# "These Are *Our* Children": Polyamorous Parenting

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## Introducing Polyfamilies

Anne: What do you think requires further research [about polyfamilies?]

Pete: Apart from everything? (PolyVic poly-parenting group)

Children raised in polyamorous families (or polyfamilies) have parents who may be bisexual, gay, lesbian, heterosexual, or transgendered; are of diverse cultures and social classes; are in openly negotiated intimate sexual relationships with more than one partner; and may all live together or in various abodes (Anapol, 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2010b). Thus, the definitional parameters of polyfamilies are broad and inclusive of LGBT group marriages/relationships, wherein multiple LGBT adult sexual partners live together communally with children, and open marriages/relationships where one or more of the LGBT adults may have more than one partner. Polyfamilies are also inclusive of both polyamorous families wherein various LGBT adults may seek external partners and polyfidelitous families wherein the LGBT adults agree to only be in sexual relationships with each other and not be open to relationships outside the group. Researchers and family service providers need to be mindful of these multiple and sometimes shifting configurations of nonnormative intimacies and queer multi-parent families (Anapol, 1992, 2010; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a). Indeed, a strong link between bisexuality and polyamory has been identified in the existing research such that bisexual individuals often have partners of diverse genders (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2009; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a).

Polyamorous parenting is an underresearched area and very few health and education resources are available to support polyfamilies. This chapter will make visible the "non-normative intimacies" (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004, p. 138) of polyamory within which children are being raised, and thus supports the need for research from the standpoint of "actual" families rather than through the traditional family lens (Erera, 2002). It is also a continuation of the research being undertaken with underrepresented "queer multiparent families": LGBT parents who challenge "oppressive master narratives that legitimize and normalize heteronormative, nuclear families" (Vaccaro, 2010, p. 443) and two-parent households (see also Goldberg, 2010).

The thematic framework of this chapter is the double-edged sword familiar to all queer family configurations. On the one hand, polyfamilies suffer from a lack of presence which disadvantages

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them in terms of legal, economic, societal, and institutional rights and acceptance. On the other hand, fears of misunderstanding, demonization, and othering by health, education, and legal service providers make polyfamilies reluctant to disclose their families or even their very existence to the wider societal matrix in which they exist and operate. In this chapter, this duality of lack of visibility and fear of disclosure and its interconnections will be examined in the context of formal societal structures such as education, health, and the law; less formal networks such as family, friends, neighbors, and social groups; and the nebulous but powerful sea of mass media in which we all swim.

Two main channels of research will be reviewed: the relatively sparse academic research available on the subject, and the findings garnered from a discussion group conducted with polyamorous parenting members of a polyamory social and support group, PolyVic, in Victoria, Australia, which holds regular meetings and social events such as picnics. Upon invitation to participate in an audio-taped discussion to collect data for this chapter, 13 polyparents (9 women and 4 men aged between 35 and 50) attended and selected pseudonyms for themselves.

The lack of existing research will be highlighted throughout to identify what is unknown or understudied and propose some directions for further research. The perspectives and experiences of the PolyVic parenting group will provide further insights into what polyparents would like health and education providers and the wider community to know about their families; what further research they feel needs to be undertaken; and what kinds of resources they would like to have available. Indeed, the PolyVic parenting group voices many ongoing experiences and perspectives consistent with the findings of previous research, from the early 1970s to as recently as 2010.

In writing this chapter, we were also mindful of the concerns of health researchers and health-service providers working with nonnormative families that "there is far too much emphasis on the supposed deficits and problems with diverse families, and insufficient attention to their strengths and abilities" (Erera, 2002, p. 213).

Indeed, Erera (2002) argues that many of the problems and pressures experienced by "diverse families" are due to factors outside the family itself, imposed by a social environment that stigmatizes, discriminates, and particularly in the case of polyfamilies, makes invisible. Hence, this chapter will present the strengths and abilities of polyfamilies and consider the impact of an external social environment that is nonsupportive or ignorant of their actual families (see also Anapol, 2010; Sheff, 2010). In response to these external ascriptions, Kentlyn (2008) explains how the home of queer or nonnormative families becomes both a "safe" and a "scrutinized" space: "[The] private space of the queer home can be seen to embody the tension between a safe space to be queer in, but also a place where the subversive performance of gender, sexuality and family comes under scrutiny" (pp. 327–328). Our review of existing research and our empirical research with the PolyVic polyparenting group will incorporate an ongoing analysis of the tensions and interweavings between external surveillance and regulation, and the safety and privacy of the polyhome (Foucault, 1978).

## Research Meta-Issues

Before addressing specific issues of concern for polyfamilies, we outline three meta-issues of research absence that are identifiable throughout the available research such as in Maria's qualitative research with 94 polyamorous parents, their adult children, and polyamorous and/or bisexual young adults in the USA and Australia (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2010b). First, it becomes immediately obvious that there is a lack of presence of polyfamilies in academic discourse which also reflects the lack of awareness of polyfamilies in social, legal, health, and educational realities. Due to the absence of theorizing and data about polyfamilies and their children, we must use the analytical literature on children from same-sex parent families to help articulate and explain what children from polyfamilies go through—although children in polyfamilies may face even more heightened levels of invisibility and stigmatization. But as similarities

and differences between same-sex parent families and polyfamilies are complex, we refer to this research only where clearly applicable.

Second, the research that has been conducted has been limited by its reliance on White middle-class samples. Maria recognizes that this is a major limitation in her own previous research (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002, 2006, 2010a, 2010b) which reflects the wider concern that most research methods fail to access larger representations of people of diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and religious locations, and transgendered identities (Noel, 2006; see also Haritaworn, Chin-ju, & Klesse, 2006; Sheff, 2006; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Most polyamorous research participants, including those in the PolyVic polyparenting group, were White, middle-class, college-educated individuals who identified as male or female and had high levels of cyberliteracy which allowed them to participate in social and support groups, particularly online, and thereby find themselves participating in our research (Noel, 2006). This concern is indicative of Sheff and Hammers' (2011) contention that race, education, and class privileges provide valuable buffers from the myriad potential negative outcomes associated with sexual and relational nonconformity.

Third, in the available research projects and writings, the perspectives, experiences, and insights of children and adults who have grown up in polyfamilies are largely absent; how these experiences affected their well-being, later relationships, and education is also absent. Researchers such as Strassberg (2003) consider this lack a major hindrance to the development of legal, health, and educational policies and practices that support these children and their families.

## Substantive Themes in the Research

Having outlined the three major limitations within the available research, this section will now present the four major themes that have been addressed in the literature. These four themes are (a) issues of disclosure and exposure to one's children and external systems such as schools; (b) internal polyfamily environments and their impact on children; (c) the need for polyfamily-friendly health, welfare, and legal services; and (d) polyfamilies in the media and popular culture. Quotes from the PolyVic polyparenting discussion group are presented to illustrate these themes.

## Issues of Disclosure and Exposure

A major overriding theme arising in research and writings about polyfamilies is how "out" parents should be to their children and to external systems, communities, and individuals. In turn, this will affect how "out" their children should or will be in systems, communities, and to peers at school and elsewhere.

## Disclosure to Children

Consider this quote by Robyn, a mother of two teenaged boys, who was a member of the PolyVic parenting discussion group:

> When we did disclose, talk to them and share with them, it was at a point where they would be going "Are mum and dad having an affair?" … .So it was at a point where we had to say, "Mum and Dad love each other, this is safe, we love you, and any time we have a relationship with someone let's remember the values of how to have a healthy relationship. … People do things different, well this is just another one of those things that we do differently." And they were like … "Let's have some pizza." (laughter)

In the above, Robyn discusses her experience of when and how she disclosed her polyamory to her children. How and when to disclose to children and its possible ramifications were a major concern of all polyparents in the discussion group, and this theme is also reflected in the available research such as the Polyamory Survey conducted by Loving More, an American-based organization with its own magazine, which elicited over 5,000 responses in 2001/2002. In her analysis of sections of this survey (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002, 2006), Maria found that about 29% of respondents were biological parents of children under 18, 16% were legal guardians of

children under 18, 18% were biological parents of children over the age of 18, and 4% were legal guardians of children over the age of 18. Despite these percentages, only about 30% of parent/guardian respondents had told their children about their poly relationships or their desire to be in one, and all parents feared that disclosure to children would place children in difficult situations of whether or not to disclose to outside peers and adults. Of those who did disclose or whose children were growing up in openly polyamorous families, about 45% of the parents reported having received affirming and unproblematic responses from their children. Another 15% of the parents reported having received negative responses wherein children were distressed about or rejecting their family structure and its potentially negative reception in the wider society, and 40% had received neutral responses, as in children did not seem interested in engaging with discussions about the family structure (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002, 2006).

A related issue that has been discussed to some degree in research and certainly requires further study is the association between children's age and developmental context and the results of disclosure to children. It consistently appears that the age/maturity level of the child is a significant factor that parents endeavor to take into account when making decisions about disclosure/exposure to parental partnerships (see Constantine & Constantine, 1976; Davidson, 2002; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a; Strassberg, 2003). Generally, it appears that preschool youngsters can handle disclosure in a more matter-of-fact way, while school-age children, who have had exposure to normative constructions of families within schools and among a wider range of peers and mainstream media discourses, tend to experience varying degrees of embarrassment and discomfort and may feel conflicted when hearing outsiders' discriminatory remarks about their parents. Adolescents are likely to experience the strongest anxieties and confusions as they are facing puberty issues in regards to their own sexualities, relationships, and identities, and may feel increased sensitivity to peer attitudes against nonnormative sexualities and families. They are also the most

likely age group to keep their polyfamilies secret, given that they are also more aware of wider dominant moral, political, or social discourses that construct cultural understandings of what constitutes a healthy family (Watson & Watson, 1982; Weitzman, 2006, 2007).

Overall, a major anxiety that most polyparents talked about in all the available research is the fear that being out about their families would lead to harassment and stress for their children. Many tried to prepare their children for the consequences of their public disclosure and provided them with verbal, mental, and emotional strategies to counteract or deflect negativity so that they would be active agents rather than passive victims in educational and health institutions (Boden, 1990). Both the pros and cons of disclosure to children were prominent discussion points in the PolyVic polyparenting group:

Robyn:    Sometimes I think "Oh have I made life harder for them?" And yet I can't go against what I feel has sat well with myself and therefore I have confidence that they'll get through.

Juliet:    Yeah, but look at it like the immune system you know, to challenge and strengthen the immune system. … you don't cotton-wool your children in any way, just give them what comes up in life, and protect them.

Daryl:    [But] they're kind of expected to be an activist for something they didn't start.

Many polyfamilies and their children feel like border dwellers, constantly navigating their positions between home and the external world. Drawing from Wright's (2001) work with lesbian-parent families, we can begin to articulate the ongoing tension children may experience between their selves within their families, "which feels 'normal' and safe and nurturing," and their experience outside their families, "in which they often feel invisible or vilified… [in] a society that enforces conformity" (p. 288). Having access to other knowledge and ways of being, and joining in the questioning of "normal" constructions of family, may place children of polyfamilies permanently on the borders of society because of their "edge identities" (Bersten, 2008, p. 9).

It requires decisions from children on how to define and construct their sexual and intimate relationships with peers within the normative social space of schools, clubs, friendship groups, as well as recognize that they will most likely experience some degree of marginalization and harassment. It may also lead to self-questioning dilemmas for parents border dwelling between a philosophy of raising their children with a broader understanding of sexuality, family, and relationships, and a protective concern that their children may be ostracized because of this philosophy.

This discussion of bordering arose in the PolyVic polyparenting group, especially concerning the emergence of the child beyond the world of the family and into a potential stress of ambiguity and duality:

Daryl:   We've been open with our kids and they know what's going on and they're all happy and fine about that but when other kids ask them, "What's going on there?" they're gonna see that the situation is not exactly the same as their family situation. My kids are gonna have to explain something. … I imagine they probably already have to some of their friends and that's probably going to get back to their families and then there'll be some misunderstanding and some explanation will be needed to be done there.

## Passing as Normal and Keeping Secrets

Many polyparents in the available literature (see Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2010b; Sheff, 2010) and in our PolyVic research worried about the effects of disclosing their poly relationships to their children because of the overwhelming invisibility of their families. This concern is a prime example of the deleterious effects of the interconnection between lack of visibility and fear of disclosure. Wright (2001) explains how feeling that the outside world has no way to understand or talk about their kind of family can create a sense of unreality for children, "as if one is seeing something that others cannot see"; this realization of invisibility and lack of acceptance

can "plant the seed of fear in the child's heart" (p. 288). To protect children from this cognitive and emotional dissonance, and to protect themselves as parent members of local communities and recipients of legal, health, and educational services, many polyfamilies will pass as monogamous to their own children. The alternative imposes a difficult either/or decision for parents: either allow children to "go public," with attendant risks to the children, or risk damaging the children by expecting them to keep a secret.

Thorson's (2009) work on communication privacy management (CPM) offers some insight into and strategies in the negotiation of these dilemmas. CPM addresses how parents and children negotiate "information ownership" and privacy rules and enact "protection and access rules" (Thorson, 2009, p. 34) for any processes of disclosure. Jeremy, a father of two school-aged children discussed his and his children's strategies of CPM in the polyparenting discussion group:

> I work in a Catholic school. They don't know anything about me. I don't want them to know anything, you know?. … And so it's the same with our children. They'll get to the point of going, "With this person I can share this, and with this person I don't" ….We trust in their commonsense.

Thus, polyfamilies need to consider and negotiate which forms of passing and CPM may work best in their specific contexts. Using terms constructed by Richardson (1985) in her work with women who were in secret relationships with married men, the following strategies were adopted by polyfamilies: withdrawing from potentially harmful external settings as much as possible; compartmentalizing, segregating, or bordering the worlds of home and external settings; cloaking certain realities so that they are invisible or pass as normative; or fictionalizing certain aspects of one's life and family. Indeed, polyparenting may involve working with one's children to redefine, reconstruct, and/or fictionalize the family for the outside world (Arden, 1996; Sheff, 2010; Trask, 2007).

Maria's previous research has explored how polyfamilies will pass, border, or pollute (see Douglas, 1966) in external settings and spaces such as in schools (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a, 2010b).

For example, some families will choose to pass as heterosexual or possibly as same-sex couple parent families. For instance, they will give existing known normative labels such as "auntie," "godparent," and "friend" to polyfamily members to avoid external scrutiny of and discrimination against their polyhome. For some polyfamilies, these strategies of editing, scripting, and concealment provide protection and the ability to live out family realities with little external surveillance or interference (Kentlyn, 2008; Kroeger, 2003). Although these findings fit in with the broader literature on LGBT life in general, and parenting/families in particular (see Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Garner, 2004; Goldberg, 2010; Wright, 2001), we assert that what polyfamilies are going through may be more difficult than what happens for monogamous or coupled LGBT persons in general due to the even greater levels of invisibility and/or stigmatization.

## Polluting Public Spaces

Some polyparents and their children see themselves as polluting outside worlds by coming out and presenting their relationships as legitimate and worthy of official affirmation. Thus, they not only claim public space but also compel institutions to adapt to new and expanding definitions of family. Proactive polyparents speak of a plurality of resistances (Foucault, 1978) including subversive strategies such as gaining positions of parent power and decision making in schools and other communities, or establishing solid working relationships and friendships within neighborhood, church, and school communities. These strategies consolidate their security, and give access to policy making, community thinking, and action, as well as making it possible to forge strong trusting bonds with other "deviant" minority persons in the community (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006, 2010a, 2010b).

Nevertheless, as Sheff (2010) found in her qualitative research with 71 polyamorous adults in the USA, the reality or potential of external stigmatization in any interaction outside the polyhome may require children to manage the stigma of their parents' relationships, and for which parents

"express remorse about the pain their relationships have caused the children" (p. 178). A strategy used to alleviate this was "stigma management" (Sheff, 2010, p.178) whereby parents strived to make the family and polycommunity a space/place of intimacy, positive role models, and support to diminish the impact and significance of external stigmatization. The members of the PolyVic polyparenting group discussed at length the issue of managing external stigmatization and discrimination:

Anne:      Having to deal with the judgement of people outside about the impact that your polyamory is having on your family.

Robyn:    It's also good to teach your child that she should do what she wants and … not be worried about what other people think of her as well.

Daryl:     We had a bunch of kids over from the scout group last night and I don't know if all of the families'd be cool about it. … I know at least three of the families are okay but at least one of them I'm thinking, they're going to find out, they might be a bit weirded out about it.

## The "Poster-Child Mentality"

Children with polyparents who are out may feel the pressure to "closet" any facets of themselves in public spaces and institutions that may be constructed as flaws emanating directly from polyparenting. They may feel compelled to display how "normal" and unpolluted they themselves are, or they develop what Garner (2004) calls the "poster-child mentality" (p. 29) in her discussion of children with LGB parents:

> We fear normal won't be good enough. So instead, we strive for perfect. Anything less leaves weak spots for critics to poke holes though our argument that our families are worthy of social acceptance. … [Children] grow tired of having to constantly watch what they do or say. They experience anxiety about getting caught with their guard down and fear it could result in someone exploiting their families' vulnerabilities. All these consequences take their toll on children's self-esteem and self-worth. (pp. 2–3)

Children of polyfamilies may feel the need to pollute/pass as perfect to signify the success of the family (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a; Sheff, 2010). Again, this is also found in families headed by same-sex couples (see Goldberg, 2007), a process that Garner (2004) describes as "straightening up for the public" (p. 179) and that could be termed "monogamizing for the public" in relation to polyfamilies. As Garner notes, "Our families currently lack the 'luxury' to be as openly complicated, confusing, or dysfunctional as straight families" (p. 6).

Much more research is required into the existence and extent of the poster-child mentality in children of polyfamilies. Most offspring from out polyfamilies and most out polyparents concluded, in Maria's research and in other studies such as Sheff's (2010), that despite problems and potential dilemmas, the positives of living in a polyfamily generally outweighed the negatives. This dilemma of weighing up the dangers and the positives of having children polluting their schools with knowledge and "sassiness" about their polyfamilies was part of the PolyVic polyparenting group discussion. In the following, Eve, a mother of a preschooler, shared her concerns with parents of school-aged children:

Eve:     And what happens when someone at school says "Oh your mum's a slut!"?

Robyn:   Yeah! (laughter) Just say, "Yeah that's right! Yeah."

Juliet:  That's probably empowering for the teenager to be able to do.

Eve:     It depends on the teenager.

Self-monitoring of one's behavior according to real or imagined external scrutiny (Foucault, 1978) may also mean that some children will pass as perfect to their own families to avoid distressing their loved ones. Thus, they may conceal from their parents any anxiety, harassment, or negativity from school and peers (Garner, 2004).

## "If I'm Out to My Kids, Do I Risk Losing Them?"

A theme that has consistently arisen in research since the 1970s is the question of whether parents should disclose their polyamorous lifestyles to children knowing that children may then disclose to external health, education, and social services, and thereby risk being taken away from their families (see Watson & Watson, 1982). A study by Walston (2001), which elicited 430 polyamorous respondents to an online survey, found that 32% of the polyparents expressed concern that polyamory would affect future child custody while 4% of the polyparents said polyamory had affected their child custody to some degree.

The concern that living in a polyfamily might be considered justification for legally removing children from a parent's custody also arose in Pallotta-Chiarolli's (2010a, 2010b) research wherein 13% of the polyparent respondents had experienced (or knew someone who had experienced) discrimination in contact with Child Protective Services (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002, 2006). Many parents stressed the need for families to collect documentation and legal papers to protect themselves and their children should any situation arise at school or with child and social welfare services (Anapol, 2010). Thus, these consistent findings across research reports again raise the question: To what extent is the low rate of visibility of polyfamilies due to their concealment from outside structures such as health, education, and family services for fear of the ramifications of disclosure? (see Easton & Liszt, 1997; Sheff, 2010).

The fear of losing custody or access to one's children was voiced strongly in the PolyVic parenting group:

Eve:     How do I give [my daughter] that gift of self-confidence without society telling her that her family's sick and wrong, and without someone calling in social services at some point?

Nigel:   I went through a process with DHS [Department of Health Services] last year. And my fear is that it was only because of the person who got involved in the case – the case manager - that everything was fine. My partners and I decided to be completely open because we felt that if while the staff were talking to our kids this all came out, then

it'd be "Oh there's something that they think is wrong, so what's going on there?" … .And we just reassured this person that we don't have sex in front of the children. … I felt very threatened. … running the risk of losing the family. … yeah it was just this constant fear of "How do we approach this?" And just having to second-guess: "Ok if we do A will B happen?"

## "Will My Kid's School Understand?"

What negotiations and silences surround polyamorous families within school communities? How do children from polyamorous families experience school? Apart from Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a, 2010b), these questions remain unasked in most recent research with polyamorous families (see e.g., Hill, 1997; Walston, 2001). The little research there shows that sensationalized stereotypes about nonmonogamous relationships conspire with silence about diverse family realities to perpetuate ignorance, misrepresentation, and stigmatization in school settings (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). Parents in polyfamilies have to make a decision about how much information to give to their children's schools. Many simply decide to give a minimum of functional information, as evidenced by this discussion in the PolyVic parenting group:

Robyn:     We just haven't talked about it to the school.

Juliet:      It's nothing that the school has to know about, I'd say.

Bronwyn:  It hasn't come up. … we had a funny circumstance recently when [a partner] came with me to pick up the kids, and the girls just ran over to her and said "Are you coming for a sleepover?" and there's been other people which they've said that to at after-school care. I haven't had any comments. If I had a comment I would address it. The children haven't been asked any questions.

Some schools may try to suppress polyamory issues that they feel are inappropriate or will be badly received by other children and their families:

Nigel:      One of my children was told at [secondary] school not to discuss poly or my bisexuality with any school friends or on the school grounds at all. … they would be ostracised or they'd be picked on, that it was not relevant for school. … it came from the year level co-ordinator. … The advice was ignored [by my daughter] (laughter) which I'm quite proud of. … [We were] quite offended. We actually contacted the teacher and said "No, that's wrong. We will be encouraging our daughter to be herself and to do what she wants."

## Researching Internal Polyfamily Environments

A second theme that has received scant attention is children's experiences of living in polyfamilies, the internal machinations of polyfamilies, and their influence on children's development and future as adults (see Iantaffi, 2009). What becomes evident in the following sections are the numerous benefits of polyparenting for both children and adults; yet these remain largely unknown in public settings and in service provision to families.

## The Benefits for Children of a Polyfamily Structure

Some early research on polyfamilies found how children may actually benefit from their experiences in this family structure. For example, the 1970s saw some attempts at researching and documenting the experiences and well-being of children from group marriages (one form of polyfamily where three or more adults live together and are sexually intimate with at least two other members of that group) (Constantine & Constantine, 1972, 1973, 1976; Francoeur, 1972). A pioneering study of 40 children from 12 group

marriage families by Constantine and Constantine (1976) found that children enjoyed a permissive environment, extending to their schooling, which was community run or cooperative with other communes. They concluded that any difficulty children faced in adapting to polyparenting was exacerbated by the lack of positive and supportive services and the prevalence of prejudice.

A consistent finding in research with polyparents since the 1970s is their strong emphasis on nonsexist practices, particularly encouraging girls to be assertive in resolving interpersonal relationships (see e.g., Eiduson, Cohen & Alexander, 1973). Similarly, members of the PolyVic polyparenting group also talked of raising their children in non-misogynist and non-heteronormative ways.

Polyparent participants in the most recent published research (Sheff, 2010) highlight five benefits of their family structures: (a) emotional intimacy with children due to fostering honesty and a sex-positive environment; (b) the greater amount of shared resources (such as financial) and resource persons; (c) more personal time due to "the ability to distribute parenting" (p. 174); (d) greater attention for children due to the availability of adults; (e) more positive role-model adults who communicate, negotiate, and have varying skills and interests. Participants in the PolyVic polyparenting group discussed similar positives, such as opportunities for those interested in parenting to become carers for children:

Lisa:   [Being a] tribal aunt's been a really cool thing and very empowering.

Eve:    [My child] has an oddfather, not a godfather … and he's a fairy oddfather. And he's part of our extended poly family.

Pete:   Or [you can have a] fairy oddmother.

## New Kinship Terms

The above section of transcript from the discussion group also points to how polyfamilies are constructing new kinship terms (such as "fairy oddmother"), or reintroducing pre-Industrial or non-Western kinship terms (such as "tribal aunt") perhaps sparked by the growing Western appreciation (and perhaps romanticization) of traditional indigenous communities and lifestyles (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2009). It is unclear from the available research whether these kinship terms are being invented or introduced by children or parents but they do represent an emerging shared discourse among polyfamilies and in polycommunities in providing appropriate and affirming family and kinship terms as points of identification and belonging.

## "It Takes a Village": Shared Child Rearing

The above discussion on the invention or re-introduction of kinship terms indicates a significant facet of polyparenting which requires much more research: the concept and practice of shared parenting or "tribal" parenting (Anapol, 1992, 2010; Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2009; Iantaffi, 2006, 2009). Some polyparents see poly as the new extended family, with greater ease of parenting than found in the nuclear, two-parent family, and they celebrate the benefits of diverse communal parenting and shared responsibility:

Bronwyn:   Huge advantage to the children to have adults that are willing to share of themselves … it takes a village to raise a child. They have input from a variety of adults with a variety of beliefs, a variety of religious backgrounds, of political views, just all sorts of things that they bring as an adult to children's life.

Eve:    The [mainstream] attitude's kind of, "Oh why aren't YOU looking after YOUR child?" whereas in this kind of poly community I think you often find that it's "these are our children" … collaborative parenting.

Anapol (2003) believes that children could be much better educated in polyamorous families, because with a larger number of adults "pooling their resources and their expertise, children would have direct access to a diverse group of tutors as well as educational software, videos, and databases" (p. 4, see also Anapol, 1992, 2010). One

disadvantage of this collaborative polyparenting identified in prior research is that children become attached to partners of their parents, and, should they later leave, the children experience the "resultant separation anxiety and grief" (Sheff, 2010, p. 177). Based on her interviews and a review of the existing research, Sheff (2010) concluded that polyamorous parents used a strategy of "emotional protection" such as striving to ensure the partners make long-term or lifelong commitments to the children, as well as helping children learn the skills required to "manage loss or transition" (p. 177).

## The Need for Polyfamily - Friendly Health, Welfare, and Legal Services

The third theme that emerges across the available research is the pathologization and problematization of polyfamilies, multisexual parents, and their children by legal, welfare, and health-service providers, and the lack of substantial research into what polyfamilies require from these services and systems (Davidson, 2002; Strassberg, 2003; Weitzman, 2006, 2007). Below, Pete, a parent of two children who were now in their 20s, discusses his experiences with a counselor when his children were much younger:

> In the 90s I attended a counselor who obviously thought that polyamory was a problem. I was pretty committed to working with her at the time. I was living a polyamorous life, although I hadn't heard the word. She suggested I try monogamy cos she didn't think that I was polyamorous – that lasted about eight months …. Ultimately that process with her confirmed that I really was polyamorous, and that some therapists really don't get polyamory (laughter).

Weber (2002) found that 38% of a sample of polyamorous people who had participated in counseling or therapy had not revealed their polyamory to their health-service providers, and 10% of those who did reveal it experienced a negative response. Even if the providers were open-minded and willing to learn about polyamory, clients had to use some of their paid session time to educate the professional. As

Firestein (2007) writes in relation to bisexuality and polyamory in the health sector, and as is evident in the growing membership and variety of discussions on listservs such as Polyfamilies and Polyparenting: "Our clients are no longer coming to us because they want to be 'normal.' They are coming to us because they want to be whole" (Firestein, 2007, p. xiii; see also Weitzman, 2006, 2007).

## Polyfamilies in the Media and Popular Culture

The fourth major theme that has been consistent throughout the available research is the need to incorporate positive representations of polyamorous families in texts, media, and popular culture for both polyparents and their children. These representations will then provide public points of reference and examples that would facilitate both wider societal visibility and polyfamilies' confidence to disclose to their own children and the external society.

Eve:    We have mass-media representation of lying and cheating and how to do it properly.

Pete:   It's not easy, but a documentary to foster public discussion and public awareness of polyamory would be great.

Maia:   Media representation with characters that I can identify with?

Eve:    Yeah. Positive representation, not "laugh at" and "bitch about."

In the Polyamory Survey, around 98% of respondents supported "the creation of positive images on TV, in books and movies of people living in poly relationships." In relation to educational issues, when asked, "How strongly do you support the creation of positive images in high school curriculum of people living in poly relationships?", about 94% of respondents indicated support (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2002, 2006). These findings again raise the question: to what extent is the ongoing low degree of disclosure to one's children and outside social institutions due to the lack of positive images in popular culture that provide

a discourse that affirms polyfamilies and thereby the emotional and social health and well-being of their children (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010a)?

A detailed discussion and critical analysis of the few available films that deliberately or inadvertently address polyfamilies and their children can be found in Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a). In the available research and our own polyparenting group discussion, polyparents expressed their desire for films and television programs with poly representations not linked to crime or pathology, as well as personal accounts, biographical writings, and opinion pieces describing polyparenting. For example, Easton and Liszt (1997) devote a chapter to child rearing for bisexual, nonmonogamous, and polyamorous mothers, showing the creative options for raising children in polyamorous households (see also Bear, 1998; Iantaffi, 2006, 2009; Taormino, 2008; Trask, 2007). In most personal writings on children in polyamorous families, and as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, the focus is on the positives these children experience growing up in such homes: "Children are equipped with lots of support and self-esteem, and (probably) more information than their peers, [who] might even benefit from a more unconventional home environment" (Arden, 1996, p. 251; see also Halpern, 1990; Nearing, 1996; Newitz, 2006; West, 1996). Thus, there is a need for more personal writings and other texts on how polyfamilies address internal and external challenges in relation to children, and how adults who have been raised in polyfamilies reflect back on their experiences.

## Books for Children, Adolescents and Young Adults

Many polyparents and their offspring called for novels as well as picture books for children. Maria's own novel for adolescents, young adults, and adults, *Love You Two* (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2008) with its multicultural, multisexual, and multipartnered characters, is based on her research over 15 years. The central character is Pina who discovers her mother is polyamorous.

This sets off a chain of events and encounters with people who disrupt, subvert, and agentically construct their own sexual identities and families according to their own needs (see Lambert, 2009 for a review).

Two other recent teen/young adult novels have also touched upon polyamory in young people: Prodan's (2008) *The Suicide Year* and *A Queer Circle of Friends* by Lees (2006). Indeed, Lees' three main characters, who are already between, beyond, and on the borders of gender and sexual binaries, construct a polyamorous relationship based on honesty and negotiation. Throughout the book, their poly relationship is a secure and sexually and emotionally satisfying given.

Two children's picture books that can be used to introduce and discuss polyfamilies are *Six-Dinner Sid* (Moore, 1991) and Else-Marie and her *Seven Little Daddies* (Lindenbaum, 1991). "Six-dinner Sid" could easily be defined as a polyamorous cat that lives with six different families. Lindenbaum's (1991) book is about Else-Marie's family, which comprises one normal-size mother and seven tiny, identical daddies whom she loves. However, when her mother announces that she has to work overtime and that Else-Marie's daddies will pick her up at playgroup, thereby outing her family's structure and her fathers' stature, the child spends an anxious day imagining all the dreadful things that could happen when her school friends discover how unusual her family is. However, her fears prove ungrounded.

## Films for Young Adults

It is important that popular films be made available for young people to see representations of polyamorous possibilities. A recent film marketed for teenagers and young adults via its New York urban school setting and soundtrack, *Take the Lead* (2006), is based on the real-life story of dance teacher Pierre Dulaine, who gives a group of "problem kids" a second chance by exploring their dance skills and entering them into a city competition. One of the subplots in this film is how the rivalry between two boys, Ramos and

Danjou, over the affections of Sasha, develops into a joyful threesome both emotionally and in the dance competition.

YouTube has made possible the wide dissemination of a short film for young adults called *Boyfriends*, produced by Robert Anthony Hubbell (http://www.robertanthonyhubbell.com). It is the story of a 16-year-old boy, Will, whose girlfriend tells him she loves him but is in love with someone else as well, their friend Brian. She introduces the idea of polyamory to him and the audience through Deborah Anapol's (1992) book, *Love without Limits*. The ending shows a happy resolution, accompanied by the *Polyamory Song* sung by David Roves which explains how the world will see them as "mad" and "bad." However, the music is whimsical and flippant, perhaps indicating that the young people will ably deal with such marginalization.

## General Film and Television Representations of Polyamory

Because of their social currency, films for general audiences containing positive depictions of polyamory can have a great influence in creating visibility, awareness, understanding, and legitimation of polyamory, thereby also assisting polyfamilies to feel more confident in disclosing their family forms. Positive presence in the media and popular culture can thus allow for the normalization of polyfamilies and their children, and thereby reduce the current need for passing, secret keeping, and bordering strategies. To date, most representations of polyamory in film have not even acknowledged the term itself, let alone provided positive representation. For example, many films resolve the dilemma of multiple loves through death, thereby using what Maria calls the "poly potential" as a romantic narrative device with which to "up" the drama/trauma quotient and elicit more heart-rending and gut-wrenching responses from the audience. This occurs toward the end of the following films: *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Marie-Jo and Her Two Loves* (2002), and 2012 (2010).

Some films venture beyond this death device, or at least depict polyparents as "good" regardless

of whatever other situations they may be in. For example, in *Ordinary Decent Criminal* (2003), the polyamorous thief Michael is depicted as a devoted father in various situations with his children. *Films like Splendor* (1999), *French Twist* (2003), and *December Bride* (1997) incorporate pregnancy and having babies in a polyfamily structure, where fathers have to grow to adjust to responsible poly relations and polyparenting while the women are already comfortably and confidently in that space.

A final film of note is the *Brazilian Me You Them* (2001). Based on the true story of a woman with three male partners and four children, it explores the economic hardships in a drought-ridden rural area that require the whole family to work together to survive. This film gains its power by eschewing Hollywood glamorization or demonization of these relationships, presenting raw, real, and multidimensional love, sensuality, and negotiation.

In television, HBO's popular *Big Love*, set within a Mormon religious context, explores both positives and challenges of polygamy, including external stigmatization, children's mixed responses to polyparents, how children handle peer-group curiosity at school, and the internal differences within Mormon polygamy, ranging from cult-like rural fundamentalism to urban, modern socioeconomic settings.

In summary, we are beginning to see film and television representations of polyamorous parenting, albeit most of them using death, devastation, and dark humor. What we require are positive media representations of polyamory for polyparents and their children. Finally, we need film and television scripts that actually use terms like "polyamory" or "polyfidelity."

## Future Directions: What Polyparents Want

Based on the available research and our discussion group, we next present what polyamorous parents report as needing and wanting to support their families' and children's health and well being. The identification of these needs is

important in providing a framework within which we can ensure that future research, policy, and practice directly address polyfamilies' requirements.

## More Research and More Polydiversity in the Research

A major need identified by polyfamilies is for further research to be undertaken in all areas of polyfamilies. For example, we need statistical data and demographics on how many polyfamilies there are and how they are constituted. We also require qualitative research on how polyfamilies raise children and the impact on children's lives now and in their adulthood. Also, how do polyfamilies navigate external settings such as schools, health services, and local communities. Our discussion group identified some other specific issues such as the rates of domestic violence in polyfamilies; the mental health of polyfamily members; how polyfamilies organize legal and property issues and arrangements; the impact of polyparenting on children's adult lives in general; and their relationship configurations and negotiations in particular.

## Legitimization and Resource Development in Educational, Health, and Legal Systems

As has already been discussed in this chapter, polyparents call for more resources, professional development for service providers, and polyfriendly policies and legislation in all educational, health, welfare, and legal services that will support and legitimate their relationships and families. Blue, a polyparent in the PolyVic discussion group, echoed the thoughts of many polyfamilies in believing these legal shifts will eventually occur, albeit too slowly:

> It will take groups like this [PolyVic], and more discussions, and activism, and us going "Um … hello? We're voters and we pay our taxes and you're ignoring us. And you're outlawing us, in fact" … but it'll take longer than my lifetime to get to that acceptance point.

In particular, polyfamilies call for the awareness of their existence in schools via policies, pedagogies, and pastoral care to cater for the specific needs and recognize the specific skills and insights of their children:

Robyn: For our children to be able to share their journey with other people in a school environment or a church environment or any environment would be more ideal than having to be … careful.

## In Conclusion: From "Normality" to "Diversity"

Throughout this chapter, we have provided an overview of the limited available research and our recent empirical findings from the PolyVic polyparenting discussion group which explored the overarching interconnected themes of the lack of polyfamily visibility and the fear of disclosure by polyfamilies. We also discussed how these themes were manifested within the polyhome and in raising children; in interactions with education, health, and legal services; and the place of media, popular culture, and texts. In concluding this chapter, we wish to espouse the need to adopt a mental and societal orientation to "diversity" rather than "normality" as a framework within which these themes and sites are situated. A framework of diversity prepares people for a wide variety of circumstances, structures, genders, sexualities, and ethnicities, and all the combinations thereof, and helps do away with the piecemeal approach wherein polyfamilies are currently ignored, erased, or rendered invisible.

A model of diversity can focus on healthy behaviors rather than healthy "situations," and on principles of providing good care rather than principles of providing the "right" family structure. This model helps refocus social perception away from a constant duologue of normality and deviance and toward a complex multiple dialog where the ultimate goal is the interaction of healthy individuals within healthy communities. Coalitions and bridges, inclusive of social and educational movements, are required at the crossroads of various social justice issues that affect families across the range of nationality, race, class, (dis)ability,

age, gender, and sexual identities. These collaborations must include the "questioning and reconceptualizing [of] relationship and families" and "engage all of us in creating sustainable relationships, families and communities" (Noel, 2006, pp. 616–617).

We conclude this chapter with the words and work of Valerie White (2007), a lawyer and member of the Boston poly support and discussion group Family Tree, who often supports polyfamilies in legal situations. She asks why children raised in a stable polyclan are considered to be in a worse situation than children from modern "blended" families—with stepparents, absent parents, stepsiblings, and half-siblings—who may have to deal with much chaos and change:

> As more and more polyamorous people find each other and establish intentional families they will produce a cohort of young people who are confident, ethical, self-actualizing, open-minded and secure. Two of them live at my house. (p. 13)

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