

Review Article

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Polyamory and Identity in the Psychotherapeutic Relationship: An Integrative Therapy Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The increasing visibility of polyamorous relationships necessitates a deeper understanding within psychotherapeutic practice. This qualitative study, grounded in the principles of Integrative Therapy, investigates the interplay between the identity formation of individuals in polyamorous relationships and the psychotherapeutic relationship. Through narrative interviews and qualitative content analysis, the research explores the experiences of polyamorous individuals in therapy, highlighting the crucial role of the therapist's attitude towards non-monogamous lifestyles in the therapeutic process. The findings emphasize the significance of empathy, openness, and a non-judgmental stance from therapists in fostering positive identity development and a successful therapeutic alliance with polyamorous clients.

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Introduction

The landscape of intimate relationships is becoming increasingly diverse, with a growing number of individuals choosing consensual non-monogamous lifestyles, including polyamory. This shift presents a challenge and an opportunity for psychotherapists, who are called upon to understand and support clients with varied relationship structures. Mononormativity, the societal norm that privileges monogamous relationships, can unconsciously influence therapists' perspectives and potentially hinder effective therapeutic work with polyamorous individuals. This study addresses this gap by examining the connection between psychotherapists' attitudes towards polyamory and the psychotherapeutic process from the lens of Integrative Therapy. The research focuses on the identity formation of polyamorous individuals and the impact of polyamory on the therapeutic relationship, aiming to provide insights that can enhance psychotherapeutic practice with this population.

Theoretical Framework

Polyamory and Ethical Non-Monogamy

Polyamory, a form of ethical non-monogamy, is characterized by openly and honestly having multiple loving relationships with the full knowledge and consent of all parties involved. It distinguishes itself from monogamy, which is often presented as the ideal within the prevailing mononormative value system of Western society. Unlike serial monogamy or infidelity, polyamory emphasizes transparency, communication, and the negotiation of boundaries and agreements among all partners. Various forms of polyamory exist, including polyhierarchy, where one primary relationship is prioritized alongside other secondary or tertiary

relationships, and relationship anarchy, which rejects hierarchical structures and predetermined rules. In polyamorous relationships, open communication is paramount for managing emotions such as jealousy, which is often seen as an indicator of unmet needs that can be addressed through dialogue and self-reflection. The ability to negotiate and establish mutually agreed-upon rules and boundaries is essential for navigating the complexities of polyamorous relationships.

Integrative Therapy

Integrative Therapy, founded by Hilarion G. Petzold and colleagues in 1965, is a modern humanistic psychotherapy that integrates various therapeutic methods and incorporates findings from clinical empirical research. Its goal is to support clients in achieving increased life quality and health through new ways of thinking, experiencing, and behaving. Integrative Therapy operates within an open yet systematic framework, encompassing both theoretical and practical levels. It emphasizes perceiving the complexity of life and social worlds without exclusion, adopting a multi-perspective view to gain a broad understanding of individual realities and their contexts. The "Tree of Science" model in Integrative Therapy provides a multidimensional framework for systematizing different levels, from metatheoretical approaches to practical application, highlighting the interconnectedness of theory and practice. The metatheory of Integrative Therapy views human existence as a co-existence of selfhood and belonging, emphasizing the development of personal identity and the importance of society fostering belonging and counteracting alienation. The therapeutic relationship in Integrative Therapy is considered an intersubjective, co-creative process. Openness and trust are crucial in the therapist-client interaction, with the therapist demonstrating appropriate attitude, personal competence, and professional expertise. Ethical considerations and the recognition of the client's dignity and

integrity are fundamental, with the understanding that clients are experts in their own lives. “Co-Responsiveness,” a key concept, involves ethical dialogue to find consensus within the therapeutic relationship, emphasizing positive attributions and the negotiation of different perspectives.

Identity in Integrative Therapy

Identity, within Integrative Therapy, is understood as a partly unconscious knowledge of oneself and others, constructed through narratives that follow a temporal and spatial order, creating connections and explanations. Identity development involves a continuous interplay between the self and others. The five pillars of identity – embodiment, social network, work/leisure/achievement, material security, and values – serve as a core model for understanding how identity is constituted through external- and self-attributions. External-attributions, experienced identifications from the social context, are compared with self-attributions. This process, involving emotional valuation and cognitive appraisal, leads to identification with or rejection of these attributions, shaping one’s internalized self-image and identity. Identity work is particularly significant for individuals in polyamorous relationships, as they often navigate external-attributions from a mononormative society. The therapeutic focus lies on the intersection of the individual and society, making visible the interplay of individual and collective dynamics. A supportive therapeutic relationship can provide trust, support, and understanding often lacking in the daily lives and social networks of polyamorous individuals, contributing to their affiliation and identity development.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing narrative interviews to explore the subjective experiences of individuals in polyamorous relationships who have undergone psychotherapy. Narrative interviews were chosen to foster trust and allow participants to freely share their experiences regarding the perception of their identity in connection with polyamorous relationship forms during psychotherapeutic treatments. Eight individuals from the Vienna polyamory community, who had prior experience with psychotherapy, participated in the interviews conducted between September and December 2017. The interviews, lasting between 35 and 60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed.

The collected data were analysed using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring. This method involves a systematic, rule-guided process of categorizing and interpreting textual data. The analysis followed a structured process, including the formulation of research questions, material description, source criticism, and interpretation. The text was initially divided into theory-driven deductive categories (Identity, Polyamory, Psychotherapeutic Relationship) and inductive categories that emerged directly from the material. The process involved paraphrasing relevant text passages, reducing the material, and developing a category system that was then reviewed against the original data. The reliability of the categorization was enhanced through intercoder agreement.

Key Findings

The analysis of the narrative interviews revealed several key findings regarding the identity formation of polyamorous individuals and their experiences in psychotherapy.

- **Identity Formation and Social Environment:** Participants often experienced negative external-attributions from their mononormative social environment, leading to feelings of

being misunderstood and not fully accepted, particularly concerning their embodiment. Supportive social networks where their polyamorous lifestyle was accepted were considered crucial and positively impacted their identity. Higher levels of education in the mononormative environment appeared to correlate with greater acceptance and less need for justification.

- **Polyamory as Part of Identity and Values:** For many interviewees, being non-monogamous was integral to their identity. Their polyamorous relationships often reflected values such as honesty, transparency, and self-responsibility. Polyamory was also seen as potentially embodying non-hierarchical and feminist ideals. Participants emphasized the importance of open communication and the ability to be truthful within their relationships.
- **Facilitating Factors in the Psychotherapeutic Relationship:** A positive therapeutic relationship was characterized by the therapist’s openness to considering alternative lifestyles and a non-judgmental attitude towards polyamory. Participants valued therapists who did not require them to explain or justify their relationship choices and who treated relationship problems triggered by polyamory as general relationship issues, rather than blaming polyamory itself. Empathy, active listening, and a focus on the client’s individual needs and childhood experiences, rather than solely on their relationship structure, were perceived as highly beneficial. Some participants explicitly sought therapists with knowledge or experience in non-monogamous relationships to avoid the need for extensive explanations.
- **Hindering Factors in the Psychotherapeutic Relationship:** Negative experiences in therapy often involved therapists who exhibited a lack of understanding or held mononormative biases. Participants felt devalued when therapists seemed to pathologize their polyamorous lifestyle or offered advice based on mononormative assumptions, such as suggesting secret affairs. A lack of genuine interest or active listening from the therapist was also perceived as hindering the therapeutic process. Some participants felt the need to present a “good poly face,” preventing them from fully expressing their emotions.
- **Impact of Therapy on Identity:** A supportive therapeutic relationship facilitated clearer self-perception, emotional processing, and identity development. Participants wished for therapists to normalize their non-monogamous feelings and experiences, reducing feelings of being “peculiar”. Confrontation with difficult emotions within a safe therapeutic environment, coupled with the therapist’s support, enabled personal growth and a stronger sense of self.
- **Motivations for Seeking Psychotherapy:** While polyamory was a significant aspect of the participants’ lives, it was often not the primary reason for seeking psychotherapy. Burnout, anxiety disorders, and a desire for help with emotional processing were frequently cited as the initial motivations. However, the way therapists addressed their polyamorous relationships significantly influenced the course and outcome of therapy.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the intricate relationship between identity, polyamory, and the psychotherapeutic process, aligning with the core tenets of Integrative Therapy. The study highlights how external-attributions from a mononormative society can pose challenges to the identity formation of polyamorous individuals. The acceptance of polyamory as a valid relationship

form by the individual often correlates with significant identity growth.

Open communication, a cornerstone of successful polyamorous relationships, is also crucial in the therapeutic context. Therapists who foster an environment of open dialogue and demonstrate non-judgmental acceptance of non-normative values facilitate positive therapeutic outcomes. Conversely, therapists who operate from a mononormative perspective risk disrupting the therapeutic alliance and hindering the client's identity development.

The psychotherapeutic relationship, viewed through the lens of Integrative Therapy's emphasis on "co-responsence," requires empathy, understanding, and a genuine curiosity about the client's lived experiences. When therapists fail to move beyond mononormative biases, clients may feel misunderstood, stigmatized, and ultimately discontinue therapy. The study's findings emphasize the importance of several of Integrative Therapy's 14 healing and efficacy factors. "Empathic Understanding (EV)" is foundational for building trust and rapport. "Promotion of Concise Self and Identity Experience, of Sovereignty (PI)" is directly addressed by the study's focus on identity formation. "Promotion of Sustainable Social Networks (TN)" is crucial for polyamorous individuals who often rely on specific communities for support and validation.

Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into the psychotherapeutic needs of polyamorous individuals, emphasizing the critical role of the therapist's attitude and understanding of non-monogamous relationships. For psychotherapeutic practice to be effective and affirming, therapists must critically reflect on their own mononormative biases and adopt an open, curious, and non-judgmental stance towards polyamory and other kinds of non-monogamy. When therapists can see beyond mononormative norms, they can create a therapeutic space where polyamorous clients feel understood, accepted, and supported in their identity development. Conversely, a failure to acknowledge and respect polyamorous lifestyles can lead to a breakdown in the therapeutic relationship and hinder the client's progress. Future research should further explore the experiences of both clients and therapists in this context to enhance therapeutic approaches and foster greater societal acceptance of diverse relationship forms.

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