

Polyamory, Diversity and Family Life

Sandee Lovas



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Over the past several decades, there has been significant progress in recognizing and celebrating family diversity in Canada. The understanding of family has evolved significantly, *along with* a capacity to recognize and explore diverse family forms through broader definitions and a growing body of research from Statistics Canada. However, surveys such as the Census of Canada and the General Social Survey don't capture a *complete* portrait of family diversity in Canada, particularly when it comes to less common family structures, such as *polyamorous families*.

Simply put, polyamorous relationships are those that **include intimate relationships with more than one partner in a consensual partnering with the knowledge of all partners**.

As noted in a 2017 study on polyamory in Canada, these relationships are themselves highly diverse:

*Polyamorous relationships vary in interdependence and commitment, and in expectations of sexual and emotional fidelity. An individual may be simultaneously involved in a number of romantic relationships without those partners being in a relationship with each other, or significant committed relationships may exist among all involved. An individual may be involved in a primary dyadic or polyamorous relationship that is committed and enduring, while one or more members of that relationship maintain more peripheral secondary relationships with others. Or, an individual may be involved in a number of concurrent relationships that are more sexual than romantic in nature and involve a diminished expectation of permanence and interdependence.*¹

Many people don't know what polyamory is or consider it a viable option, a reality compounded by a lack of reliable information and public discourse. Most of what people see comes from sources that do *not* understand the practice of polyamory, some of whom actively produce material to discourage people from asking questions or exploring the option. This lack of awareness is fertile soil for misconceptions to flourish about what it means to be polyamorous.

People often group all non-monogamous relationships under the polyamorous umbrella, but there are important differences. *Swingers* are couples seeking couples, or a third person, and participate in sexual encounters, usually without any other emotional ties. *Open relationships* are people looking for sexual relationships outside of their primary relationship, often without major emotional ties to this person. People who are polyamorous may also branch into those areas, but in my experience, the main difference is the *emotional bonds and connections* polyamorous people have for more than one person at a time.

While sometimes thought of and/or described as a sexual "preference," I feel that polyamory is part of my orientation, much like being gay, straight or bisexual – not a preference, but rather a part of honestly *expressing who I am*. For most polyamorous people, it's not a choice.



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Metamour: The partner of my partner, for example, my boyfriend's wife with whom I don't have a romantic relationship (I may or may not have a friendship with her).

Polyecule: The network of an individual's relationships. This usually includes their immediate partners, metamours and all of the related children (i.e. their family).

Compersion: The feeling of joy one has experiencing another's joy, such as in witnessing a toddler's joy and feeling joy in response. The feeling of joy associated with seeing a loved one love another; contrasted with jealousy.



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Though there is very little research and data on polyamorous families in Canada, the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family published two reports in 2017,² which have at the very least begun to scratch the surface when it comes to exploring some of the realities and experiences of these families. The first report mentions that polyamory is associated with egalitarian assumptions and ideals, including “honesty and clear agreements among partners, mutual good will and respect among all involved, intense interpersonal communication, and high ethical standards.”³ The emphasis on communication and honesty is not surprising, considering there is very little when it comes to “go-to” guides or role models on how to practise

polyamory; since most people don’t even know it is an option, they don’t know where to get information about it from the people with *lived experience*.

Unlike in monogamous relationships, which are guided to some extent by social norms and expectations, people in polyamorous relationships don’t have the same kind of societal “road map” to turn to when managing their relationships. Movies, TV shows and books tend to focus on an ideal of what monogamy “should” (but rarely ever does) look like. When polyamory is discussed in the media, it is usually in a negative context or is misclassified, often lumped in with people who want to cheat on their partners, people who can’t commit to relationships or people who practise religious-based polygamy.

Many people are figuring out polyamory as they go along; communication, questions between partners and honesty are important aspects of making the complex relationships work. There are fewer assumptions as to what a person’s role is within a polyamorous relationship, and there is no straight path that the relationship is “supposed” to follow, so negotiations regarding time and duties happen frequently, and people are always checking in with their partners to see if there are any changes. In monogamous relationships, good communication and honesty are also very important, but there may be less negotiation, because people tend to assume “traditional” gender roles more often and they may be afraid to talk about any feelings they might have for another person.

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Conversation is particularly important when it comes to *family finances*, which can be complicated even if everyone is committed to total financial independence. I look after my own finances, but if I were to enter tough times, my partner(s) may want to help me out. Also, if I know my partner(s) is tight on finances, I wouldn’t

want them spending money on me if another loved one of theirs was in financial need. The time we spend together would have to be negotiated; my involvement with their children (if they have any) would have to be negotiated; how we present ourselves publicly would have to be negotiated. Some people fear losing friends, family or even jobs if people were to find out they are polyamorous. When new people enter into the relationship dynamics, it has to be talked about to make sure it won’t interfere with the current relationships or, if it will, to find ways to manage it.

When you start inserting children into the mix, it becomes far more complicated.⁴ For me, I prefer to live on my own and I have no desire to have children of my own. However, my future partners may be married or live with others and/or have children, so these relationships would need to be discussed. If a future partner has a child and it would make my partner’s life easier, I would help with tasks such as picking the child up from school, helping them with homework or arranging birthday parties, so my partner can enjoy more time with them. I would care about and care for the child, having the type of relationship one might call a “friend of the family.”

There’s also the question of how many people *can* marry (yes, polyamorous people may want to marry for all the same reasons as monogamous people, minus the “no one else” part), as this can play out in several ways. Three or more people may want to all be married together, or one of the spouses in a married couple may want to marry

another person *outside* of their relationship (i.e. A is married to B, B is married to C, A and C are not married and don't want to be). Some polyamorous people marry symbolically in ceremonies called *handfasting* since they are unable to legally marry due to laws based on monogamy. While this ceremony may not be legally binding, as far as the participants are concerned, it's a marriage.

To help fit into society, there may be a need to have "recognized guardian" or "recognized partner" status that acknowledges the legitimacy of the relationships and allows for certain rights while not binding people to the same commitments as legal guardians or spouses. These rights could include, for example, the ability to go to a school and pick up a child or attend events with them, or, if one's partner ends up in the hospital, the ability to see them. However, some people may want the rights and responsibilities when it comes to parenting children and view the children as their own. Such was the recent case in Newfoundland, where three adults in a polyamorous relationship were deemed a child's parents after a judge cited that it was in the "best interest of the child."⁵



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If, when you were growing up, you were never told what a relationship is "supposed" to look like or what you are "supposed" to do, what would you want? We're all shaped by the societies in which we're raised, and monogamy has been the dominant social and legal reality in Canada throughout its history. In the 2017 *Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada* study, only 16.7% of surveyed polyamorous people agreed that the public "[sees] polyamorous relationships as a legitimate form of family." This might not be the case if more people knew polyamorous people and it became more accepted in society.

The reality is that polyamory and other forms of non-monogamous relationships have been around as long as monogamy, even if they aren't well understood in society. People often fear and are uncomfortable with what they do not understand. Will this be the end of "traditional" families? Is polyamory truly an emerging family structure across Canada? Will we have to change our social structures and ideas of what it means to be in a relationship?

For me, family is made up of people who love each other, look out and care for each other, support each other and encourage us to be the best version of ourselves.

For me, family is made up of people who love each other, look out and care for each other, support each other and encourage us to be the best version of ourselves. If I have that in the people around me, what their titles are makes little difference to me. There are more kinds of relationships than we have words for, and if society opens up and allows people to define relationships for *themselves* and express their authentic selves, polyamorous families could feel more recognized, respected and included in the national conversation on families and family diversity in Canada.

Sandee Lovas is a community volunteer who enjoys writing and meeting new people, and is active with social initiatives such as those encouraging more women to become involved in politics, raising mental health awareness and challenging people to look past societal norms when it comes to gender expressions and non-traditional lifestyles.

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¹ John-Paul E. Boyd, MA, LLB, *Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada*, Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (December 2017). [Link: https://bit.ly/2q5teR8](https://bit.ly/2q5teR8).

² These two reports are *Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada* (above) and John-Paul E. Boyd, MA, LLB, *Polyamorous Relationships and Family Law in Canada*, Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (April 2017). [Link: https://bit.ly/2GDEcZq](https://bit.ly/2GDEcZq).

³ Ibid.

⁴ See "Polyamory in Canada: Research on an Emerging Family Structure" for discussion on the legal implications of being in polyamorous relationships in which children are involved. [Link: https://bit.ly/2MF4jNO](https://bit.ly/2MF4jNO).

⁵ Michael MacDonald, "3 Adults in Polyamorous Relationship Declared Legal Parents by N. L. court," *CBC News* (June 14, 2018). [Link: https://bit.ly/2u2F0O2](https://bit.ly/2u2F0O2).



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