Analysis of the Experiences of Polyamorists in Spain

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to determine and to expose the morphology of polyamorous relationships through their conception and characteristics, identifying experienced and perceived situations of discrimination, and to analyze the future expectations for polyamorous relationships. For this purpose, 11 people who were in a polyamorous relationship, with an age ranging from 26 to 57 years, were interviewed. The results show that polyamorous people define their relationships as casual, without possession, a lifestyle that includes friendship, trust, affection, and sex. The success of this type of relationship depends on freedom, respect for each other's spaces, flexibility of roles, and sharing household expenses and responsibilities. All participants claimed to experience and perceive discrimination by their environment and society. Among their expectations for the future is continuing the relationship, even considering reproduction. Such relationships represent a breakdown of the monogamous society. Poliamory poses many challenges in an attempt to legitimize the diversity of relationships and environments of coexistence in our society.

Keywords Polyamory · Relationships · Discrimination

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Introduction

In most developed countries, monogamous marriage is society's usual and most accepted type of relationship (Balzarini et al., 2019; Barker, 2011; Henrich et al., 2012). Relationships have been changing since the advent of the sexual revolution initiated in 1960–1970 (Rubin, 1984). During recent decades, social attention begins to focus on consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships, which is reflected in the parallel increase of research of various areas of knowledge such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, health, or law to make this type of relationship visible (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Moors, 2017). The study of Moors (2017) showed that the search for information on the Internet about polyamory has increased markedly in the last 10 years in the United States, revealing how society's interest in polyamorous relationships is increasing.

CNM relations are defined as relationships in which all partners involved agree that each one can have romantic and/or sexual relationships with other people (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013). CNM is a general term that includes the concept of polyamory, but also encompasses other relationship practices such as open relationships and partner exchange, among others (Conley et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2013). The first studies on the prevalence of the practice of CNM reported that between 4 and 5% of the population of the United States claimed to have participated in this type of relationship (Conley et al., 2013a, 2013b). More recent studies indicate that approximately one in five Americans and Canadians (12–23%) have engaged in some kind of CNM relationship throughout their lives (FairBrother et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2016; Rubel & Burleigh, 2020).

CNM includes three subtypes of relationships (Sheff & Tesene, 2015): polyamory (which is romantic, loving, and long-lasting), swinging (which is sexual), and open relationships (which are mainly sexual, but can also be romantic). In this study, we will focus on the analysis of polyamorous relationships through their protagonists' experiences and their expectations in Spain, to make visible the different forms that exist of affective-sexual relationships in society. We will also analyze, taking into account the existing literature, how people in Spain who have a CNM relationship feel stigmatized or misunderstood by society (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Hutzler et al., 2016) and face situations of discrimination and rejection (Moors et al., 2021) including the workplace (Lesher, 2013) and their social and family circles (Moors et al., 2021).

Polyamory: Conceptualization and Typologies

The term polyamory is a neologism, a combination of the Greek term for "many" and the Latin term for "love", which first appeared in 1953 (Alan, 2010) but became popular in the 1990s due to an article of Morning-Glory Zell-Ravenheart titled "A Bouquet of Lovers" published in Green Egg Magazine. Taormino (2008) states that polyamorous relationships are born of the desire to maintain multiple significant

intimate relationships simultaneously, "Polyamory means loving more than one" (p. 71). This love can be sexual, emotional, spiritual, or any combination of them, depending on the desires and agreements of the people involved (Klesse, 2011). So polyamory is a style of relationship that allows people to openly engage in multiple sexual and/or romantic relationships simultaneously, with the knowledge and consent of all persons involved in the relationship (Sheff & Tesene, 2015). A variant of polyamory is polyfidelity, which is a style of closed relationship that requires sexual and emotional fidelity to the group of people involved in the relationship (Klesse, 2011). Another variant is polyaffective relationships, defined as emotionally intimate, non-sexual bonds between people connected by a polyamorous relationship, such as two heterosexual men who have sex with the same woman but have fraternal relationships with each other (Sheff, 2005, 2014).

The emotional hierarchy also influences the organization of polyamorous relationships (Sheff & Tesene, 2015), giving rise to primary and secondary relationships. Primary relationships reflect the cultural characteristics of a monogamous couple, as they often live together, make important decisions in common, share economic, domestic, and family responsibilities, and even have children. Secondary couples are more similar to a boyfriend's or girlfriend's profile, as they do not usually live together, spend less time together, and have less social and emotional power than the main couple. Some authors even identify tertiary relationships, defined as episodic or short-lived interactions that are often limited to sexual intercourse (Thalmann, 2008). However, as Sheff (2014) claimed, many polyamorous people downplay or even reject the hierarchy, considering the relationship from a more pragmatic perspective and tracing the dividing line between couples who live together and those who live apart.

The number of people involved in polyamorous relationships is heterogeneous (Sheff & Tesene, 2015). Thus, relationships formed by three people can be Vees or Triads, differentiated by the degree of emotional and sexual intimacy, usually with more separation in the Vee relationship. Relationships formed by four people are Quads. Sometimes Quads are established when a triad or a Vee adds a fourth person, and other quads are constituted when two couples come together to form a larger group. A Moresome is a relationship made up of five or more people. Finally, Polycules are made up of family networks chosen from people associated through polyamorous relationships (Creation, 2019), involving members who have polyaffective relationships that are emotionally intimate and non-sexual (Sheff, 2014).

In the words of Klesse (2011, p.7), "the discourse on polyamory maps a broad and diversified cultural terrain". Polyamory is close to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, anarchist, or other progressive leftist tendencies, as well as environmentalists and spiritualists (Klesse, 2011). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are more inclined to want polyamorous relationships because they question the heteronormative model with which they do not identify (Klesse, 2016). Moreover, several authors pointed out a strong link between bisexuality and polyamory (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2009; Gusmano, 2018) because polyamory creates a space in which to express the desire for people of different genders or regardless of gender (Klesse, 2007). The study of Fairbrother et al. (2019) shows that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have non-monogamous relationships more often than heterosexual people.

However, not all polyamorous people are bisexual; in fact, heterosexual people also engage in this type of relationship (Sheff & Tesene, 2015).

Literature Review

Research on polyamory is still incipient although in recent decades, many international works are beginning to appear, mainly from the US and Canada and, to a lesser extent, from Europe, and but still very scarce in Spain. Most studies are theoretical (Kless, 2011; Sheff, 2011, 2020) and qualitative (Grunt-Mejer & Chanska, 2020; Sheff, 2005, 2006, 2011). Although quantitative studies have also appeared in recent years (Balzarini et al., 2019; Grunt-Mejer, & Campbell, 2016; Haupert et al., 2016; Hutzler et al., 2016), there is still a significant knowledge gap concerning polyamorous relationships (Moors et al., 2021; Rubel & Bogaert, 2015; Rubel & Burleigh, 2020). Among the studies, we highlight the pioneering ethnographic study led by Elisabeth Sheff (2005, 2006), which characterized the polyamorous communities of the west coast of the United States as people between 30 and 50 years old, white, middle class or upper class, with university studies, and holding professional jobs. This profile has been reproduced in numerous subsequent studies (Klesse, 2011; Wosick-Correa, 2010).

The most recent topics of polyamorous research, which will be the focus of our study, revolve around polyamorous families and the attitudes, perceptions, and prejudices experienced. One aspect shown by various studies is that society in general is not yet prepared to accept polyamorous relationships, as the individuals involved are often regarded as vicious, promiscuous, or perverted (Table et al., 2017). It is usually assumed that their relationships are less sexually satisfactory, of lower quality, less committed, more immoral, and with greater sexual risk and more harmful for children although this is not so (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Rodrigues et al., 2018). However, some hope of acceptance is glimpsed because after monogamy, polyamory is the second most accepted option (Matsick et al., 2013). Also, studies show that younger people have a more positive and open view towards CNM couples and, specifically, toward polyamorous couples (Harumi et al., 2017; Hutzler et al., 2016) than do older people. People of more conservative and religious ideology show more prejudiced attitudes towards polyamory (Hutzler et al., 2016). The practice of having multiple sexual partners leads to the stigmatization of the polyamorous lifestyle (Hutzler et al., 2016). The study of Cox et al. (2013) notes that out of 4000 people who identify as polyamorous, 28.5% reported having experienced discrimination. The type of discrimination experienced by these people is called structural stigma (Corrigan et al., 2005). Mononormativity is one of the cultural norms that contributes to discrimination against polyamorous people (Conley et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013), arguing that monogamy is necessary to meet individual, relational, and family satisfaction. As with other minorities, social self-exposure as an unconventional sexual or relational minority can mean loss of employment, housing, relationships with friends, families of origin, or custody of the children, so polyamorous people may conceal their identity and relationships from society (Moors et al., 2021; Sheff

& Hammers, 2011). This discrimination towards polyamorous people occur within a society structured by monogamy and heteronormativity, where monogamy is the only legitimate form of relationship (Sheff, 2020). Thus, monogamy and compulsory heterosexuality establish the order of romantic relationships imposed by the patriarchal ideology (Heckert, 2010). In this way, society continues to reproduce concepts, attitudes, and misperceptions about polyamory and other forms of CNM (Conley et al., 2013a, 2013b; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Moors et al., 2013). Perhaps the crucial social reason for considering polyamory and other forms of CNM as deviant relationships is that they expose, on the one hand, the weaknesses of compulsory monogamy and the fading of the heteropatriarchy and, on the other hand, the decline of the heterosexual nuclear family (Sheff, 2020).

Research focused on polyamorous families identifies them socio-demographically as white, middle-class, well-educated, and liberal adults (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. (2020) report that polyamorous parents often use a free-range parenting style, maintain more permeable family boundaries, and opt for extendable kinships in which they include people who are not really family but who are involved in their lives as such. Communication also plays a very important part in polyparents' relationships with their children. They tend to communicate honestly and age-appropriately so that when this communication works well, resilient poly-families offer support and safety both to children and adults to cope with the difficulties and prejudices of society. As the studies of Sheff (2011, 2015) show, even though polyamorous families are not perfect, they create positive environments that allow adults to raise secure and healthy children.

Aims of the Current Study

Polyamorous communities have a trajectory, as they have been settling in major US cities for decades (Anapol, 2010; Klesse, 2011; Moors, 2017). Although in Europe their incursion is more recent, the polyamorous movement in the United Kingdom has been organizing Poly Day since 2006 (Klesse, 2007). The emergence of the Internet and social media plays an important role in the knowledge and expansion of polyamorous communities (Olmstead, 2020). Thus, in Spain, as Pérez-Navarro (2017) points out, polyamory is the form of non-monogamy that has been gaining visibility in recent years, and social networks have allowed these communities to be in touch. Currently, polygroups proliferate in different Spanish cities, such as Barcelona, Murcia, Valencia, or Zaragoza, among others. We note the Poliamor group of Madrid, which has existed for almost a decade and brings together more than one hundred people in their monthly sessions, where they defend the need for a more flexible marriage law, especially concerning polyfamilies that have children. Another international Poly event held annually in Barcelona is the OpenCon Catalonia.

Therefore, and taking into account the scarcity of previous research carried out in the Spanish context, through the testimony of the protagonists of polyamorous relationships, this study aims to achieve a triple objective: (i) To visibilize and determine the morphology of polyamorous relationships through their conception and characteristics; (ii) To identify experienced and perceived situations

of discrimination and rejection by their environment and society in general; and, (iii) To analyze the future expectations for polyamorous relationships.

Method

Participants

This qualitative study involved eleven people (five women and six men) living in central Spain. All the people participating at the time of the interview were in a polyamorous relationship lasting more than one year. The age range of the participants is between 25 and 43 years.

Most of the interviewees identified with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation. The eleven people interviewed were part of a primary polyamorous relationship. In addition, two people also mentioned that they had secondary polyamorous relationships; that is, when a person is itinerant in the polyamorous unit (see Table 1). Concerning the number of members of the polyamorous relationship, there were four Triads and five Quads.

Table 1 Participants' identifying data

Participants (age)	Gender	Members of the polyamorous relationship
Female (25 years)	Gender fluid	2 gender fluid women and feminine gender 1 man identified as masculine
Female (27 years)	Feminine	2 women self-identified with the feminine gender 1 man identified as a-gender
Female (29 years)	Feminine	3 men identified with the masculine gender 1 woman identified with the feminine gender
Female (30 years)	Feminine	1 man identified as a-gender 1 man identified as masculine 1 woman identified with the feminine gender (sporadic person)
Female (34 years)	Feminine	3 women identified as a-gender 1 man identified as a-gender
Male (27 years)	Masculine	3 men identified as masculine 1 woman identified with the feminine gender
Male (29 years)	Masculine	1 woman identified as gender fluid 1 woman identified with the feminine gender 1 man identified with the masculine gender
Male (31 years)	Masculine	3 men identified with the masculine gender 1 woman identified with the masculine gender
Male (32 years)	Gender fluid	3 men identified with the masculine gender 1 woman identified with the masculine gender
Male (33 years)	A-gender	2 men identified as a-gender 2 women identified with the feminine gender (one sporadic person)
Male (43 years)	A-gender	2 men identified with masculine gender 1 man identified as a-gender

Data Collection

This qualitative study was carried out through semi-structured interviews. For this purpose, a script of ad hoc questions was designed. The script was organized into the following thematic blocks: (i) Facts about your gender identity and members of your amorous relationship; (ii) Typology of polyamorous relationships, (iii) Perception of rejection and prejudice experienced because of the polyamorous relationship; and, (iv) Future plans concerning your polyamorous relationship.

Procedure

The participants were contacted through a civic center. The interviews were conducted in various spaces that met the appropriate environmental conditions.

To safeguard the ethical issues of the study, the research team provided an informed consent document, explaining the objective of the study and asking permission to record the interview. This document was signed by the researcher in charge of the field-work and by each participant, guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the informants. A code was assigned to each participant (gender and age of the person). All interviews took place during May and June of 2019 and January of 2020. Each interview lasted an average of 50 min.

Data Analysis

Initially, the interviews were transcribed literally. For the content analysis of interviews, we used the ATLAS.ti v.8 program, which can manage large bodies of data, increasing the transparency, coherence, and scientific rigor of the analysis (Weitzman, 2000). The use of this software allows various researchers to work simultaneously (San Martin, 2014), so that the data processing, as well as its coding and subsequent classification, was triangulated. The analysis of the naturalistic content of interviews was carried out according to five basic rules (Ruiz-Olabuenaga, 2012): (i) completeness (Bardin, 1986), which consists of categorizing all the content; (ii) exclusivity, or placing the same idea in the same category; (iii) semi-induction, or performing a thorough pre-categorization or coding; (iv) relevance of the category to assess whether it is appropriate to maintain that category; and, (v) objectivity: to comply with this rule, we crossed the codings and categorizations of the content analysis among the members of the research team. Thus, through the content analysis of the interviews, we obtained three main categories, which were broken down into categories of second- and third-depth levels (see Table 2). On the basis of this categorization, we present the results below.

Table 2 Categories resulting from the content analysis of the interviews

Primary category	Secondary category	Tertiary category
I. Morphology of the polyamorous relationship	I.1. Defining a polyamorous relationship	I.1.1. Casual relationships
		I.1.2. Relationships without possession
		I.1.3. Type of family
		I.1.4. Beyond sex, affection, friendship, trust, and care
		I.1.5. It's a lifestyle
	I.2. Success of a polyamorous relationship	I.2.1. Freedom to decide at all times
		I.2.2. Respect for people's own spaces
		I.2.3. Role flexibility
		I.2.4. Sharing expenses and housing
	I.3. The reasons for the failure of a polyamorous relationship	
II. Experienced and perceived situations of discrimination and rejection	II.1. Discrimination experienced in various areas	II.1.1. Health environment
		II.1.2. Work setting
		II.1.3. Family Setting
		II.1.4. Circle of friendships
	II.2. Perceived and experienced rejection by society	II.2.1. Invisibilization of polyamory
		II.2.2. Triple discrimination
III. Plans for the future of the polyamorous relationship	III.1. For the time being, to continue the relationship	
	III.2. On maternity/paternity	

Results

I. Morphology of the Polyamorous Relationship

The analysis of the participants' interviews in this first main category, focused on the morphology of the polyamorous relationship, allowed us to delimit through the secondary and tertiary categories: the concept of a polyamorous relationship, to identify the values that underpin the success of a polyamorous relationship, and the reasons for the failure of the polyamorous relationship.

I.1. Defining a Polyamorous Relationship

The interviewees defined a polyamorous relationship as a casual relationship, without possession, as a type of family, as a relationship that goes beyond sex, and as a lifestyle.

I.1.1 Casual Relationships The vast majority of women and men participating in this study (9 out of 11 participants) define their polyamorous relationships as casual relationships that little by little became a temporary formality. Many of these relationships originate from coexistence in shared flats or common transit homes.

> We started without realizing it, some time ago, we already lived together as flatmates, the rest just happened by itself (Female 25 years, 1:2).
> We proposed it one day as a joke, two months later, we were all living in the same flat and then, we saw how sharing more than sex and friendship worked, just like any other relationship (Male 27 years, 1:32).

Thus, from these testimonies, it is evident that, in many cases, polyamorous relationships are not planned but arise because in the previous cohabitation, the members realized that they shared many ideas and values about the type of affective relationships. In fact, six of the interviewees acknowledged that the idea of starting a polyamorous relationship did not arise from them but from their partner: One day at home, my female partner proposed to us four to start a relationship, and we plunged in (Male 29, 1:22).

I.1.2. Relationships Without Possession. The vast majority (10 out of 11 participants) of women and men participating in this study define their polyamorous relationships as healthy relationships without feelings of possession. They also consider that marriage is not a natural union despite being the predominant social model, pointing out that one needs to experience marriage more freely.

> Marriage is unnatural. I mean, to maintain a healthy romantic relationship, you must incorporate new things into your life, other lovers, other toys, but also other friends, other people, and places (Female 30 years, 1:19).
> We are like other people and we live our relationships like them but without possession of each other (Male 31, 1:39).

The participants of this study reaffirm the idea that heteronormative romantic love has no place in polyamorous relationships because elements such as the possession of the partner, exclusivity, or jealousy are incompatible with polyamory, which is based on trust, understanding, and freedom.

I.1.3. Type of Family. The interviewees also considered polyamorous relationships as a family unit, even though they do not share the cultural patterns of patriarchal society.

We are not a normal family, but we are a family (Female 43 years, 1:55).
Nor do we belong to a sect (Male 31 years, 1:34).
Although it is difficult for them [society] to accept it, we are a family but with more people (Female, 27 years, 1:69)

It is evident that polyamory opposes the concept of the mononormative nuclear family that society has internalized because the traditional family model (man-woman, monogamous) is one of the tools of patriarchy to maintain the hierarchical social order of the heteronomative society.

I.1.4. Beyond Sex, Affection, Friendship, Trust, and Care. Almost unanimously (10 out of 11 participants), our interviewees claimed that their polyamorous relationships go beyond sexual intercourse: for them, sex is just another element of the affective relationship because in their relationships, there is also affection, friendship, trust, and care in parallel.

This isn't just sex, it's friendship, affection, and a lot more. […] We love each other (Male 43 years, 1:56).
Not only do we fuck, we also have our moments of affection and taking great care of each other (Female 34 years, 1:29).
We love each other (Male 43 years, 1:56).
In these relationships, we love each other (Female 27 years, 1:13).
Everything matters, sex, trust, affection, care, everything (Male 32 years, 1:47).
For me, before sex, other things like coexistence, complicity, affection, and knowing that you have someone to lean on take precedence (Female 30 years, 1:22).

The polyamorous people interviewed in this study want to make it clear that their relationship is not based exclusively on sexual behavior, but involves elements such as love, communication, trust, support, care, honesty, and friendship. Actually, we found that the defining characteristics of a polyamorous relationship are the same as those of a "healthy" monogamous couple relationship, free of sexist and stereotyped biases.

I.1.5. It's a Lifestyle. These polyamorous units do not match stereotypical profiles about relationships, nor do they even consist mostly of people who share likes or tastes, they define these relationships as a lifestyle.

Of course, we share things, friends, relatives, acquaintances, a home, but we are not clones or people from another world. You can go from time to time

to normal places where other people who are in polyamorous relationships go, there aren't so many of us (Male 31 years, 1:36).
Not all of us like the same things (Male 31 years, 1:34).
But you think we're alike? That we go to the same places and we like the same things? Not at all, you would be surprised (Male 33 years, 1:48).
Believe it or not, we like this way of life (Male 43 years, 1:56).

Polyamory is perceived as a lifestyle, mutually agreed on by the people involved. They are considered a socio-affective unit, open and at the same time, emotionally stable. In addition, they consider their polyamorous relationship as a source of opportunities for people to continue exploring and growing emotionally, without being limited by the traditional roles involved in romantic relationships.

I.2. Success of a Polyamorous Relationship

As the eleven people interviewed through their testimonies express, the success of a polyamorous relationship is mainly due to the following reasons: freedom in the relationship, respect for each others' own space, flexibilizing roles, and sharing expenses and housing.

I.2.1. Freedom to Decide At All Times. Polyamorous units, already defined as free relationships, assume that people have complete freedom to make the right decisions about their lives and how and with whom they share them. When appropriate, leaving a polyamorous relationship should not become a problem, but should be accepted naturally, without losing friendship and affection.

In our relationships, no one assumes anything that cannot be assumed at that time. […] If anyone wants to start something, it's alright, but without bothering the rest (Female 27 years, 1:13).
If someone doesn't want to be there, they can leave, we'll try to avoid making a fuss, without hard feelings and without losing touch or friendship, but it's fine like this (Female 30 years, 1:21).

The people participating in this study reported that the structure of polyamorous relationships is based on autonomy, independence, and naturalness to make the appropriate decisions about their affective relationship. In this sense, the autonomy of polyamorous relationships leads to individual well-being because each person is free to leave or maintain the loving unit. No one is going to judge their decision because the rest of the members of the polyamorous affective relationship will respect it.

I.2.2. Respect For Each Others' Own Spaces. Another reason that interviewees allude to for the success of a polyamorous relationship (7 out of 11 participants) is that, despite sharing common spaces, each person must have their own physical and individual space.

We share everything, but everyone has their own spaces. I have mine and my dog's (Female 34 years, 1:30).

Another of the defining peculiarities of polyamorous relationships is that the members consider it important to have control of their personal space, as well as in the way they interact and connect with people because otherwise, their own freedom and autonomy would be restricted.

I.2.3. Role Flexibility. Another peculiarity of polyamorous units is that none of the interviewees assumes static and "traditional" gender roles in their relationships, especially those that concern the tasks of responsibility, care, and material provisioning. Provision and caring roles are assumed interchangeably by any of the members of the sentimental unit.

> I am not always the one who scolds or, on the contrary, the good-natured one, or the dominant one, or the food supplier. Here, things are divided equally (Female 27, 1:8).
> No, one doesn't behave every day like a girl and another person like a boy, no. That's very straight. No one here assumes a static role (Male 31, 1:37).

A common idea of all the participants in this study is that they openly state that their relationships do not reproduce stereotyped gender roles because they define their polyamorous relationships as egalitarian.

I.2.4. Sharing Expenses and Housing. Another common argument underpinning the success of the polyamorous relationship is that coexistence is perceived as a shared, communitarian, and co-existential exercise in which the sharing of tasks, expenses, and responsibilities becomes one of the most fundamental parts for the durability of the relationship. Fidelity or stability is not so much sought as coexistence and care.

> I lived two months with my girlfriend and a pal, the guy was cool, he didn't want a serious relationship, but he helped us like a good friend who loves us very much, and we love him, our house, our everything; this way, he could live here without spending anything on rent (Female 25 years, 1:1).
> They intend to distribute everything equally, each his part. It's not selfishness, it's coexistence (Female 27: 1:10).
> Well, that's what we're doing, we're all paying (Male 43, 1:54).

In this way, in polyamorous relationships, coexistence is based on co-responsibility both in the private-domestic space (in the distribution of domestic tasks, expenses, etc.) and the public space. That is, they reaffirm once again that polyamorous relationships do not reproduce gender roles.

I.3. The Reasons for the Failure of a Polyamorous Relationship

The polyamorous people participating in this study consider that the main reasons for the failure of a polyamorous relationship are jealousy, possession, and lack of trust. They indicate these behaviors as the most common impediments in their relationships.

In a relationship like this, jealousy is the end of the relationship, but the same thing happens with trust, more than with the sexual aspect and many other things (Female 25 years, 1:5).

Without bothering the rest (Female 27 years, 1:15).

For me, when someone shows their overly possessive and very macho side, that's the end (Female 29 years, 1:18).

Jealousy? if you're jealous, don't even think about this. No, it is not easy to manage to suppress what you have been taught as a child; jealousy and possession, envy, and that stuff are very problematic (Female 31 years, 1:38).

Therefore, concerning the morphology of a polyamorous relationship, most of our participants agreed to define it as casual, as a relational lifestyle based on affection, respect, communication, and sexual intimacy and free of the sexist and heteronormative biases that society reproduces. Polyamorous relationships usually succeed because the members are clear about the premises of freedom, respect, role flexibility, and co-responsibility in the domestic sphere.

II. Experienced and Perceived Situations of Discrimination and Rejection

In this second main category, on the one hand, the situations of discrimination experienced in the various areas of their lives will be analyzed through secondary and tertiary categories and, on the other hand, the rejection they perceive from society in general will also be narrated.

II.1. Discrimination Experienced in Various Areas

Concerning the discrimination suffered in the first person by the protagonists of this study, the analysis of the interviews shows a wide range of attitudes and behaviors that turn into violence and harassment of people who are in a polyamorous relationship, in the health, work, family, and social environments.

II.1.1 Health Environment. One of the interviewees recounts that he has suffered pejorative comments and negative value judgments by his doctor when he found out about his polyamorous relationship.

When my doctor found out, he started questioning my health, lifestyle, and self-care; I felt very uncomfortable and challenged. We are not perverts and take great care of our health (Male 32 years, 1:42).

In this sense, the social stigma towards polyamorous people can also come from health professionals because they may have a mononormative bias when interacting with these people, or they may even try to persuade them to change by questioning their health.

II.1.2. Work Setting. A large part of the participants (8 out of 11 participants) narrated situations of derogatory attitudes or disapproval they have experienced, as well as mobbing behaviors when their co-workers became aware of their polyamorous relationship.

In my work, you are not judged for being homosexual, but when I told them that I had a polyamorous relationship, then things changed, all sorts of things happened, people who asked about it because of their morbidity, curiosity, perplexity, and other people only look at you with disgust or disapproval (Female 27 years, 1:9).

At work, there are all sorts, people who look at you as if you were weird. Others, especially heterosexuals, are driven by morbidity. And the women, if they're not very traditional, usually don't say anything. […] But in general, they act surprised, astonished, or disapproving (Female 25 years, 1:4).

II.1.3. Family Setting. In the analysis of the interviewees, two participants reported that they suffered incomprehension, rejection, and family abandonment because of their polyamorous status. One of the interviewees even reported that his family did not accept his sexual orientation or his polyamorous relationship, which led to his family exile.

My father doesn't understand it, he tends to conceal that I am who I am, he doesn't want to understand it, not that he doesn't understand it, that's something else (Female 25 years, 1:3).

When my brothers found out, they immediately stopped talking to me, I'm not allowed to see my nephews/nieces or anything, my being queer bothered them but this overwhelmed them (Male 43 years, 1:50).

II.1.4. Circle of Friendships. Participants also narrated rejection situations they have suffered from their nearest social environment, including their friends. They reported that some of their friends, upon learning that they were living in a polyamorous relationship, judged them harshly and even labeled them as depraved and recommended that they seek psychological help from a professional.

You don't go around talking about your sentimental and sexual life, but there are times when friends' or acquaintances' faces change when they find out, they cannot accept it; the first thing they ask you is morbid, then they go on to make valuative judgments about your depraved sex life, and end up putting on strange faces, some are so brazen as to ask you if you are well, or why don't you go to a psychologist (Male 29 years, 1:33).

Therefore, for the most part, the polyamorous people in this study considered that monogamous sociocultural norms are inflexible. They also stated that sometimes these norms are harmful to personal and interpersonal well-being due to the degree of rejection perceived and experienced when people around them find out about their polyamorous situation. In this way, the participants stated that they would like to explain their situation naturally, without being the target of social prejudices from the environment of their family, friends, or relatives. However, the incomprehension on the part of the general society creates a reality of exclusion and social rejection of polyamorous relationships, which continue to be subject to prejudice and value judgments of a moral nature.

II.2. Perceived and Experienced Rejection by Society

In this second secondary category of perceived and/or experienced rejection by society, we analyzed the implications of the invisibility of polyamorous relations and also the triple discrimination suffered by this group, especially the women.

II.2.1. Invisibilization of Polyamory. With regard to society's rejection of the participants, they (7 out of 11 participants) largely emphasize that the invisibilization of polyamorous relationships leads to discrimination, devaluation, and contempt. People who are in polyamorous relationships are cataloged as perverts, libertines, vicious, or crazy.

> People don't know what this is, they think we're fucking all day. And you can't explain anything to them, it's bad to question an institution like marriage; they really like fancy weddings (Male 31 years, 1:41).
> If people were better informed, they wouldn't consider us perverts, libertines, vicious, or crazy. I realize it's not easy to understand. Everything is all based on the heterosexual binary or gay binary, which is what provides money (Female 25 years, 1:6).
> People look askance at us, as if we were not normal (Male 33 years, 1:49).
> People don't leave you alone (Female 30 years 1:20).

The participants of this study stated that the low public visibility of polyamorous relationships is due to social and moral prejudices, as well as the lack of awareness and sex education. In addition, sexuality is another of the biases attributed to polyamorous people because they are labeled as promiscuous.

II.2.2. Triple discrimination. One of the interviewees reported that because she is a woman, lesbian, and polyamorous, she has suffered more situations of discrimination than a heterosexual and monogamous woman.

> They look at you and treat you worse if you are a woman, lesbian, and, on top of that, polyamorous (Female 29 years, 1:10).

It is also interesting to note that two interviewees claimed that heterosexual men tend to better accept polyamorous relationships made up of women, just because they find the idea of two women together exciting.

> The fact that I am a woman makes people accept it a little better, but only in terms of the morbidity of people who do not conceive of this type of relationship (Female 27 years, 1:11).
> Heterosexual men are driven by morbidity (Female 25 years, 1:12).

Having analyzed the experiences of the polyamorous people participating in this study, we note that all of them have, at some point in their lives, suffered discrimination both in the public space (at work, in the doctor's office, etc.) and in the private space by family and friends. However, again, it is the polyamorous women who suffer the most discrimination, as society usually punishes them more harshly than polyamorous men.

III. Plans for the Future of the Polyamorous Relationship

This third main category focuses on the interviewees' plans for the future of their polyamorous relationship. This category is divided into two secondary categories: 1) To continue the relationship; and 2) On maternity/paternity.

III.1. For the Time Being, to Continue the Relationship

With regard to future plans, most participants indicated that, in the short term, they did not plan to abandon their current relationship, although, in the long term, there might be some change.

> We don't plan anything but this (Female 30 years, 1:23).
> I don't see any reason to change (Male 32 years, 1:43).
> We're fine like this for now (Female 30 years, 1:22).
> I have no problems with anyone; if I did , I would no longer be in this relationship (Male 43 years, 1:52).
> There comes a time when you think about whether you're going to want to be like this all your life, living together, without a home of your own. Do you think it would work for us if we had a property? I often wonder about this because one is beginning to feel older (Male 43 years, 1:53).

III.2. On Maternity/Paternity

In the plans for the future, of the eleven people interviewed, only two mentioned the possibility of becoming mothers and fathers, but this was not an explicit desire or a lack or a weakness within their relationships.

> Being a mother... The truth is yes, I have thought about it, I wouldn't mind. But that boy or girl would have a very hard time, people are very gossipy and very traditional, fusty, and intolerant (Female 34 years, 1:31).
> Fatherhood or motherhood in a relationship like this would not be a problem, it would be the child's problem because of the intolerance of society (Male 43 years, 1:51).

They reflected on whether the negative consequences of a child whose parents have a polyamorous relationship would materialize in social rejection, intolerance, or misunderstanding by the environment about what polyamory is.

Therefore, following the line of the arguments of the participants at present, they do not consider planning the direction of their relationship in the future or having children immediately, as only two people alluded to this. Their idea is to continue living and enjoying their relationship in the hope that society will come to accept them.

Discussion

This study has allowed us to take another step towards knowing and exposing polyamorous relations in Spain. Most of the people interviewed identified with a non-hetero-normative sexual orientation, as they consider sexuality to be changing throughout people's lives, and that there is no single identity of affective-sexual relationship. The types of polyamorous relationships elude traditional hetero-normative and patriarchal structures (Sheff, 2011). In fact, all our participants were living together in primary relationships, and only two alluded to having another secondary relationship and forming four Triads and five Quads. This variability has allowed us to know the morphology of polyamorous relationships through their conception and characteristics.

Concerning the conception of polyamorous relationships, the interviewees define them as casual relationships that took on a temporary formality. Many of these relationships arise from coexistence in shared flats or common transit homes. Six of the interviewees acknowledged that the idea of starting a polyamorous relationship did not arise from them, but from another partner. They also defined polyamorous relationships as healthy, free from possession and ownership of the other, and as antagonism to traditional monogamous marriage, which they consider to be "unnatural". In this line, other studies show that people who choose to have CNM relationships declare that their relationships allow them greater freedom to enjoy new experiences and to satisfy themselves sexually with other partners (Cohen, 2016a, 2016b; Moors et al., 2017).

Another defining feature of their relationship is that they mostly perceive themselves as a type of family even if they break up with the duality of two-sexes-two-genders, with heteronormativity and the social and cultural norms imposed by patriarchy. They combine a lifestyle that does not conform to stereotypical roles, as their relationships become more egalitarian, far from the idea of reproduction or the figure of a father as the head of the family. In this sense, Table et al., (2017) claim that, through their lifestyle, polyamorous people share a co-culture, in which people in the polyamorous community often adapt the dominant cultural norms and values to give them a new meaning. From this point of view, polyamory enters into real conflict with the interests of the nuclear family at the service and interests of the patriarchal society (Valencia, 2010). The concept of the family is considered the first possession of the man-subject, which is governed by the presumptions of the patriarchal tradition through the sexual division of work, the sharing of public–private spaces, the crystallization of the duality of two-sexes-two-genders, and through heteronormativity (Federici, 2010). In this sense, mononormativity operates as a hegemonic social system that devalues any form of atypical, unconventional relationship and, consequently, any different forms of parenting and family practices. And thus, CNM relationships, like any transgression of the monogamous ideal, are considered deviant (Sheff, 2020).

Another recurring argument of all the people interviewed when defining their polyamorous relationship was that it was not just about having sex but goes further, mainly involving affection, friendship, trust, and care. In this sense, they

consider it necessary to banish the myth that links them to homosexual sexual debauchery. Polyamory may or may not be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.; that is, it does not correspond to dual-label logics in terms of sexual orientation, nor does it refer to the sexual practices that are performed (Sheff, 2020). We cannot refer to a polyamorous relationship as if we were talking about a closed relationship, because it corresponds to the logic of freedom and flexibility when it comes to loving, respecting, caring for, and sharing lives.

The reasons for the success or failure of a polyamorous relationship are articulated as the two sides of a coin. Success is related to combining people's freedom to decide at all times the course of their affective and sexual life, respect for their own spaces within coexistence, and flexibility of roles. None of the interviewees assume static roles in their relationships, especially those that concern the tasks of responsibility, care, and material provisioning. These roles are assumed interchangeably by any of the members of the sentimental unit. Successful coexistence is perceived as a shared, common, and convivial exercise in which the distribution of tasks, expenses, and responsibilities becomes one of the most fundamental aspects for the durability of the relationship. These peculiarities, which are in line with other international studies (Cohen, 2016a, 2016b; Moors et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2021), oppose and challenge the pillars that underpin patriarchal society, which assigns specific roles to people according to gender (Cascais & Cardoso, 2012; Rodríguez-Castro, Fernández, et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, et al., 2013). Women are expected to care for and attend to the family while men are assigned the responsibility for economic maintenance and decision-making (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, et al., 2013). Thus, this vision of polyamory constitutes a real attack on these patriarchal postulates. Some studies indicate that women within polyamorous relationships feel the same as their male partners, with the same rights and obligations (Sheff, 2005, 2013), as they can freely discuss and reach agreements that are beneficial to all members of the relationship, which makes such relationships more honest, and those involved enjoy a healthier affective-sexual relationship (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013).

As for the other side of the coin, we identified some of the reasons for the failure of a polyamorous relationship. There is some unanimity among the people interviewed, pointing out jealousy, possession, and lack of trust as key elements that cause the relationship to break up. In this sense, other studies show that people in CNM relationships report less jealousy, greater sexual satisfaction and personal growth (Conley et al., 2018; Moors et al., 2021). As Klesse (2011) states, polyamorous people defend their relationships as a lifestyle, leaving behind incomprehension towards the other person, jealousy, possession, and infidelity. In this way, it breaks up with the idea that most western people internalize through the socialization of romantic love, which developed from the values of patriarchal heterocentrism, where women are weak, sensual subjects, dominated by their emotions, who turn into dependent beings at the service of the needs of their male partner (Lagarde, 2005). Polyamorous people's vision of love becomes a way of enjoying shared feelings, eliminating the idea of possessing another person (Klesse, 2011). Such possession becomes one of the fundamental pillars for the exercise of domination, which is emotionally translated into jealousy as a way of expressing love (Esteban, 2011).

It is what Yela (2000, p. 238) calls "the other side of love". In this sense, Butler (2007) states that this web of romantic love prevents the heterocentric matrix from being questioned so it continually reproduces itself. From a young age, boys and girls socialize differently under the sociocultural norms of romantic love, which are in tune with the myths of love (possession, jealousy, omnipotence, and one's better half) (Ferrer et al., 2008; Rodríguez-Castro, Fernández, et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, et al., 2013). Women link loving relationships to tenderness, happiness, safety, and being attached to a single partner, whereas men, with their more pragmatic vision of love, associate loving relationships with sex and pleasure (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, et al., 2013). In this sense, Lagarde (2005) states that love becomes the most vulnerable space in a woman's vital project because their identity is in tune with a relational self and dedication to the other person. This implies that love, by occupying a central place in women's lives, can be mistakenly associated with other manifestations such as belonging, domination, or even annulment, components that would lead to subordination and violence against women (Esteban & Távora, 2008).

Another objective of this study was to identify this group's experienced and perceived situations of discrimination in Spain. The results of our study clearly show that polyamorous people suffer continuous discrimination in the various areas of their lives and also perceive society's stigmatization, in line with the results of other studies (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2021). In fact, they have described various discriminatory situations in the health field, by health professionals who have "pointed them out" for being in a polyamorous relationship (Vaughan et al., 2019). As Haupert et al. (2016) claim, health professionals continue to perpetuate stigma towards this group because they lack adequate training. Other participants have also suffered discrimination in the workplace; in fact, they stated that in the workplace, they do not usually disclose their polyamorous relationship to avoid professional threats and retain their jobs. The study of Sheff (2005) shows that loss of a job is one of the negative consequences for polyamorous people when they reveal their relationships. Other areas where we have found that polyamorous people have received discriminative attitudes and behaviors have been the family sphere and in their circle of friendships. The estrangement of family members is one of the consequences for polyamorous people who reveal their relationship (Gusmano, 2018; Moors et al., 2021; Sheff, 2005). So, both family and friendships tend to be harsher and crueler in their criticism of the polyamorous community (Table et al., 2017).

Also, our results show that polyamorous people have openly mentioned the rejection they perceive by society as a whole, being regarded as an immoral deviation from the heteronormative monogamous relationship, which, in turn, leads to discrimination tin against them (Hutzler et al., 2016; Treas & Giesen, 2000). Most participants stated that society has negative perceptions and labels them as sexual, promiscuous, and/or nymphomaniac deviants (Cohen, 2016a, 2016b; Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2013; Table et al., 2017). In this way, these negative reactions to polyamorous units by the monogamous society make this type of affective-sexual relationship invisible, and monogamy continues to be

considered the only legitimate form of affective-sexual relationship (Sheff, 2020). That is why many polyamorous people choose to conceal this information and to invisibilize their polyamorous relationship as a protective measure, thus avoiding exposure to society and the consequent experiences of social discrimination and structural violence (Sheff, 2014).

In this study, some of the participants have highlighted the triple discrimination they face: for being a woman, for being lesbians, and for being polyamorous. Although attitudes towards sexuality have evolved positively in society in recent decades (Bullough & Bullough, 2019; Twenge et al., 2015), the medical and moralistic model of sexuality, which, through double sexual standards, regards women as asexual beings and not legitimized to enjoy their sexuality, highlighting their reproductive identity, continues to be perpetuated and reproduced (Lameiras et al., 2013). Sexist attitudes towards women continue to be identified in society (Arbach et al., 2019) as well as attitudes of homophobia/lesbophobia/transphobia/biphobia (Carrera et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Castro, Fernández, et al., 2013; Rodríguez-Castro, Lameiras, et al., 2013), which have been transformed into more subtle and more difficult-to-identify forms, and therefore, more pernicious. In this line, some studies show that women who are in a polyamorous relationship have greater control over their sexual health (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013; Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2013) and even greater personal power (Sheff, 2014). However, sexual double standards remain deeply rooted in traditional attitudes towards women (Farvid et al., 2017).

Finally, the third objective of this study was to analyze the future expectations for polyamorous relations in Spain. In general, continuing their polyamorous relationship was among their short-term plans for the future. Actually, they were not focused on a criterion of the durability of the relationship but on the quality of the affective and/or sexual relationship. Polyamorous relationships are timeless; stability and durability are not fixed for life. Our participants conceive of relationships as an evolution that can lead to changes in the members of the polyamorous union or they may even decide to take it a step further through maternity/paternity. Of the eleven people interviewed, only two alluded to the issue of future maternity/paternity. Although they perceive themselves as potential parents, their concern was about the negative consequences and stigma that their children might suffer from society. In this sense, Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. (2020) point the way for society to evolve towards the visibility and acceptance of polyamorous families by identifying four problems: the first refers to the *erasure* of polyfamilies in the academic discourse, reflected in the social, legal, health, and educational fields. The second refers to the *exclusion by inclusion* because the experiences of polyfamilies' children are different from those of children of other types of families, which contributes to increasing their invisibility and stigmatization. The third problem they point out is the absence of intersectionality in research, as most research is performed with samples from middle-class white polyamorous families. And finally, the fourth problem they detect is the absence of the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of children and adults who have grown up in polyfamilies, as well as how this type of education can have an impact on their future lives. It is also important to note that polyamorous relationships lack legal recognition of the union when there are more than two parental

figures (Pérez-Navarro, 2017). This legal impediment prevents polyamorous relationships and families from being normalized and visible.

Conclusion

This study has allowed us to approach the reality of polyamory in the Spanish context through the testimony of polyamorous people, their identities, experiences, difficulties, and expectations. Polyamory and other forms of CNM challenge and defy the foundations of patriarchy and normative social organization. Polyamorous relations are considered an attack on the patriarchal matrix that underpins our current society (Valencia, 2010). The incursion of polyamory as a social form of union puts at risk many of the postulates that sustain heterosexual monogamy and the family as the epicenter of social normativity, as such postulates are considered the baluster of the existence of social order between genders and between the systems of production and reproduction (Lameiras et al., 2013).

Like other sexual and relational minorities, polyamorous people suffer from incomprehension, social stigma, and discrimination in different areas. It is therefore necessary to promote research to overcome this social ignorance and advance our knowledge and recognition of polyamorous relationships. Likewise, from a technical-professional and practical point of view, policies and institutions should promote the necessary changes at the social, health, educational, or regulatory level aimed at ensuring the creation of environments of coexistence, safety, and acceptance of diversity.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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