, such as open or closed relationships, relationships based on agreements, rules or the absence of them, sexual or platonic relationships, and even as an umbrella term for other forms of Consensual Non-monogamous relationships such as open relationships or relationship anarchy. Responses from people in MR tended to be simpler and were coded for less themes than people in CNMR on average (3.87 and 4.83 respectively). While people might have given shorter answers for brevity or comfort limitations (such as typing on a mobile phone), within the multiple and disputed definitions of polyamory, it seems most people tend to adhere to just one, with a tendency of people in CNMR to have a broader understanding of possible multiple definitions than people in MR. These definitions show that polyamory can be understood as a complex network of meanings centered on one word, with many dimensions, with people choosing different sets of beliefs and agreements when defining themselves and their relationships.

Stigma

Our study shows that people in MR see polyamory as more sexual than their non-monogamous counterparts and wrote less about Positive feelings in a relationship. This might be one way that stigma appears in our sample. Qualitative research on polyamory with lay people has been done investigating stigma, and there is evidence of changing definitions in polyamory to avoid stigma, especially stigma regarding promiscuity (Kean, 2017; Klesse, 2005, 2006). While there were very few derogatory comments, with views

of polyamory as unacceptable, those were mostly depicting polyamory as just sexual and not true love, being only sexual, and that is perceived as lesser.

We also found in our sample that people in MR rarely mentioned Commitment, and especially Family building, as a characteristic of polyamory. Our data falls in line with Conley's et al study (2012), where Commitment is perceived as one of the greatest advantages of monogamy, thus less perceived as existent in polyamory, while it is part of the people in CNMR's discourse. There is also evidence that people in CNM relationships are subject to dehumanization, where people do not attribute human specific emotions and behaviors to people, and this can be glimpsed in our sample, as people in CNMR were coded higher than average in Positive Feelings in a Relationship, feelings that matches those described by Rodrigues, such as love and intimacy, reflecting that people who are not in CNMR tend to see less of this characteristics in polyamorous relationships than the people who live them (Rodrigues, Fasoli, Huic, & Lopes, 2018).

This perspective of polyamory as lesser than might contribute to polyamory being stigmatized, and polyamorous individuals being subject to minority stress, even when polyamory is concealed, as is corroborated by studies on this specific aspect (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012; Séguin, 2017).

Many people defined polyamory as a concrete relationship or concurrent feelings for multiple people while not mentioning consent in any form. While the limitations of our study make it impossible to clarify, this people could understand having multiple partners while maintaining a monogamous agreement to qualify as polyamory, and thus equate polyamory to infidelity or cheating, or view it as an excuse or justification to a stigmatized behavior, and thus add to social stigma associated with consensual non-monogamy, perceiving polyamory as cheating even without specifically naming it so.

It is interesting to note that people in other sexual minorities, such as lesbian, gay and bisexual people in our study mentioned commitment less than heterosexuals. This might reflect legal or social difficulties to establish families, or an increased focus on personal autonomy, that is reflected in the data, or some attempt to portray this minority status closer to monogamous normativity, trying to avoid double stigmatization. The data collected doesn't allow for this differentiation, and further study is necessary to clarify this aspect of the data. It is interesting to note that people in other sexual minorities, such as lesbian, gay and bisexual people in our study mentioned commitment less than heterosexuals. This might reflect legal or social difficulties to establish families, or an increased focus on personal autonomy, that is reflected in the data, or some attempt to portray this minority status closer to monogamous normativity, trying to avoid double stigmatization (Cardoso, 2014). The data collected doesn't allow differentiation of these hypothesis, and further study is necessary to clarify this aspect of the data.

People in MR seem to think polyamory more in terms of a concrete relationship, and possibly a relationship agreement (consent to have a relationship or feelings sub-theme) than people in CNMR. This could indicate an attempt to approximate polyamory using the language and structure they already know from monogamous relationships, but extending it to more people, and not seeing it as challenging normativity in society in other ways. This is not wholly representative of how people in CNMR present their definitions, something a couple might do, instead a more persistent identity or set of beliefs, with more political implications. The focus on sex is still visible, as are the efforts of people in CNMR to assert sex is an optional part of polyamory. This framing of polyamory as something a couple might agree on within the context of a previous monogamous relationship might be less challenging on some societal norms, as evidenced by Burleigh & Rubel (2018), whose count shows greater prevalence of polyamory when

defined as a relationship agreement when compared to either an identity or a set of beliefs. It might also indicate a tendency towards normalizing polyamory to the mainstream public, with people in CNMR trying to avoid sexual shaming, and people in MR perceiving polyamory as a less threatening practice, as evidenced by Kean (2017).

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People who suffer stigma find themselves in a difficult spot of trying to manage social expectations. Polyamorous relationships are often concealed, but even concealed stigma can lead to psychological and physiological health implications (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012). Our data shows people in CNMR divided between trying to avoid sexual stigma and embracing social norms by minimizing a possible sexual characteristic of the relationship and trying to assert a social and political critique on monogamy as a system, offering new ways to express affectivity and develop relationships, out of normativity's bounds.

Limits

The sample is not a representative sample of the Portuguese population. As such, some sampling biases are present. It is also has more highly educated people than the Portuguese average (52% vs 15%). The sample is also younger than the Portuguese average population (32.19 vs 41.83). The sample is likely to include a higher representation of bisexual and homosexual people. No national study has been done to verify the demographic distribution of sexual orientation and/or identities, but in other

western countries, the LGBT population varies in the single digits percentages: 3.4% in the USA (Gates & Newport, 2012), LGB identified population sum up 2,5% in the UK (Geary et al., 2018), while in our sample over 30% of respondents identified as LGB. Some studies on the USA population show that education has no association with non-monogamous behavior, but sexual orientation does have, with people of bisexual or homosexual orientations being more likely to have had a sexually non-exclusive relationship (Hauptert et al., 2017; OECD, 2015). Though the prevalence of non-monogamous relationships in Portugal was not measured, and as such no comparisons can be made, this sample has a significant number of people currently in non-monogamous relationships.

This selection bias might have an impact in the volume of coding for each theme and could possibly account for the low number of derogatory and negative views on polyamory portrayed in the data. The more highly educated sample might represent more liberal views and might have made the distinctions between the CNM people and monogamous people less pronounced than they would be in the general public.

The answers given were mostly short, and the survey methodology doesn't allow for the assessment of meaning and sorting of ambiguity on the written text, which might result in responses being encoded with different meanings than the intent of the respondent.

This study also doesn't allow for comparisons between definitions from polyamorous people and people in other kinds of consensually non-monogamous relationships, as current relationship status was asked, but no distinction between different consensual non-monogamies was made. Finally, there's no way to guarantee that respondents didn't research definitions online while answering the survey.

Thematical analysis is a qualitative research methodology. This methodology is based on a constructionist epistemology, as language and meanings are constructed and disputed by those how use them. Therefore, even conflicting or contradictory themes could be generated. We strive for a bottom-up generation of themes, giving preference for terms and meanings present in the sample. However, as Braun & Clarke remind us, there is an “*active* role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which are of interest, and reporting them to the readers”, and the researchers have studied Consensual non-monogamies and Polyamory, being familiar with current literature on the topic. As such, some of the themes might be influenced by each researchers’ prior research interests.

Implications

Understanding lay people’s definitions of polyamory can lead to a better understanding of perceived stigma and new strategies to avoid it. The definitions presented in this study can also orient definitions used in other studies, especially considering sex as a possibility instead of a defining characteristic of polyamorous relationships.

Monogamous people in our sample often neglect aspects in their definitions that seem important to people in CNMR, such as informed consent, positive feelings, cohabitation and building families. The importance and role of sex is also distinct in this two groups, with people in CNMR describing sex as an option more often than outright stating polyamory always involves sex. Psychotherapists should be aware of these distinctions between how polyamory is presented by people in MR and those in CNMR, as way to not further stigmatize their non-monogamous patients.

While the academy understands polyamory as a disputed term, lay people tend to give a single definition of polyamory, either as a relationship status, or set of beliefs, a

feeling for multiple people, and so on. When working with patients within a polyamorous relationship, acknowledging the many forms of expressing this form of non-monogamy might allow for a broader range of behaviors, identities and solutions.

In comparison with the definitions given by Burleigh & Rubel, very few people in our sample defined polyamory as an Identity, the most represented meaning being Polyamory as a Relationship-status. A sizeable minority of respondents also characterized polyamory as a possibility, which in Burleigh & Rubel's terms is closer to a set of beliefs, especially among people already involved in CNMR. Polyamory as a relationship agreement was also not common in our sample, as the most frequent form of expressing this idea in our sample is somewhat ambiguous in the original language the research was conducted on, suggesting that in further studies definitions based on relationship status and relationship beliefs might be more effective than those based on relationship agreements and identity.

With such diversity of relationship types, orientations, agreements, it is important for clinicians, activists and policy makers to acknowledge that many forms of expressing non-monogamy exist in this word, with a broad range of behaviors and identities.

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