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## POLYAMORY IT'S NOT CHEATING

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

**A**n increasing number of people are in committed relationships that ethically and consensually include other people — and it is not the same as adultery and it is not just an open relationship. Polyamorous relationships are often ongoing and emotionally involved and based on a set of very clear, mutually agreed-upon terms, ethics, and shared responsibilities.

Constance Lynn Hummel, RCC, says there's a joke among counsellors

who work with members of the poly community: "If monogamous couples were as clear about expectations, boundaries, and communication as poly couples, we'd go out of business."

She explains that in monogamous relationships, there is often an unspoken (and unconscious) set of rules and expectations that each partner assumes the other will follow when it comes to "being monogamous," even though the definition of being in a committed, monogamous relationship is different for every person. For example, one partner

**These can be very serious, committed relationships, in which emotional maturity, self-awareness, and empathy are paramount.**

may think it is not okay to have drinks with a colleague of the opposite sex after work, while the other partner thinks it's fine as long as they're not having sex.

"With poly clients, there's no room for assumptions," says Hummel. "Communication and boundaries are key. Partners must get clear on, 'How would you feel if I did this, and would you be okay with that' and 'Yes, in this context but not in that context.' It's about really getting explicit about expectations and being clear about your own needs and values."

"People outside of the poly community often have many preconceived notions, like thinking people who are poly can't handle a relationship and are just out to have sex with every person they see, when in fact, these can be very serious, committed relationships in which emotional maturity, self-awareness, and empathy are paramount," says Hummel.

#### Helping People Get Clear

When clients come to see Hummel for poly-specific reasons, the sessions may focus on establishing the terms of their unique relationship and determining what is and isn't permitted — essentially the relationship code of ethics — which can be incredibly complex and nuanced, particularly the more people involved. Each relationship is entirely unique that way.

"Often a big piece of the work is really helping clients think it through," she says. For example, "You're saying you want to open up your relationship to other partners

— What would that really mean for you? Do you want the power to approve the other person's partners? Do you even want to meet the other person's partners? Do you want them to be able to have completely separate relationships, or do you want them to be somebody that gets brought in and is maybe known to you as a couple? What happens if both (or multiple) partners get sick on the same day? Who do you take care of first?"

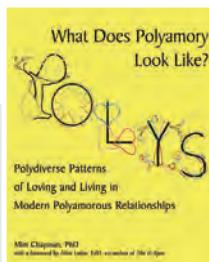
Hummel says that sometimes during the process of really thinking about it, people realize they like the idea of having multiple partners, but in practice, it is more complicated than they bargained for — there is so much more to this relationship structure than just being allowed to have sex with other people.

"It's different than an open relationship," says Hummel. "In an open relationship, there is also consent required by both partners, but there is usually no ongoing emotional relationship with the other person, and contact is generally limited to specific sexual activity with someone outside the existing relationship but nothing else."

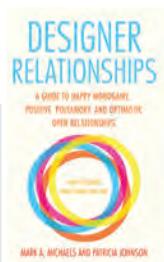
But polyamorous relationships are different because they allow for an emotional connection outside the primary relationship and that can open up old attachment wounds. Being open and vulnerable with one partner

**Being open and vulnerable with one partner is hard enough; it is a delicate balancing act when multiple partners' needs and values must be taken into account.**

## POLY RESOURCES



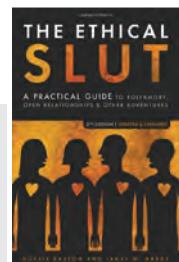
**WHAT DOES POLYAMORY LOOK LIKE?**  
*Polydiverse Patterns of Loving and Living in Modern Polyamorous Relationships*  
by Mim Chapman, PhD. iUniverse, Inc., 2010.



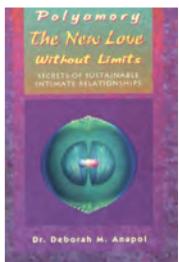
**DESIGNER RELATIONSHIPS:**  
*A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*  
by Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson. Cleis Press, 2015.



**MORE THAN TWO:**  
*A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*  
by Franklin Veaux and Eva Rickert. Thorntree Press, 2014.



**THE ETHICAL SLUT:**  
*A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Adventures*  
by Janet W. Hardy. Third edition. Celestial Arts, 2009.



**POLYAMORY:**  
*The New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships*  
by Deborah M. Anapol. Intinet Resource Center, 1997.



#### MUST-WATCH FILM

## ORGASM INC.

Award-winning director Liz Canner's documentary *Orgasm Inc.* (2009) features the filmmaker working as an editor of erotic videos for use by a pharmaceutical company doing a drug trial. The company is developing a Viagra-type drug for women afflicted with Female Sexual Dysfunction. Canner's original plan was to focus the film on science and pleasure, but soon began to suspect her employer's motives. Canner refocused her attention and *Orgasm Inc.* became a documentary about the medical and pharmaceutical industry, the marketing campaigns, and the pursuit of profit. Described as both shocking and hilarious, the film has been shown around the world and has received numerous awards. [www.orgasminc.org](http://www.orgasminc.org)

is hard enough; it is a delicate balancing act when multiple partners' needs and values must be taken into account. Hummel says people in poly relationships must be honest with themselves and their partners about what will and won't work for them and be checking with each other every step of the way.

"Often people don't know something is a trigger until they've run head first into it," she says. "You can only prepare so much for the unknown."

From a therapeutic perspective, Hummel says you have to be watching for coercion and true consent of both partners. An example of coercion may be if one partner is going along with a poly structure because they are afraid of losing their partner. "This is not true consent. This is consent under duress," she says. "There's no safety in the primary relationship if you're saying, 'I'm halfway out the door. Do this or I'm gone.'"

Hummel adds that in her experience, couples that are trying out a poly arrangement as a last-ditch measure to

save a struggling relationship are seldom successful. "In those cases, it's usually the fastest way to blow that relationship out of the water. For some people, it becomes just a bridge to getting out."

For it to be successful — and Hummel has seen many successful examples — there has to be unwavering commitment to honesty, communication, and respect, even when it is hard and messy. While she acknowledges that there are several schools of thought on what constitutes a true polyamorous relationship, mainly because the terms of the relationships can vary so widely, Hummel has observed that stable poly relationships seem to be those that put their primary partners first.

"From a therapeutic standpoint, I believe there has to be a primary partner who comes first, no matter what, in order for the relationship to be maintained in the long-run. The more secure the primary relationship is, the more they can manage the anxiety evoked while exploring secondary relationships, because it's

## COUNSELLING LGBTQ/2S CLIENTS

INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF RELATIONSHIP DIVERSITY AND THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE LGBTQ/2S POPULATION.



**Qmunity** is a Vancouver-based non-profit organization that works to improve queer and trans lives, provide a safer space for LGBTQ/2S people and their allies, and empower all to be their best selves.

In addition to counselling and support, including youth support, Qmunity offers consulting and training for individuals, service providers, and organizations to help them understand how best to make services more welcoming to local LGBTQ/2S communities.

A variety of resources is also available at their website. Of particular interest for this issue of *Insights* magazine, check out *Supporting LGBTQ Folk Experiencing Relationship Abuse and Safety in Relationships for Trans Folk*, both of which were developed by Qmunity in partnership with the Legal Services Society and are available for download at <http://qmunity.ca/learn/resources/>.



known, if push comes to shove, they are emotionally safe with their primary partner."

### Preventing Bias

But poly clients are not always coming into counselling for poly-specific reasons and counsellor bias can be a challenge for them. Just because someone is in a polyamorous relationship doesn't mean all (or any) of their issues stem from that, and this assumption can sometimes prevent clients from getting support for other concerns. Hummel says many of her poly clients are happy with their relationships and really just want to address their anxiety, depression, parenting concerns, or their struggles at work or in other relationships, etc. When counsellors assume a poly relationship is the source of all issues, or keep bringing conversations back to their multiple partners, it can be a frustrating and invalidating experience for clients.

As with anything else, if counsellors

plan to work in this area, it is the counsellor's job to educate themselves about this relationship structure, the community, and its culture, as well as to explore any personal biases that may impede work with this population.

For counsellors with polyamorous clients, Hummel says it's like dealing with any other client situation — the relationship is only a problem if the client says the relationship is a problem — otherwise, focus on what your client wants to work on. If the relationship is actually an issue, with time and trust, it will come up on its own.

"The poly community is very much its own culture. It has its own rules. It has its own norms," says Hummel. "However, people who identify as poly are also just everyday people. They identify as all genders and sexual orientations. They come from all backgrounds. They are loving parents. This is not acting out or proof there is something wrong. I would say most of the people who are

actively involved in the poly community are highly aware of their 'stuff' and have done significant amounts of healing and personal development work. As with any group of people, some members may have trauma histories or were abused and that would need to be addressed, but that's not necessarily connected to why they have chosen to be polyamorous."

"I think that's the key: poly relationships are really no different than any other type of relationship — sure, they're more complex — but at the end of the day, it's just a relationship with more people trying to find love, be heard, and be seen."

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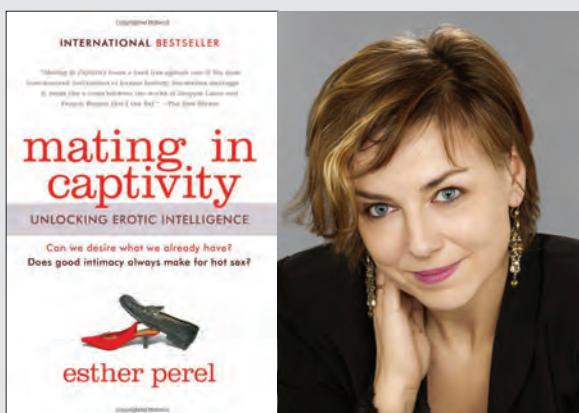
Constance Lynn Hummel, MA, RCC, is a psychotherapist and leadership coach in private practice. She specializes in relationships, sex therapy, and substance addictions and provides case consultation for therapists and wellness professionals working in these areas. [www.constancelynn.com](http://www.constancelynn.com)

## Esther Perel Rethinking Infidelity

The *New York Times* called her "the most important game changer on sexuality and relationships since Dr. Ruth." Esther Perel is one of the world's most respected voices on the topic of intimate relationships.

*Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence* (Harper Paperbacks, 2007), Perel's landmark book, explores the "paradoxical union of domesticity and sexual desire" and was translated into 25 languages.

Her TED Talks, *The Secret to Desire in a Long-Term Relationship* (February 2013) and *Rethinking Infidelity... A Talk for Anyone Who Has Ever Loved* (May 2015)



have collectively reached over 17 million viewers.

The Belgian native is a practising psychotherapist in New York, speaker, and consultant. From her website: "Couples therapy is probably the hardest type of therapy to be in and to practise; and I have been on both sides. In

my work as a therapist, I see despair, entrenched patterns, loneliness in the presence of another, contempt, violence, lack of any physical touch; so many couples come to me way beyond due date. I learn, daily, how to master the art of couple therapy." [www.estherperel.com](http://www.estherperel.com)

### 10 CRITICAL DIMENSIONS

The Infidelity Recovery Institute has a number of resources for counsellors and their clients. One you may find useful is a free, downloadable, client-directed handout called *10 Critical Dimensions*. While it was originally developed for people experiencing infidelity challenges, it is mainly focused on strengthening a committed relationship and could be a useful tool for any couple seeking relationship help.

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|------------------|--------------------|
| ① Emotions       | ⑥ Trust            |
| ② Romance        | ⑦ Family Relations |
| ③ Responsibility | ⑧ Intimacy         |
| ④ Companionship  | ⑨ Sex              |
| ⑤ Appreciation   | ⑩ Letting Go       |

Each section includes details on what each dimension means, as well as a list of questions to prompt deeper thinking and suggestions to encourage positive change.

The 10 Critical Dimensions handout is available under Free Tools at [www.infidelityrecoveryinstitute.com](http://www.infidelityrecoveryinstitute.com).