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When Lovers Are Fighters: Polyamory and Intimate Partner Violence

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When Lovers Are Fighters:

Polyamory and Intimate Partner Violence

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This work represents my own work unless otherwise cited

This senior comprehensive project has met the minimum requirements of the Global Health Studies major for a Bachelors of Science degree

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Polyamory, also referred to as consensual non-monogamy, deeply challenges many contemporary social conventions and cultural expectations about intimate partnerships. As a philosophy, polyamory provides alternatives to unhealthy relationship ideologies that can lead to discord in intimate partner relationships and, particularly when there are imbalances of power between partners, may result in intimate partner violence (IPV). This project uses Dean Spade’s chapter For Lovers and Fighters (2006) as an artifact to formulate a critical analysis of several commonly held beliefs about relationships and how polyamory as an ideal rejects and reshapes those beliefs. In this project, I examine Spade’s claims and the evidence he uses to support these claims as well as evidence (both for and against his claims) taken from the scholarly literature. Through critical analysis of Spade’s claims, I identify ways that his arguments can be extended to IPV in the polyamorous community and identify unique vulnerabilities and resilience. Conclusions emerging from this analysis are applied to suggest ways to support polyamorists and their partners in order to prevent harmful relationship dynamics and IPV behaviors.
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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a social and public health problem, as well as a violation of human rights (Centers for Disease Control, 2015; McHugh & Frieze, 2006). It is defined as “a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one’s partner [or former partner] to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone” (United States Department of Justice, 2015). According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NIPSVS), more than one in three women and more than one in four men in the United States experience some form or IPV in their lifetimes (Roy, 2016). Globally, thirty percent of women over age 15 have experienced IPV (Devries et al., 2013). IPV can have severe consequences, including physical injury, depression, low self-esteem, suicide attempts, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and gynecological or pregnancy complications, any of which may lead to hospitalization, homelessness, disability, or death (Centers for Disease Prevention and Control 2015; McCarrick, Davis-M McCabe, & Hirst-Winthrop, 2015; Roy, 2016).

The term “intimate partner” can be used to describe anyone with whom an individual has emotional connectedness, regular contact, and/or familiarity and knowledge about each other’s lives (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015). In some contexts, the scope of the word “intimate” encompasses both the traditional sense of the word (the spaces of sex and romance, close kinship, and friendship) as well as “all other kinds of connection that impact on people, and on which they depend for living” (Berlant, 1997: original emphasis). I use the term intimate partner in this paper to refer to an individual with whom one has ongoing physical/sexual connection and with whom one forms an identity as a couple. Typically, IPV is
placed in the context of a single pair of heterosexual intimate partners with an emphasis on male-on-female violence. However, IPV can occur in any type of intimate relationship, including same-sex couples and relationships that encompass multiple partners (polyamory).

While not as prevalent, scholarly work is being done on IPV outside the context of a cis-gender (i.e., an individual for which there is a match between gender identity and biological sex) heterosexual couple. Scholarship on IPV within lesbian, gay, and bisexual couples is becoming more common, within both the academic spheres of IPV, abuse, and violence as well as LGBT studies and family studies (Barrett & Sheridan, 2016; McClennen, 2005; Neal & Edwards, 2015). As a result of this work, it has been shown that bisexual women experience virtually all types of IPV at higher rates than both heterosexual and lesbian women (Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). Nationally, IPV rates among LGBT individuals are similar or greater to rates among heterosexual and cis-gender individuals (Chen, Jacobs, & Rovi, 2013). It has also been established that many LGBT individuals have experienced psychological or physical abuse due to their status as a sexual minority, which impedes their efforts to utilize IPV services (Chen, Jacobs, & Rovi, 2013). Conversely, IPV can exacerbate minority stress caused by stigmatization and discrimination (Chen, Jacobs, & Rovi, 2013). This scholarly work has also been extended to the study of the issues, needs, and challenges associated with assisting or advocating on behalf of LGBT people (Ford, Slavin, Hilton, & Holt, 2013). However, even this research limits its inclusion of LGBT people to only those which comprise the acronym: lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals (Ford, Slavin, Hilton, & Holt, 2013).

Research shows that sexual minorities face barriers to seeking help for IPV that are unique to their sexual orientation and gender identity. For example, legal definitions of domestic violence are limited to heterosexual dyads (Hodges, 1999; Stapel, 2007) and there tends to be low
levels of confidence among sexual minorities that law enforcement officials and courts will be sensitive and effective at protecting LGBT people (Eaton et al., 2008; Goodmark, 2013).

One sexual minority group, those in multiple concurrent (polyamorous) relationships, clearly does not fit within cultural scripts for IPV; these relationships deviate from both the expectation of having a male and female partner and the expectation of only having two participants in a relationship. However, IPV does exist within the polyamorous community, as evidenced by the wide variety of IPV-related content on websites, blogs, and forums written by polyamorous individuals for the polyamorous community (such as the “Abuse in Poly” series on the website Polyamory On Purpose: Mahler, 2015). One article written for the website P.S. I Love You, entitled “Confronting Abuse in Polyamorous Relationships,” states that “within the poly community, our own values and best practices can make us more vulnerable to certain abusive dynamics and less able to confront them” (Socrates & Glaucon, 2016).

In this senior comprehensive project, I seek to add to the limited scholarly literature on IPV in the polyamorous (hereafter referred to as “poly”) community. Specifically, I use Dean Spade’s chapter For Lovers and Fighters (2006) as an artifact to formulate a critical analysis of how polyamory as an ideal can be used to identify mechanisms that might protect polyamorists or place them at risk for IPV. In the first section of this paper, I define and contextualize polyamory. In the second section, I discuss how this topic links to the four dimensions of the Global Health Studies. In the third section, I summarize Spade’s chapter, which serves as the artifact for this analysis, providing contextual information about the author and the intended purpose of the piece in order to identify the cultural perspectives that Spade brings (or does not bring) to his arguments. Within this section, I provide subsections devoted to each of Spade’s claims, wherein I summarize the evidence Spade himself provides as well as evidence from the
Polyamory

Polyamory, also referred to as consensual non-monogamy, is the philosophy or practice of having multiple romantic or sexual partners with the full knowledge and consent of all involved (Dryden, 2015). Polyamory and other forms of “ethical” or “consensual” non-monogamy have been practiced by various human cultures since before written history and continue into present day (Rogers, 2010). The increasing visibility and recognition of polyamory in modern life has launched new dialogues, challenged many social institutions, and created changes in certain branches of academia and subpopulations of society (Shucart, 2016). While activists, rights groups, and allies have made progress towards acceptance of this controversial relationship structure, there remains significant resistance to and discrimination against those who practice polyamory.

As an umbrella term, polyamory encompasses a wide variety of relationship practices (Shucart, 2016), including swinging (married couples exchanging partners solely for sexual purposes: Jenks, 1998), polyfidelity (a group of three or more sexually exclusive partners, collectively referred to as a polycule, who live together and share resources: Bennion & Joffe, 2016), open relationships (commonly a primary relationship which is prioritized over others, with outside relationships permitted within certain boundaries: Labriola, 1999), monogamish relationships (a primarily monogamous relationship with occasional and negotiated sexual contact with others, such as one night stands or local limitations when either partner is travelling: Cohen, 2015; Table, 2016), and relationship anarchy (the rejection of hierarchical relationships...
and the idea that sexual and romantic relationships should be privileged over non-romantic or non-sexual ones: Table, 2016). Each structure is flexible and can be personalized to each individual relationship group to meet a wide variety of needs and desires.

For many, polyamory does not manifest as a particular relationship form but instead as a dedication to a set of values and the cultivation of a particular inner approach to intimacy (Anapol, 2010). For instance, a polyamory framework can reflect the ideal that all relationships can be allowed to evolve naturally without limits, and that love is an unlimited resource. Successful polyamorous relationships can promote increased personal freedom, greater depth in social relationships, the potential for sexual exploration in a non-judgmental setting, a sense of being desired, a feeling of belonging, increased self-awareness, and intellectual variety (Weitzman, Davidson, & Phillips, 2010). Some polyamorists experience “compersion” (feeling joy that one’s partner is sharing closeness with another person, also referred to as “frubble”) (Polyamory Society, 1997). Poly relationships can also provide practical benefits, including greater financial freedom and security, reduction of living expenses through cohabitation, pooled incomes, mutual support, and multiple sources of companionship, advice, joy, and love (Veaux, Hardy, & Gill, 2014). A polyamorist situation can offer both an expanded range of sexual experiences as well as a diffusion of pressures associated with sex that are accommodated by a group rather than a single individual (Veaux, Hardy, & Gill, 2014).

Despite the incentives that might encourage people to practice polyamory, there are factors that discourage such a decision. Many publicly polyamorist individuals face discrimination in the form of loss of employment, housing, relationships with friends and families, or custody of children (Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013; Sheff, 2012). For many, polyamory departs too radically from conventional relationship structures, which
contributes to such social consequences (Veaux, Hardy, & Gill, 2014). For example, participants in open relationships or swinging situations are perceived as less moral, less motivated by duty, and not as family-oriented as those in polyfidelity relationships (Matsick et al., 2014; Shucart, 2016). A deterrent for many considering polyamory is the simple fact that polyamory is complicated; managing a single relationship is overwhelming for some people and the thought of bringing more people into an interpersonal dynamic can be unappealing (Veaux, Hardy, & Gill, 2014). Polyamory involves an enormous investment of time, patience, and honesty. Within the poly community, being unable to accommodate additional relationships due to the time and logistical constraints created by the number of existing partners is referred to as being polysaturated (Veaux, n.d.). It can be very difficult to find a system that meets the various needs and preferences of multiple people, and many things can go wrong when personalities clash, multiple opinions are being offered, or someone’s feelings get hurt (Veaux, Hardy, & Gill, 2014).

As polyamory grows in recognition and numbers, it becomes increasingly critical to examine the ways in which this population experiences and interacts with issues such as legal, social, and political discrimination, restricted access to health care, and the complicated matter of raising children in a polyamorist family structure. It is estimated that 1.2 to 2.4 million Americans, or four to five percent of the population, participate in some form of polyamory. An estimated 9.8 million individuals allow satellite lovers (partners outside of a primary relationship) in their relationship (McCoy et al., 2015; Sheff, 2012). These estimates are inexact because quantifying the poly population is difficult to do for several reasons. Variations in many measures are due to difficulty defining polyamory and the complexity of the identities of individuals within the community. Additionally, discrimination can discourage them from openly
admitting their relationship style to the general public or anyone outside their immediate social circles (Sheff, 2012). The surveys that have been conducted on the American poly community have relied on demographics gathered from self-identified polyamorists who are active within the community, which is not necessarily representative of the entire community. In addition, people of color, individuals of lower socioeconomic status, young people, gay men, and lesbian women are all underrepresented within the self-proclaimed poly community (Anapol, 2010). The collection of data on polyamorists primarily involves use of the internet where polyamorists can express themselves. This inherently introduces biases towards white middle class individuals who have access to internet services with the privacy to visit sensitive sites such as those for polyamorists (Sheff, 2014).

One collection, Understanding Non-Monogamies, presents academic research and theories regarding openly nonmonogamous relationships (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). It, and other books of this nature, including Angela Willey’s Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology, provide highly interdisciplinary perspectives on monogamy and nonmonogamy. This includes the presentation of research done by a wide variety of authors on specific topics such as poly parenting, various representations of nonmonogamy, and polyamorous intersections with sexuality, culture, and disability (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Such volumes are crucial sources of critical and celebratory perspectives of polyamory.

Global Health Studies Dimensions

The four dimensions of global health intimately intersect any discussion of polyamory and intimate partner violence (IPV). The dimension of Science and the Environment has an obvious link with the understanding of IPV and its impact on the mental, physical, and emotional health of those who experience it. IPV is recognized by the Center for Disease Control as a “serious, preventable public health issue,” a label which is associated with rigorous scientific
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study of IPV as a clinical issue and its causes and outcomes (Center for Disease Control, n.d.). However, understanding the causes of intimate partner violence is substantially more difficult than studying a disease. For example, diseases usually have a biological basis and occur within a social context, but intimate partner violence is entirely a product of its social context (Jewkes, 2002). Consequently, understanding the causes of such violence requires research in many social contexts (Jewkes, 2002). This characteristic of IPV makes it difficult to fully understand from a scientific perspective, but also from a sociocultural perspective.

The dimension of Power and Economics is also necessary for a full understanding of issues such as the allocation of resources to support those who experience IPV. Power dynamics are inherent in IPV itself, as IPV is fundamentally the power and control exerted by one partner over another (US Department of Justice 2015). Power imbalances within an intimate relationship may be the result of the intersections of race, class, gender, or religion. Power also plays a significant role in creating dynamics in which polyamorous people are largely invisible within discussions of IPV. Those who study and work with IPV are granted the power to determine what constitutes intimate partner violence, which has resulted in the absence of polyamory from most IPV research and discussion. Because of the inequity of power between the professional IPV community and those who study or practice polyamory, IPV within the poly community is not addressed, which is detrimental to the health of those who experience it. Power, evidenced by privileges and oppressions, is not distributed equally across and within the poly community as a whole. According to Nathan Rambukkana, some individuals practicing nonmonogamy are able to “mobilize substantial sociocultural privilege,” and others are not (2010).

Ethics and Social Responsibility are deeply ingrained in the examination and cultural treatment of those with marginalized identities such as polyamory. Moral decisions and problems
of political and social justice are fundamental in the neglect of populations which may be vulnerable in certain ways. The treatment of marginalized victims of IPV is also an ethically charged matter. Because of mainstream rejection of polyamory, the IPV needs of these individuals are not met. Full understanding of the production of health resulting from the different valuation of polyamorous people requires critical inquiry, as this project will attempt to do.

Finally, the dimension of Cultures and Society is of clear importance to this project as it examines the structures of polyamorous culture, how it does or does not conform to various norms, and how this conformity or variation may impact IPV within the community. IPV is also dependent upon the cultural context in which it occurs. For example, the risk of IPV is greatest in societies where the use of violence in many situations is a socially accepted norm (Jewkes, 2002). Polyamory can be described as its own culture, distinct from monoamory, with norms and shared experiences among its members. While polyamory and monoamory may overlap in some practices or other commonalities, polyamorists often consider themselves a separate and unique group within society (Barker & Langdridge, 2010).

Artifact

I have chosen Dean Spade’s chapter, For Lovers and Fighters, as an artifact to anchor my analysis of IPV in the poly community. This chapter appears in a collection of essays entitled We Don’t Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists. Published in 2006, this collection of essays by young feminist writers for young feminists covers a wide variety of issues, focusing on unity within the feminist movement. Spade’s chapter consists of a mix of personal narrative and theoretical perspective of polyamory. While Dean Spade does not discuss IPV within For Lovers and Fighters, he discusses elements of polyamory which impact relationship behaviors and interpersonal dynamics in both positive and negative ways. In this
way, these dynamics can be seen as potentially protective or risk factors for IPV.

Spade’s perspective on polyamory is significant in many ways and can provide meaningful insight into the ways in which polyamory shapes the experience of IPV. A prominent queer, transgender, polyamorist activist and Associate Professor at Seattle University School of Law, he draws from his personal life and his experiences as an activist and theorist whose work heavily involves cultural dynamics and the legal system (Spade, n.d.). Elements of his identity and background position him to reflect on traditional relationship dynamics as well as alternative relationship dynamics. Spade is a transgender male who was socialized as female but identifies as and is currently perceived as male and a central member of the queer and transgender communities he interacts with. His experiences position him to speak to the damaging effects of a culturally enforced, rigid gender binary and the liberation, experimentation, and independence experienced by those who reject cultural norms.

There are also perspectives which Spade cannot provide and which may impact his discussion of polyamory. Throughout the chapter, he mentions the supportive communities of which he is a member, and how these communities are empowering and healing for him. These communities may allow for Spade to experiment with his relationships in a safe environment, a situation which is unavailable for those without supportive networks. Throughout the chapter, Spade does not discuss the difficulties faced by someone who practices polyamory in an unsupportive environment or without access to the poly community.

**Spade’s Claim**

Throughout *For Lovers and Fighters*, Dean Spade reflects on polyamory and how it rejects or conforms to various cultural norms or dynamics. He suggests that polyamory can be beneficial to those who practice it, as it deviates from monoamory and heteronormative cultures, but also that polyamory can create new norms and dynamics which can be harmful to those who
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practice it. Spade supports these claims through a discussion of those elements he considers problematic within monoamorous, often heteronormative, culture and how polyamory challenges or questions those elements. He includes the following elements; (1) the heteronormative family structure, (2) the myth of heteromonogamous romance, (3) the idea of scarcity in romantic relationships, and (4) primacy given to monoamorous relationships. Spade also discusses the ways in which a rejection of traditional ideology allows for (5) highly fluid and performative gender, (6) sexual freedom and affirmation, (7) recognition of difference and identity politics, and the (8) development of a new meaning of love. Finally, Spade claims that polyamory has emerged as a (9) new idealistic relationship form which is impossible to attain and is used as a basis for judgment and a means of coercion. Below, I discuss in detail Spade’s evidence used to support his claims, using supporting literatures.

Spade’s Claim Part 1: Traditional Relationship Ideologies Are Harmful

The first part of Spade’s claim involves a discussion of how relationships are harmed by (1) the heteronormative family structure, (2) the myth of heteromonogamous romance, (3) the assumption of scarcity within romantic relationships, and (4) the primacy given to monogamous relationships above all others. Spade argues that each of these dynamics is damaging to an individual and their romantic relationships and that departure from these dynamics allows for healthier relationships. Because polyamory, by definition, rejects the notion that intimate partner relationships must be exclusive and dyadic, those who practice polyamory are in the position to challenge many or all of these damaging beliefs.

The heteronormative family structure

The term “heteronormativity” is used to reference an inevitable, taken-for-granted assumption of gender binary (male and female) and universal heterosexuality in modern society (Warner, 1999). A long tradition of feminist scholarship, such as Judith Butler’s (2010,
originally published:1990) concept of “heterosexual matrix” and Adrienne Rich’s (1980) idea of “compulsory heterosexuality,” and discusses how assumptions of binary gender norms and an assumed opposite-sex attraction have shaped cultural consciousness about social norms being rooted in nature and therefore immutable. Oswald, Blume, and Marks describe heteronormativity as the “implicit moral system or value framework that surrounds the practice of heterosexuality” (2005).

Heteronormativity is intimately connected to cultural norms associated with family. Tradition has defined family as a nuclear one, consisting of two monogamous, heterosexual adults with or without children (Dryden, 2015). There is ample evidence that American society has developed a value system that strongly encourages individualism and independence, and this value has translated into the perception of the biological nuclear family as the basic familial unit. For example, urban industrial capitalism created a demand for a small, flexible and mobile family (Ruggles, 1994). Spade identifies this heteronormative family structure as a structure which pressures individuals to “form a dyad, marry, have kids, and get all their needs met within that family structure” (2006). According to Spade, this is seen within his queer and trans communities as unhealthy because this mentality encourages individuals to focus on a smaller nuclear family unit as opposed to a community, which isolates them (2006). As evidence that the queer community broadly rejects the pressures of heteronormativity of family structures, Spade reflects on the strong community bonding seen in LGBT communities. Bernstein and Reimann emphasize that constructed kinship networks and intentional families “must be achieved and constructed on a daily basis,” which fits with the level of effort required to maintain poly relationships and families (2001). Polyamorous communities are especially close knit and larger family groups form as networks of committed partnerships develop (Sheff, 2010).
Although many contemporary families such as single parents, divorced parents, step-parents with a variety of marital statuses and involvement in the raising of any children, do not fit this model, such families are generally still culturally accepted as “valid,” a status often denied to queer or polyamorous families. Elisabeth Sheff describes the stigma faced by polyamorous families (specifically those with children) as one disadvantage identified by polyamorous parents when interviewed, as was children becoming attached to partners who leave the family (2010). However, those interviewed did not wish to be in monogamous relationships despite the stigma they faced. According to Sheff, the primary strategy used to manage stigma was extreme honesty, which demonstrated self-acceptance and trustworthiness (2010). Departure from a heteronormative, nuclear family structure, although it contributed to stigma, also allowed for high emotional intimacy with children, shared resources among the family, increased personal time (which allowed individuals to meet their own needs outside of the family), attention for children, and more role models for children (Sheff, 2010). In these ways, polyamorous families reject the harmful pressures of a dyadic monoamorous relationship.

**The myth of heteromonogamous romance**

Spade further supports his claim that traditional relationship beliefs are harmful with his discussion of the myth of heteromonogamous romance. This myth refers to a set of romantic ideals which encourage falling in love with the idea of love. Deborah Anapol describes romantic love as the “Holy Grail of serial monogamy, elevated to the notion of a state of pure nirvana but always out of reach, always elusive” (2010). Not only does the myth of heteromonogamous romance create a desire to maintain a relationship in which one feels swept off their feet and completely in love, it also provides a model of perfection within a romantic relationship which is unattainable (Novak, 2013). Individuals subscribing to this myth compare themselves and each other to the perfectly romantic partner, one who buys red roses, prepares candlelit perfumed
baths, swoons, puts their partner first, and whose life goal is to move in with each other and start a family, swept into a “frenzied hunt for the perfect relationship” (Anapol, 2010). This argument is supported by Elizabeth Emens, who refers to the “fantasy of monogamy,” namely that the exclusive relationship of two people is the romantic ideal and is “all we should and do strive for” (2004).

At its core, polyamory is a rejection of monogamy. This in and of itself can be beneficial for polyamorists, as monogamy has been identified as problematic in several ways. Robinson (1997), as well as Jackson and Scott (2004), have put non-monogamy forward as a way for heterosexual women to challenge the monogamy inherent in heterosexuality which “privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance” (Robinson, 1997). They argue that monogamy benefits men rather than women, keeping women in unpaid domestic labor, increasing their dependence on men, allowing them little autonomy, and separating them from friendships and support networks with other women (see also Barker & Ritchie, 2007).

Eleanor Wilkinson (2010) provides a perspective which challenges Spade’s assertion that the poly community, as part of the queer community, rejects the notion of idealized romantic love. She discusses how dominant narratives surrounding polyamory place value on “long-term meaningful relationships that are founded upon love, honesty, understanding and trust” and these values contribute to strength and stability in these relationships and family structures. In this way, values of polyamorists mirror existing definitions of contemporary love (Wilkinson, 2010).

According to Spade, the myth of idealized romantic love is personally and politically damaging to all, creating ideals and expectations of perfection between individuals and
preventing feminists, especially women, from standing together against sexism and other forms of oppression (2006). Spade argues that the all-consuming activity of seeking “happily-ever-after” love, longing, and desire directs social arrangements which “subordinate women and make them the property of men” (2006). Under the ideals of heteromonogamous romance, women’s value is defined by their “ability to find and keep a romance” (Hayes, 2014; pp. 15). Spade argues how idealized romantic love is damaging and harmful, working to “brainwash women,” “fuck women over,” and “subordinate women…in the romantic dyad” (2006). Cultural romance scripts are also problematic for men, particularly gay men, as these scripts prescribe a relationship trajectory of dating, falling in love, sexual exclusivity, and life-long commitment, which directly contradicts “male-gendered scripts of sex as adventure, pleasure, and exploration without commitment” (Adam, 2010).

Spade concedes that while the ideological dialogue in queer communities, including polyamorous communities, critique these ideals and frame them as mythical, in practice the ideals are still reflected in how these communities approach sex, love, and romance. Katherine Frank and John DeLamater describe how the boundaries of fidelity are defined, justified, and negotiated for couples who practice varying levels of sexual exclusivity (2010). Couples who practiced consensual nonmonogamy (polyamory) were more likely to have discussed and negotiated clearly the meaning of fidelity within their relationship, yet still there was overlap between the meaning and limits of fidelity across relationships with different levels of sexual exclusivity (Frank & DeLamater, 2010). The work of these two authors emphasizes the variety within any group of people, and draws attention to the ways in which dominant discourses about love, sex, and marriage impact romantic relationships of all kinds. So while it is true that polyamory as an ideal rejects the myth of heteromonogamous romance, it is difficult for those
who practice polyamory to fully escape such cultural scripts, particularly given the lack of socially acceptable alternatives that polyamorists may use to replace the romance myth.

**Primacy of romantic relationships**

Closely linked with the myth of heteromonogamous romantic love, prioritization of romantic relationships “over all else” is another problematic relationship dynamic that Spade discusses. While he discusses this dynamic as it occurs in his own social circles, not specifically in monoamorous or polyamorous relationships, it can be inferred that Spade understands this in a monoamorous context as he describes how he sees people “ditching their friends, putting all their emotional eggs in one basket, and creating unhealthy dynamics with the people they date” (2006). The use of the phrase “one basket” indicates that such relationships involve only one partner.

Spade discusses how the ideals of heteromonogamous romance and the “world of shame in which sexuality is couched in our culture” create a situation in which a romantic relationship becomes a place to express one’s most insecure self (2006). Outside the context of a committed relationship, individuals who are socialized as female are “raised to think that sexual pleasure is not for [them], that to seek out pleasure is to be a slut, that [they] should be less sexual than men, that sex is a service you give to attain commitment and family structure from men” (Spade, 2006). Spade argues that because sexuality is shamed in every other setting, romantic relationships become the only safe place in which sexuality can be expressed. The cultural shaming of sexuality is evident in the practice of slut-shaming, discrimination against sex workers, and the fear felt by youth who have not been positively educated about sexuality (Miller, 2016; Peterson, 2015; Vance, 1984; Walkowitz; 2016). These are issues which impact people of all genders but are particularly damaging for women. Because of this insecurity and shame, finding oneself in a socially accepted heteromonogamous relationship provides a sense of relief and security, which contributes to the behavioral relaxation that Spade describes. He notes
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That individuals, even within the LGBT community, can behave differently around the person they are dating, being “overly needy or dependent, or dominating, or possessive, or jealous, or mean, or disrespectful, or thoughtless” (2006). Spade considers the following: “Is [love] about possessing [other people], finding security in them, having all our needs met by them, being able to treat them however we want and still have them stick around? I hope not” (2006).

**Notion of romantic scarcity**

Spade identifies the notion of scarcity as a problematic cultural element which is damaging to romantic relationships. In the context of intimate partner relationships, scarcity shapes ideals of sexual exclusivity, which claims that “each person has only a certain amount of attention or attraction or love or interest, and if any goes to someone besides his or her partner, partner must lose out,” and can also be seen in the ideals of the romance myth, which claims that “there is only one person out there for you” (Spade, 2006). Although Spade does not directly name monoamory as the primary space where romantic scarcity is experienced and perpetuated, his reference to a singular perfect partner (“one person out there for you”) indicates monoamory as the implied structure (2006).

Further evidence of the cultural acceptance of love as a scarce resource can be seen in The Ethical Slut, which refers to the “starvation economy of monogamous romanticism” when describing the commonly accepted notion that the giving of romantic love, intimacy, and connection to one person involves taking it from someone else (Easton & Liszt, 1997). The idea used by Burleigh, Rubel, and Meegan of zero-sum romantic beliefs, the perception that one person’s love gained is another person’s love lost, also supports Spade’s inferred connection between romantic scarcity and monoamory (2016).

Spade makes the clear distinction that other relationships do not incorporate the notion of scarcity as romantic ones do; having more than one child does not insinuate that less love is
available for the first child once the others are born, and having more than one friend does not mean being a “bad or fake or less-interested friend to our other friends” (2006). It is only within romantic relationships that more is bad, mandating that having more than one romantic partner is damaging to one’s romantic relationships as it decreases the amount of love available to any given partner. Not only does Spade establish that scarcity is only applied to romantic relationships and is damaging for those relationships, he also claims that capitalism is largely responsible. According to Spade, capitalism invests in the development of feelings of scarcity in many areas of one’s life as this feeling contributes to greed and promotes a focus on accumulation (2006). Compulsory monogamy has also been tied to contemporary consumer capitalism and notions of ownership (McPheeters, 1999).

The core of polyamory, the expansion of romantic relationships outside a single dyad, conflicts directly with the socialized idea that each person has a limited amount of romantic love to distribute to their partner. According to Christian Kleese, love within polyamory is regarded as an “active agent which has a potential to grow eternally” (2014). Furthermore, polyamory resists the categorization of relationships as platonic friends or romantic intimate partners, which blurs the lines as to which relationships use up limited romantic resources. Polyamorists deal with this issue by moving entirely away from the idea that attention, attraction, love, sex, etc. are in fact limited.

Spade’s Claim Part 2: Polyamory Offers Alternative Ideologies

The second part of Spade’s claim - that polyamory as an ideological alternative to harmful relationship beliefs - is supported by his discussion of how the rejection of harmful beliefs leads to freedom of expression. The elements he uses as evidence are the (5) acceptance of gender as a fluid and performative part of one’s identity, (6) sexual freedom and affirmation, (7) the acknowledgement of identity politics, and (8) redefining the cultural meaning of love.
Spade argues that each of these dynamics is beneficial to an individual and, by extension, the freedom to express one’s identity and be validated in that identity by one’s intimate partner(s) contributes to healthier relationships. However, Spade also acknowledges that the development of new polyamorous norms and ideals carries its own risks for relationships.

**The fluid and performative nature of gender**

As evidence for this second component of his claim, Spade first discusses the cultural scripts of gender. Being poly does not necessarily mean challenging gender norms and rules, but the poly community, as Spade points out, is closely tied to the trans and queer communities in which gender scripts are explicitly deconstructed and redefined. Spade identifies how gender in our culture is considered binary, with an overall social understanding that “all people are either male or female their whole lives, and that this difference is inscribed by ‘nature’ in our very genes” (2006). Individuals are pressured to perform exclusive masculinity or exclusive femininity, especially within their romantic relationships. This is largely restrictive, as socially acceptable gender roles generally do not allow for flexibility, especially in a shift from one set of gender roles to another (Lindsey, 2016). However, this binary understanding is a cultural construction, as established by a thorough body of literature.

Scholarship on the cultural construction of the meaning of gender has a long tradition and continues today. Many authors contribute to this dialogue, and the centrality of gender to one’s sense of self, social expectations, and role behaviors is widely recognized (World Health Organization, n.d.). According to Amy Wharton, gender is a “system of social practices” which creates and maintains gender distinctions and organizes relations of inequality and power based on those distinctions (2009). Furthermore, she discussed how gender occurs at an individual, interactional, and institutional level throughout society (Wharton, 2009). The meaning prescribed to different genders shift over time and as cultures change.
Not only is the cultural understanding of gender fluid, so is the way in which some
individuals express their gender. In this way, gender is both fluid and performative. Individuals
may choose to perform different genders at different times in their lives or depending on their
environment. Theoretical understandings of gender as a spectrum have developed in past
decades. First published in 1990, Judith Butler outlined a theory of gender performativity, which
referred to the way objects and subjects are constituted in the basis of actions that, through
repetition, perform what is experienced as objects and subjects in the world (2010). In this way,
gender is not a ‘natural’ object which explains gender patterns. Instead, gender is an identity
situated in a distinct historical and cultural context. This approach is sometimes referred to as a
queer approach to gender, pointing out the strangeness rather than the ‘naturalness’ of gender
patterns. Spade describes that “for people living on the outskirts of traditional gender, being
perceived as different genders at different times - and coming to find out how subjective gender
assignment is and how fleeting membership in any gender role can be - can generate new
feelings of experimentation and increased independence and pleasure” (2006). This change in
perspective by an individual, from being told gender is binary to understanding it to be a more
complex concept, is not reserved solely for those who fail to conform to binary gender norms.
Spade emphasizes that some transgender individuals settle into traditional male or female gender
identities, but the process of transitioning into that identity disrupts their understanding of gender
as a stable, fixed position (2006). The acceptance of gender as a fluid construction can be
reaffirming for those who are transgender or who occupy a gender position that otherwise defies
traditional expectations, as this validates their experiences and identity.

**Sexual freedom and affirmation**

First described by Spade as evidence of how monoamorous romantic dynamics are
problematic, the culture of shame surrounding sexuality is highly damaging for people of all
genders, particularly women (see Primacy of romantic relationships). Spade revisits this issue when he describes the ways in which polyamory benefits those who practice it, reframing his discussion from what might be characterized as “shaming sexuality is damaging” to “sexuality free from shame is beneficial.” As Spade argues, polyamory allows individuals to move past social shaming and restrictions on sexuality and own and seek out their sexual pleasure. Polyamorous culture provides space for individuals to experience sex freely, without shame or fear of violence, particularly individuals who are “experimenting with how they think about or express their own gender” (2006). Spade also regards sex as an opportunity for affirmation of sexual orientation identity. Sexual experimentation grounded in such rejections of shaming and encouragement for one’s partner to explore is the ideal, and provides an alternative to the sexual experimentation described by Anapol as going “hand-in-hand with polyphobia and mononormative and possessive relationships” (2010).

Spade further discusses how polyamory is beneficial for intimate partner relationships in that it provides avenues for sexual experimentation. Many polyamorous individuals recognize the fact that it is unlikely that they will be able to meet all their partners’ sexual needs. Allowing for open experimentation with other individuals, accompanied by open communication with each participant, creates relationships in which polyamorous individuals do not pressure their partners (and are not pressured themselves) into sexual behaviors they do not want (2006).

Identity politics

Spade refers to “shitty liberal culture” and “stupid romance myths” which encourage individuals to blind themselves to differences in identity within their relationships (2006). These cultural elements are the damaging components which polyamory replaces. When liberal culture and romance myths dictate the nature of sexual, romantic, and familial relationships, explicit recognition of partners’ differences in identity are discouraged (Spade, 2006). Without radical
politics regarding identity in which individuals have views that break from historical views and norms, relationships are likely to unintentionally reflect sexist, racist, classist, and other systems without directly recognizing them, allowing these dynamics to continue to perpetuate the belief that love is blind to such difference. Even within healthy romantic relationships, elements of difference may create tension which is difficult to identify and address when love is supposed to be blind to difference. This can create situations in which an individual is unable to fully experience or appreciate aspects of their identity.

Spade maintains that aspects of identity such as race, class, age, religion, gender, or ability are central and impact intimate partner relationships (2006). Rather than dismiss these characteristics, Spade argues that individuals with ideologies that encourage redefinition and celebration of diversity of identity (radical identity politics) tend to honor individual identities and differences (2006). Furthermore, politically radical individuals recognize and work to minimize the ways in which identities contribute to privilege and oppression within interpersonal relationships. This becomes especially evident within polyamorous relationships, in which there are many individuals and relationships, each with different degrees of difference across characteristics.

A result of an ideology of acceptance of differences in identity between partners is that individuals are free to pursue relationships with others who share important identity characteristics (Spade, 2006). This concept is mirrored by Deborah Anapol, who lists appreciation for diversity as an element of the “polyamorous personality,” comprised of personality traits shared by most polyamorous people (2010). Individuals who, for example, do not practice the same religion as their partner may seek connections with people who do. Because one person is unlikely to share all central aspects of an individual’s identity, polyamory
can be beneficial by allowing this need for validation and connection to be shared by multiple partners. As Spade describes, polyamorists “understand that experiencing and acknowledging the identities we live in and are perceived in is important, and finding community with other people who are like us can be empowering and healing” (2006). This aspect of polyamory is confirmed by other authors, who emphasize the importance of recognizing difference within polyamorous relationships (Noël, 2006).

An important distinction to make is that between the recognition of identity politics in poly relationships as Spade discusses and the inclusion of identity politics in poly literature. Angela Willey states that “poly literature...has tended to presume a universal subject, neutral and therefore implicitly white, middle-class, college educated, able-bodied” (2010). White dominance in poly literature has made it difficult for anti-racist feminist critiques of monogamy to be heard (Frankenberg, 1993; Noël, 2006; Willey, 2006). Several authors have stated that polyamory has not yet reached its “radical potential” to challenge various cultural “isms,” such as racism and ableism, which is largely due to the apolitical narratives presented to the public (Noël, 2006; Petrella, 2007; Willey, 2010). The politics of identity within relationships is also distinguishable from identity politics as described by Jamie Heckert, which is inherently oppositional and reifies categories that social divisions depend upon (2004). Heckert further described identity politics as problematic as it maintains the “series of conceptual binaries upon which much of Western thought rests” (2004).

The meaning of love

Several elements of Spade’s discussion of polyamory tie back to what love is and how love is societally constructed and understood. A large part of this construction is the acceptance of jealousy as an expression of love. This is not surprising, as a focus on love is common among polyamorists and the way they conceptualize and construct their relationships (Kleese, 2006).
Within the frameworks upon which polyamory operates on, love is not defined in terms of sexual exclusivity but instead in terms of “respect, concern, commitment to act with kind intentions, accountability for [one’s] actions, and desire for growth” (Spade, 2006). In extension of the redefining of love in the poly community, polyamory literature views jealousy as manageable, and as a cultural phenomenon rather than a universal biological and inevitable element of a relationship (Anapol, 1997; Benson, 2008; Easton & Liszt, 1997; Stenner & Stainton-Rogers, 1998; Sharpsteen, 1993).

According to Spade, love should focus on one’s interest in seeing their partners’ needs met and helping one’s partners develop themselves and reach their own form of happiness and fulfillment (2006). This in contrast to expressions of love he connects to sexual exclusivity, specifically jealousy. Emens’ work (2004) also emphasized the pervasive belief that monogamy and jealousy equate to love. When sexual exclusivity is violated, the validity of love within the relationship is called into question. As Spade describes, sex outside of a monoamorous relationship is commonly portrayed as “heart-crushing” and “trust-violating” in the media, and is almost always accompanied by strong expressions of jealousy and often anger (Spade, 2006). Trust in a monoamorous relationship can be seriously damaged when sexual exclusivity is broken, or even when a partner expresses sexual or romantic interest in someone outside the dyad (Emens, 2004). Jealousy often stems from the knowledge that one’s partner is likely to experience desire for other people and the social understanding that this desire poses a threat to a monoamorous relationship (Spade, 2006). Furthermore, jealousy has been described as natural only in family settings where family members feel a sense of ownerships over one another (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Within the ideals of polyamorous relationships, jealousy is no longer an acceptable
expression of love. As jealousy arises in a relationship, polyamorists tend to manage that jealousy rather than succumb to it due to high levels of trust within relationships built on strong communication (Gould, 1999; McDonald, 2010). There is an additional interesting relationship between jealousy and the polyamorous community which is a result of overlap between polyamory and BDSM communities. BDSM stands for bondage, discipline, dominance and submission (DS), and sadomasochism (SM) (Bauer, 2010). As Robin Bauer discusses, nonmonogamy is so prevalent among BDSM communities that monoamorists are often pressured to try nonmonogamy. This is relevant to Spade’s claim in that BDSM dynamics have “generated new, BDSM specific ways of relating, for example using DS as a tool to deal with or overcome jealousy” (Bauer, 2010). This connection between polyamory, as well as communities which overlap with it, and rejection of jealousy and ownership as expressions of love supports Spade’s claim that polyamory redefines problematic cultural beliefs.

Polyamory as an ideal of perfection

Interestingly, Spade himself offers evidence that calls into question his own claim that polyamory ideology is beneficial to relationships. He points out that polyamory as an idealized abstraction can be described as an achievement in escaping cultural norms and pressures and those that practice it are described as free from the resulting constraints. However, most polyamorists were raised in a heteronormative culture and experience the associated pressures and expectations. Polyamorists can struggle to escape from feelings of scarcity, traditional arrangements of social structures, and culturally established meanings of love. When a polyamorist experiences jealousy or other elements which are not supposed to exist in a perfect polyamorous relationship, they may feel as though they have failed to be a perfect polyamorist and judge themselves harshly. Spade recounts how he himself has felt jealous within his relationships but felt that it was an embarrassing failure on his part as a polyamorist and
therefore hid his feelings, which led to frustration and failed relationships (2006). He discusses this occurrence in relation to cultural pressures to deny and hide one’s feelings, which are especially prevalent for those who have experienced sexual violence or who are raised as women in rape culture (Spade, 2006). For these groups in particular, achieving the ideals of polyamory can be difficult, and therefore polyamory becomes another context in which they are told their feelings related to sex and safety are wrong (Spade, 2006).

Spade argues that an ideal of polyamory within politically radical circles may lead to judgment against those who are not radical enough to embrace this relationship style. Judgement within the polyamorous community can also arise when polyamorous ideals of perfection replace monoamorous ones. While polyamorous values move away from ideals of perfection in terms of one’s gender or identity, Spade points out how polyamory itself is becoming a “new sexual norm and a new basis for judgement and coercion;” in this way polyamory is becoming a new model of perfection (2006). To illustrate this point, Spade describes how, within the social circles he experiences, polyamory has become the only “radical” way to express sexuality (2006). This creates situations in which those who don’t practice polyamory, whether they tend towards monoamory or are simply minimally sexual, are judged.

This is mirrored in the relational ideologies of gay nonmonogamies as described by Ringer, who makes the distinction between those which model normative heterosexual values and those which challenge them (2001). Throughout polyamorous literature, there is discussion of polyamory as both normative and counter-normative, and the narrative of a “good” polyamorous person emerges as one who is counter-normative (Kleese, 2006). As Ani Ritchie argues, such hierarchies pose a danger of “reinforcing mono-normative relational ideologies and limiting more sex radical politics of polyamory” (2010).
Applying Spade’s Claims to IPV in Polyamorous Relationships

In this section, I analyze and extend Spade’s arguments to the occurrence and experience of IPV among polyamorists. In addition to an analysis of concepts raised in Spade’s chapter, I introduce an element that is not directly addressed as evidence for his claim but that is central to extending his claim to poly IPV - namely, the importance of a supportive social network.

Throughout his article, Spade refers to the communities he is a part of, specifically the queer, trans, and polyamorous communities. The importance of these communities in shaping his understanding of polyamory is clear. Often, his arguments and claims are plural, referring to the community as a whole rather than to himself as an individual (Spade, 2006). These communities, as they exist on the fringes of normativity, are politically minded and actively examine their experiences and realities through a variety of perspectives. Additionally, these communities offer substantial social support. Although Spade does not focus on a supportive context as central to his claim, my analysis of Spade’s chapter and the literature I reviewed has highlighted how important such a support network might be in preventing, identifying, and intervening in IPV among polyamorists.

As part of my analysis, I have structured my analysis by addressing two related topics: (1) how relationship ideologies (particularly those supporting polyamory) relate to IPV and (2) how a polyamorist’s network of social ties can reinforce or counteract these ideologies. Within these two topics, I interweave various concepts discussed by Spade as well as other evidence in the literature. I conclude with my own claim about the particular vulnerabilities and resilience to IPV associated with polyamory, identifying areas that may represent opportunities for prevention/intervention.

Healthy and Unhealthy Relationship Ideologies and IPV

Of the ideologies Spade discusses, two address personal expression of identity within a
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relationship (performance of gender identity and diversity), two address the relationship itself
(meaning of love, romance ideals), and three address relationships outside a dyadic partnership
(family structure, scarcity, primacy). Spade frames each of these ideologies as a continuum;
healthy ideologies on one end and unhealthy ideologies about the same topic on the other. He
argues that traditional cultural scripts represent the unhealthy end of the continuum while
resistance and replacement of these traditional ideologies represents the healthy end. Spade’s
discussion of polyamory also includes ways in which he views polyamory to be problematic for
those who practice it; when polyamory ideologies are used to judge and coerce, unhealthy
dynamics might arise and IPV may be more likely to occur.

While the notion of a continuum of healthy-unhealthy ideologies applies to both
monoamorous and poly relationships, the multiplicative nature of poly relationships implies that
an unhealthy dynamic can potentially be intensified or alleviated, depending on the ideologies
embraced by one’s other partnerships. In polyamory, one partner may restrict an individual’s
identity expression while another is supportive. An individual may play different roles with
different partners - restricting one partner while supporting another. On the other hand, the same
ideologies may play out across multiple relationships where, for example, an individual is
restricted by multiple partners or seeks to control multiple partners.

Ideologies about the expression of one’s own identity in a relationship has been closely
tied to IPV in the literature. In healthy relationships, partners mutually support the expression of
differences in identity, whether it be differences from one another, from cultural scripts, or from
one’s own identity at another time point. Conversely, ideologies that involve one partner acting
to restrict the personal expression of another partner are inherently about power and control and
can lead to IPV. For instance, when partners differ along characteristics central to personal
identity (e.g., religion, race), unhealthy relationships might be characterized by one partner trying to control the expression of those identities and limiting access to others with those same characteristics. When identity differences are silenced, both within monoamorous and polyamorous relationships, the result may constitute or contribute to IPV in the relationship (Powell & Smith, 2011). Dismissal of a partner’s identity may constitute IPV if dynamics of power are implemented to coerce or oppress one’s partner based on some aspect of their identity. Additionally, IPV behaviors may include cutting one’s partner off from established communities, usually as a means of isolation and the creation of dependence for all provision of support (Gormley & Lopez, 2009).

Traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity are implicated in both perpetration and victimization in IPV relationships (Lacey, McPherson, Samuel, Powell Sears, & Head, 2013). For example, traditional masculinity that mandates that males are expected to economically support and act as guardian to a more vulnerable, less powerful female can result in male-to-female IPV (Próspero, 2008). A corollary to this is that men are also expected to control the behavior of “their” women: relationships tend to be more violent when a woman’s gender role transgression is involved, particularly challenges to male privilege and transgressions in matters of finance such as instances where the woman is the primary financial provider for the relationship (Jewkes, 2002).

The association of masculinity with aggression and femininity with docility is a common contributing factor to incidences of IPV. In her discussion of global IPV research, Rachel Jewkes (2002) discusses how, in situations of poverty, men are violent towards women they can no longer control or economically support; this allows the men to express their power and dominance over women while simultaneously revealing male vulnerability created by social
expectations of manhood. Efforts to control a partner may include limiting the freedom of the victim to behave independently (e.g., controlling finances: McHugh & Frieze, 2006).

If IPV is perpetrated against a man, social expectations about masculinity hinder him from acknowledging the IPV and seeking help (Archer, 2000; Barber, 2008; Choi et al., 2015; Hamel, 2009; McCarrick, Davis-McCabe, & Hirst-Winthrop, 2015; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Tsui, Cheung, & Leung, 2010). It may also shape the ways in which he receives help, as it is common for men’s experiences with abuse to be silenced because they are inconsistent with the idea that men are strong and invulnerable. In fact, when male IPV victims do seek help to address IPV, they frequently report negative responses, such as being turned away, being ridiculed, and being accused of perpetrating the violence themselves and/or they are referred to a batterer intervention program (Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines 2011; Drijber, Reijinders, & Ceelen, 2012; Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007; Machado, Hines, & Matos, 2016; Tsui, 2014). In addition, men have reported that locating specific services to meet their needs is not an easy task and that some services, such as helplines or shelters, work with female victims exclusively (Dutton & White 2013). Cultural gender scripts, associated with both internal (e.g., denial; fear of not being believed; shame; internalized gender stereotypes; masculinity norms; emotional turmoil and ambivalence) and external barriers (e.g., dearth of support services; bias; suspicion of perpetration) are likely to prevent male victims of IPV from seeking help (Barber, 2008; Cook, 2009; Douglas, Hines, & McCarthy, 2012; Machado, Hines, & Matos, 2016; Tilbrook, Allan, & Dear, 2010).

Without the mandate to perform masculinity according to one social script, men may feel more comfortable expressing their emotional needs, compromising with their partner, or reaching out for help in situations where masculine gender roles might prevent them from doing
so. When recognition and communication of one’s feelings is discouraged, it can be extremely difficult to communicate to one’s partners what is desired, what is a violation within the relationship, or how one truly feels about a situation or activity (Anapol, 2010). Without these skills, anyone, polyamorous or not, is vulnerable to dynamics of IPV (Messinger, Davidson, & Rickert, 2010).

According to the evidence provided by Spade and others ideologies about the relationship itself (beliefs about the scarcity and primacy of romantic relationships) are linked with damaging relationship dynamics and these dynamics at their extreme can result in IPV. For example, relationship ideologies that combine the myth of the scarcity of a “perfect” (idealized romance) relationship partner and the notion of the primacy of an intimate partnership might lead to a situation where IPV occurs. When romantic relationships are given primacy over other relationships, an individual may come to depend on that relationship for meeting their needs. In situations of IPV, this gives the perpetrator power to control the relationship and coerce their partner into situations they would not willingly enter or allow. If romantic attention is understood to be a scarce resource, then any way that a partner is perceived to be distributing attention outside of a romantic dyad can be seen as a betrayal. Perpetrators of IPV may use a romanticized notion of love as an excuse for their abuse, justifications that might be perceived by the perpetrator, the victim, or outsiders as acceptable because of how romantic love is portrayed and taught. For example, a perpetrator may claim violent behavior is based on jealousy driven by intense love or that restriction or tracking of movements and social connections is based on a desire to protect the victim from harm (Pippin Whitaker, 2013). Victims of IPV may cling to the notion that love can excuse and transcend violence and abuse from a partner because unconditional acceptance is held as an idealized form of love (Eckstein, 2010).
When considered in the context of polyamory, ideologies about a given relationship must be considered in combination with ideologies about relationships with others outside a given dyadic partnership. The ideology that an idealized romantic partner is scarce might manifest in a polyamorous relationship as a preference for a given partner over another in the same way that Spade claims a romantic relationship might be manifest as preferred over a non-romantic relationship. The distribution of finite resources such as time, physical proximity, and material goods and finances within polyamorous relationships may contribute to the perception of favoritism (Anapol, 2010). The presence of a metamour (one partner’s partner) that is viewed as a competitor can result in intense cycles of affection and jealousy, a dynamic that perpetuates conditions in which IPV can escalate and is almost always a factor contributing to IPV (Anapol, 2010; McHugh & Frieze, 2006).

By directly addressing socialized notions of scarcity, polyamorists can begin to address the ways they have been internalized and how they play out in romantic relationships. While this might not eliminate such internalized feelings and their external expressions, including jealousy, it can provide the opportunity to begin to disassemble these constructions and manage them in ways which do not contribute to IPV. As Spade argues, when problematic ideologies are successfully addressed, polyamorous relationships counter cultural pressures to place a single romantic relationship above all other relationships. Within multiple romantic relationships, replacing the notion of scarcity can and the exclusive centrality placed on a (single) romantic relationship might avoid or relieve tensions between poly partners and potentially avoid rage, jealousy, and controlling behavior and instead contribute to prosocial behaviors which strengthen families and encourage responsibility and integrity (see Anapol, 2010 for examples of these prosocial tendencies).
Social Support Networks and IPV

There is a great deal of evidence in the broader IPV literature supporting the importance of supportive social networks in preventing and intervening in violent and abusive behavior. Indeed, cutting one’s partner off from established communities, usually on the basis of isolation and the creation of dependence upon oneself for all provision of support, is named as a specific form of IPV (Powell & Smith, 2011). This dynamic is particularly salient for sexual minorities, who may fear that “outing” oneself will result in rejection and isolation from family, friends, and society, a fear that can restrict help-seeking (Ard & Makadon, 2011; Goodmark, 2013; Roch, Morton, & Ritchie, 2010).

Both social isolation on one hand and access to a support system on the other operate as positive feedback cycles, making the dynamic of IPV incredibly difficult to escape. For example, abusive partners often restrict their partner's movement and contact with others and this social isolation allows IPV to continue and worsen over time (Jewkes, 2002, McHugh & Frieze, 2006). Social isolation compounds the effects of abuse on an individual’s mental state, causing them to withdraw into themselves and perpetuating the cycle of isolation (House, 2001).

On the other hand, when a distressed relationship results in violence in the context of access to a strong social support system, the cycle may be interrupted. For example, IPV victims who perceive their family and friends to be emotionally supportive report fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Coker, Smith, Thompson, McKeown, & Bethea, 2004; Hansen, Eriksen, & Elklit, 2014; Sprague & Oliff, 2014). Social support can empower victims to break a cycle of IPV by demonstrating that they are valued, enhancing their self-esteem, and providing practical assistance during or after violent experiences (Coker et al., 2004; Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1992; Svavarsdóttir, Orlygsdottir, & Gudmundsdottir, 2015).

Relationship ideologies play out in how individuals experiencing IPV access social
support. The myth of romantic love can be isolating for both men and women (Wilkinson, 2010). Pressure from oneself and one’s partner to be the perfect partner, defined by the relationship and no longer a solitary individual, may lead to unhealthy levels of attachment and dependency, weakening of relationships with friends and family, or letting go of one’s passions and goals in order to accommodate a life with one’s partner (Kane & Bornstein, 2015). By extension, the removal of a strong division between romantic relationships and non-romantic ones can serve to broaden the social structures of individuals by reinforcing the value of many types of relationships. Having a more extensive network with closer personal ties provides individuals experiencing IPV more opportunities for help-seeking and support (Coker et al., 2004).

Dismissal of a partner’s identity may constitute IPV if dynamics of power are implemented to coerce or oppress one’s partner based on some aspect of their identity. Compassion fatigue in those who are asked to play a supportive role can be minimized when support is shared by multiple members of the community (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999).

Based on my understanding of Spade’s claim and his evidence, I argue that belonging to a social network is not protective of IPV if that community does not subscribe to healthy relationship ideologies that challenge harmful beliefs and support polyamorous relationships. Spade focuses on polyamory as an ideal, in which participants in relationships understand and reject notions of culturally constructed and enforced romantic scarcity, gender norms, and expressions of love. An underlying assumption in Spade’s body of evidence is that those who practice polyamory are supportive of these nontraditional ideologies. Spade’s polyamorists engage with identity politics and feel free to express and experiment with their sexuality because they operate within friendly, accepting environments among like-minded individuals. The
assumption is that community members have collectively moved beyond social and cultural shaming.

Relationship ideologies held by members of one’s social network can impact how they respond to awareness of IPV. When members of one’s social network espouse healthy ideologies, help-seeking and encouragement may be easier for some individuals. For example, women have been shown to be more likely than men to reach out to their support system, especially when relationship violence becomes more severe (Sylaska & Edwards, 2013). By extending Spade’s argument, a social network that supports a fluid and performative expression of gender may encouraged men to reach out to their support system to seek help for IPV. On the other hand, an extension of Spade’s argument about the scarcity of an ideal romantic partnership might imply that if a romantic partnership appears wholesome and romantic, members of a community in which the myth of heteromonogamous romance is not challenged may not intervene, even if they are aware of IPV taking place in private.

Conclusion

Having conducted an analysis of relationship ideologies in the context of IPV among polyamorists, I can offer a claim - namely, that polyamory can contribute to unique resilience or to unique vulnerabilities to IPV, depending on the ideologies held by the individual, their partners and members of their social support network.

As an ideological framework, I claim that polyamory lends unique resilience against IPV by actively countering relationship beliefs shown to be implicated in relationship stress and destructive behaviors. Specifically, I argue that the extent to which polyamorists espouse these ideals and surround themselves with others who share and support the realization of these ideals, relationship dynamics leading to violence and abuse will be identified early and countered.

I offer as evidence for my claim that polyamory as a value system involves the
examination of one’s identity and cultural scripts regarding gender, sexuality, love, and romance. Idealized polyamory strives to establish love as an unlimited resource, eliminate jealousy, and support one’s partners in their own self-discovery and growth. At its best, idealized polyamory might even protect against the pressure to fulfill idealized polyamory; when one’s own behavior or the behavior of a partner falls short of the ideal, a shared value of responsive support for examining and addressing issues supports the relationship as a “work in progress.”

I also offer as evidence the argument that the sheer number of opportunities for close and actively nurtured relationships increases the resilience or vulnerability to IPV among those who practice polyamory. Because polyamory incorporates multiple individuals and social connections, the degree to which there is a shared value system that supports healthy ideologies lends unique resilience to polyamorists when violence enters a relationship. The culture of support that these connections provide can identify unhealthy behaviors, track down belief systems underlying the behaviors, and act as corrective agents when the community of individuals engage in the process of examining and evaluating cultural and personal dynamics.

I claim that polyamory practiced without these ideals represent a situation where relationship stress, already intensified due to discrimination and rejection of the lifestyle in the larger culture, places polyamorists at increased risk for IPV. Individuals practicing polyamory must cope with unhealthy ideologies arising from a lifetime of exposure to a dominant culture that is not supportive of polyamory. Indeed, if a polyamorist does not have an ideologically supportive social network, understanding the influence of unhealthy relationship ideologies becomes more difficult perhaps than in monoamorous relationships, since the very nature of a polyamorous relationship breaks the cultural scripts. In this way, polyamorists may find themselves perpetrating IPV or becoming a victim when cultural mandates do not fit their
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My claim has implications for political action and prevention and intervention efforts. With practice and continual effort and under the right circumstances, individuals and their partners can counter destructive cultural norms and rules, redefine love, and shape how they experience and perform gender. When dialogues, alternatives, and role models are not available in one’s existing social network, it may be beneficial for polyamorists struggling with destructive ideologies, either their own or a partner’s, to seek a community in which these things are available. There are community discussions on a wide variety of topics, including polyamory and mental illness, religion, pregnancy, and safe sex (Sheff, 2012). Many polyamorist websites, blogs, and books discuss ethical polyamory, how to navigate the external pressures and messages that individual polyamorous individuals face, and abuse within polyamory. The internet and the media have contributed greatly to the size and cohesion of the polyamorous community, facilitating communication between geographically separated people as well as providing a convenient way for polyamorists to create community, give each other advice, and find partners (Sheff, 2012). Some examples of this online community include lovemore.com, alt.polyamory, polyamoryonpurpose.com, and polyamorysociety.org.

In addition to providing an opportunity for growth and dialogue, the online presence of those practicing polyamory can impact how polyamorists cope with IPV. Survivors may not have access to or not know about LGBT-specific or LGBT-friendly assistance resources (Girshick, 2002; Goodmark, 2013; Poorman, 2001; Scherzer, 1998) and when accessing available IPV services, potential homophobia and transphobia from staff of service providers or from non-LGBT survivors of IPV with whom they may interact may cause damage rather than provide support (Balsam, 2001; Jacobson, 2013; Roch, Morton, & Ritchie, 2010). On the other hand,
awareness of specific LGBT- and polyamory-friendly IPV resources is spread throughout the community and available on various LGBT and poly websites (i.e. Kaufman, 2014; Office for the Prevention of Domestic Violence, n.d.; SMU Women & LGBT Center, n.d.). In this way, the online poly community can support those who are experiencing IPV in their relationships. Support for IPV through the use of technology (specifically email) has also been found to be beneficial (Constantino, Crane, Noll, Doswell, & Braxter, 2007), and is likely to be occurring within the online polyamorous community through community forums, blogs, and chat rooms where participants can more directly communicate with each other.

For all its potential in alleviating the effects of IPV in poly relationships, the poly community can also handle IPV in problematic ways. A narrative from within the community, posted online, described how IPV played out within one poly family and how the community leaders met the situation with resistance and silencing (Fenza, 2015). Wesley Fenza’s ten-part account of the situation details how the organizers and leaders of several polyamorous events failed to support one of his partners when she reported the abuse she experienced, and were in fact more active in their attention to the abuser’s demands that the victim be banned from poly events and groups (Fenza, 2015). The account is also told, on other websites and blogs, from the perspective of other partners, and is a strong example of the challenges presented by IPV within polyamorous relationships (Lea, 2015, Nunes, 2015). The polyamorous community may provide support to IPV victims, yet it may also complicate instances of IPV or try to remain neutral which allows IPV to continue. No matter the response, addressing and eliminating IPV from the poly community cannot be the sole responsibility of the community and its members. Support is required from IPV researchers and service providers, as well as from those who discriminate personally or professionally against polyamory and those who practice it. Without significant
social change and coordinated effort, the opportunity to protect polyamorous individuals from IPV will be missed.
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