

# Queering Relationships

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Marty Laubach

Ian Clark

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a link between sexuality and gender identity and an individual's likelihood to pursue non-monogamous or polyamorous relationship dynamics. The interviews and surveys consisted of questions regarding sexual orientation, understanding of non-monogamous relationships, and attitudes/experiences surrounding monogamy and non-monogamy. The results of the study indicate that LGB+ sexuality, rather than non-cis gender identity, was more closely related to participation in non-monogamous or polyamorous relationship dynamic and that LGBTQIA+ people are unlikely to perceive the stigma surrounding polyamory as being the same severity as the stigma surrounding the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, etc.) population.

## **Introduction**

An extensive amount of research is readily available on LGBTQ+ people, and research has been collected from people in polyamorous relationships, but very little research exists on LGBTQ+ people and the way their sexuality/ gender identities influence their relationship dynamics (if they do at all). Almost all existing research as to the relationships of LGBTQIA+ people is focused on LGB+ people, and in a way that reinforces the normativity of monogamy. Similarly, research done on polyamorous relationships usually focuses on heteronormative relationships in which most parties involved are heterosexual (maybe bisexual, depending on the study). Both subjects are seen as deviating from relationship norms in their own way, and as such are rarely combined into one research project. This study, using two separate surveys and a handful of interviews, served to provide insight into social perceptions of non-monogamous relationships

and LGBTQIA+ people, as well as how those two categories overlap. It also tests the hypothesis that LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to engage in non-monogamous practices because of the many ways they already deviate from gender, sexual, and relationship norms. The data supports this, with added insights into the ways that terms used to describe various relationship dynamics are defined and used by those to whom they apply. Other data provides multiple “types” of people who are likely to understand polyamory, and those who contribute to its stigmatization.

## **Theory**

Very little existing research focuses directly on LGBTQIA+ identity and non-monogamy (specifically polyamory) simultaneously. It is possible, however, to apply the theories that have been used to examine monogamous, usually heterosexual relationships to polyamorous (or otherwise non-monogamous) relationship dynamics as they pertain to LGBTQIA+ people. These include the use of social exchange theory, which sees relationships as a cost and reward system, as well as conflict theory (specifically feminist and queer theory).

In the most basic sense, social exchange theory applied to relationships sees relationships as a cost and reward system. If the emotional, social, etc. costs are higher than the rewards reaped from the relationship, it will be unsuccessful or at the very least unhappy. Using a modified form of social exchange theory, ‘equity theory’, Sprecher observed that an absence of equity (here meaning the balance between cost and benefits) is positively correlated with distress, anger and depression in the “under benefiter” and guilt in the “over benefiter” (1992). A balance of costs and rewards, and the maintenance of that balance, then, is a necessity for relationship health through the social exchange theory lens. There are different ‘costs and rewards’ for LGBTQIA+ and/ or non-monogamous people, though. Relationships of any kind

that are visibly not cisheteronormative or strictly monogamous are intrinsically socially expensive because they attract criticism for rejecting normative behavior. There are subsets of these relationships, though, that could be immensely more equitable (lesbian relationships existing without patriarchal imposition, a healthy polyamorous triad in which communication and decision making is shared by all) than heterosexual, monogamous relationships could ever be. Liu applies a different version of social exchange theory, ‘outcome interdependence theory and investment model’, and determines that high comparison levels (expectations in the relationship versus options outside the relationship) in a relationship result in a more committed relationship, and in higher dependence of the individual on that relationship (2012). Non-monogamy renders this analysis of relationships ineffective because the options outside the relationship don’t endanger the existing relationship; they add onto it. While the individual is still fully capable of being satisfied within the relationship, they are not dependent on one person or relationship for the entirety of their satisfaction. This allows for a more autonomous role in relationships, while collecting the rewards of emotional fulfillment at the cost of going against social norms and the energy it might take to meet the needs of more than one relationship or partner. Because LGBTQIA+ people already assume that cost upon entering any relationship, people might be more likely to at least consider a polyamorous or otherwise non-monogamous relationship as equally as they would a monogamous one.

Conflict theory as a whole has a little more to offer on the subject of polyamory and LGBTQIA+ identity. Looking to feminist theory offers an understanding of the way that polyamory can be used to subvert patriarchal relationship norms, creating a more egalitarian and liberating relationship structure. In her discussion about polyamorous lesbian and bisexual women, for example, Deri states that one way this subversion occurs is through a reclamation of

sex and promiscuity (2015). Women, particularly lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other LGBTQIA+ women, who would otherwise face pressures to conform to socially acceptable gender and sexual roles upon entering a monogamous relationship with a cishetero man are (ideally) afforded more options. Queer theorists offer more targeted information because they're quite literally theorizing about LGBTQIA+ identity and expression. Trahan, for example, states that polyamory must be discussed from a queer theory perspective because it pertains to desire and non-normative conceptions of "love", and "family" (2014). Challenging these normative ideals is innate in the existence of any LGBTQIA+ person, regardless of how much legislature is passed or assimilation attempted. Song argues that, because "queerness" exists in opposition to hetero and cisnormativity, it should inherently come with some challenge to mononormativity (2012).

This study theorizes, then, that due to their sexuality and/ or gender identity rendering them as "other", LGBTQIA+ people will be more likely to embrace (or at least accept) non-monogamous relationship dynamics as opposed to people who are both cisgender and heterosexual. Regardless of whether or not a non-monogamous relationship dynamic is embraced by the individuals themselves, it's also likely that LGBTQIA+ people will be more knowledgeable about and accepting of relationships that aren't monogamous. Lastly, people who are in non-monogamous relationships who are also LGBTQIA+ will probably view the stigma produced by their relationship dynamics less significant than the stigma produced by their sexuality or gender identity.

## Methodology

A portion of the data was derived from the “Capstone Survey”, a survey of students taking the general education classes of Marshall University’s Department Sociology and Anthropology that was developed and administered by the department’s Senior Seminar course.<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted between February 26 and March 19, 2019, where the students entered 13 classes on the Huntington campus, read the consent statement, passed out the forms, and collected the forms through a slit on the top of a box to ensure anonymity. One class from the Teays Valley and the Mid-Ohio Valley Center campuses were administered by their instructors. An invitation to the online version, developed using Qualtrics, was emailed to students who took online versions of the courses during the same period. The total population of in-class students on Huntington campus was 504, from which we received 231 responses for a rate of 65.5%, the population from remote campuses was 23, from which we received 18 for a rate of 78%, and the population of online students was 164, from which we received only 3 responses, a rate that was so low that we decided to not use them. The population of students in the department’s general education courses has been generally representative of the broader student body at Marshall who are taking general education courses.

The other part of the data was collected through a more specific Qualtrics survey, titled “Queering Relationships”, and a small number of in person interviews.<sup>2</sup> Participants were recruited through word of mouth and from online forums. The participants fully consented either online (for the survey) or in person (for the interview process). The interviews were made up of questions regarding sexual orientation, understanding of non-monogamous relationships, and attitudes/ experiences surrounding monogamy and non-monogamy. The interviews were

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<sup>1</sup> The survey received Marshall IRB approval as study # 725823-6 under the title “Capstone Survey.”

<sup>2</sup> This survey received Marshall IRB approval as study # 1335070-1 under the title “Queering relationships”.

conducted in a location of each participant's choosing and recorded in writing during the interview. All records from these interviews were submitted to a password protected journal system accessible only to the principal and co-investigators, and physical records kept in a locked office. Participants consisted of LGBTQIA+ and cisgender, heterosexual people over the age of 18 who were not at the time in relationships, in monogamous relationships, or in polyamorous relationships. Three interviews were conducted from a handful of self-identified LGBTQIA+ individuals who were familiar with polyamory and wanted to be interviewed. The "Queering Relationships" survey was conducted between January 23, 2019 and April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019. The survey link was distributed on multiple online polyamory or LGBTQ+ centric forums, from which participants were led to a consent form and allowed to complete the survey anonymously. During the course of this Qualtrics survey, 100 responses were recorded.

## **Data**

The "Capstone" survey was constructed with a section for basic demographics, a section asking how often respondents engaged in given behaviors, and a section of statements which the respondent would indicate four levels strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) with neutral recorded but not prompted (see Appendix A for a copy of consent and questions).

Tables 1 and 3 report the general demographic makeup of the respondents, where 74.7% are between 18 and 20 years of age, 34.6% are male, 7.5% are transgender, 81.4% are white, 85.4% are in college straight from high school, 45.4% describe their parents as below middle class, 57.8% are from traditional households (i.e. 2 parents and siblings), 61.5% of mothers and 72.4 % of fathers have less than a baccalaureate education, 70.3% are from rural or small town settings, and 85.7% are from West Virginia. The largest religious affiliation is Evangelical at

39.2%, followed by “none” at 25.5%, though 72.6% report religion as either “important” or “very important.” The largest political affiliation is “moderate” at 25.1%, while 16.4% identified as Democrat, 15.5% identify as Republican, 16.0% identify as “other liberal” or “far left,” 5.5% identify as “other conservative” or “far right,” and 21.0% report that they “don’t care.” The distribution was clearly skewed to lowerclassmen as the majority of students were Freshmen 52.5%, followed by Sophomores at 30.4%, with some 17.0% as upperclassmen. The distribution of students between Marshall colleges tended to over represent Liberal Arts, and underrepresent Business and Science, but it correlated more closely with the general population of students ( $r=.67$ ) than the distribution of Freshmen ( $r=.42$ ).

The following reports frequencies and descriptive statistics of the responses from the broad set of questions relevant to this analysis. Many of these questions were combined into scales, allowing for a finer measurement of relevant concepts and offers significant data reduction.

The primary dependent variable used in this analysis was the *misconceptions scale*, which was constructed from questions in the last section, and comprised of agreement with the following statements:

1. LGBTQ+ people are more likely to have multiple sex partners
2. Polyamory just means you have multiple sex partners
3. Polyamory is the same thing as having an open relationship

And disagreement with this statement:

1. It is possible to love (romantically) more than one person at a time.

These questions scaled with a Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.601$ . The mean score for the scale was 10.79, and 23. 45% of the respondents scored in agreement with the first three statements listed above, and



disagreement with the other. The section prior to this also collected information on how many LGBTQ+ people the respondent knew, which can be considered related to these questions.

Two other statements were included in the latter part of the survey in order to collect information on the general populations' knowledge of polyamory, both using the agreement response:

1. I know what polyamory is, and
2. Monogamous relationships are more socially acceptable than polyamorous ones

The data provided several other scales that proved relevant to this study as independent factors that could influence perception of polyamorous relationships and LGBTQ+ people. One scale measured family religiosity and was taken from responses to three questions “How important is religion to” (1) you, (2) your father, (3) your mother. This had possible responses as 0= not important, 1=somewhat important, 2= very important. The *family religiosity* scale has a Cronbach  $\alpha = .72$  and 31.9% of students were in general agreement with the questions. Another is a *conservative ideology* scale consisting of the following questions using the “agreement” format:

1. Mankind is supposed to exercise dominion over the earth
2. America is letting in too many immigrants
3. Sometimes it is OK if species die off for people to have jobs
4. I support the coal companies doing what they need to for job creation
5. The government is spending too much on the environment.

This *conservative ideology* scale has a Cronbach  $\alpha = .72$ , and 7.5% of students scored above midpoint (i.e. the average of “neutral” for the 5 questions). Political identity was measured by the

response to a question whether the student identified through the scale of (0=far left; 1=other liberal; 2=democrat; 3=moderate; 4=republican; 5=other conservative; 6=far right; 7=don't care).

Students who responded as “don't care” were coded in with moderate.

Three additional scales are drawn from questions in the “how often” format that serve to segment students by interest. The first set questions identify a subset of students identified as *partiers*:

1. Go out to a bar/dance club
2. Attend or host a private party at someone's house/apartment
3. Drink alcoholic beverages

The *partier* scale has a Cronbach  $\alpha = .83$ , with 35.0% of students in general agreement with the questions. A second set identifies people who are more engaged in sports and outdoor activities:

1. Do outdoor activities
2. Play amateur sports
3. Engage in sport fan activity (tailgate, game parties around the TV)
4. Go hunting or fishing

We named this group as *jocks*, and the Cronbach  $\alpha = .72$ , with 35.8% of students in general agreement with the questions.

A final student interest scale using the “how often” scale was used to identify students as “nerds:”

1. Play role-playing game at gathering of friends/group (e.g. D&D, LARP)
2. Engage in non-sport fandom activity (e.g. bands, e-games, cosplay)
3. Play online multiplayer computer games (e.g. World of Warcraft)

This *nerd* scale had a Cronbach  $\alpha = .63$ , with 16.4% of students in general agreement with the questions.

Another scale from other modules became important in the analysis, measuring perceptions and misconceptions about sex trafficking, comprised of the following questions:

1. Men cannot be sex traffic victims
2. Sex trafficking only happens in developing countries (Asia, Africa, etc)
3. Sex traffickers only target victims they do not know
4. It is not considered sex trafficking if everyone is consenting adults
5. Minors in the United States (anyone under the age of 18) can consent to prostitution
6. Other than sex, there are no other forms of human trafficking

This *sex trafficking misconception scale* has a Cronbach  $\alpha = .69$ , with 2.2% of students in general agreement with the questions.

The “Queering Relationships” survey had a more limited demographic collection, asking only about the respondents’ gender identity and sexual orientation. The survey allowed the respondents to select multiple sexuality and gender identifiers, acknowledging the complex and fluid nature of both. As such, people who identify as bisexual made up the majority of the responses at 29.10%, followed by pansexuals at 22.39%, queers at 16.42%, heterosexuals at 13.43%, lesbians at 7.46%, gays at 5.22%, other at 3.73%, and asexuals/ demisexuals at 2.24%. The ‘other’ category consisted of four ‘heteroflexible’ responses, and one ‘polysexual’ response as neither were explicitly included as multiple-choice options. Where gender is concerned, the respondents were predominantly cisgender women at 55.34%, followed by cisgender men at 16.5%, nonbinary people at 15.53%, other at 6.80%, transgender women at 3.88%, and transgender men at 1.94%. The other category consists of one quogender response, two

cisgender woman responses, a blanket trans response, a cross-dresser response, one genderfluid response and one intersex response.

The demographic questions were followed by questions about the respondents' relationship status and dynamic, personal definitions of 'monogamy', 'non-monogamy', and 'polyamory', the labels they personally had used, whether LGBTQIA+ identity influences engagement in non-monogamous practices, and perceptions of stigma based on LGBTQIA+ identity or participation in a polyamorous relationship, as follows:

1. What is your sexuality?
2. What is your gender?
3. Are you or have you ever been in a relationship?
4. How would you define your past relationship(s) in terms of monogamy/ non-monogamy?
5. How would you define your present relationship(s) in terms of monogamy/ non-monogamy?
6. If you've ever been or are in a relationship that isn't monogamous, what word(s) did/ do you use to describe your relationship(s)?
7. What does monogamy mean to you?
8. What does non-monogamy mean to you?
9. What does polyamory mean to you?
10. Do you think there's a difference between polyamory and non-monogamy?
11. Do you think being a part of the LGBTQ community makes it easier to embrace non-monogamous relationship dynamics?
12. Do you think there's stigma around relationships that aren't monogamous?
  - o If yes, is this stigma comparable to the stigma around LGBTQIA+ relationships?

Almost all of the respondents had been or were in relationships (95%), with 3% being single and never being in a relationship and 2% choosing not to respond. Most respondents had a relationship history consisting of both monogamous and non-monogamous relationship dynamics (49.48%), with 25.77% having a relationship history of strictly monogamous relationships, 9.27% having been in somewhat monogamous relationships, 8.25% having been in somewhat monogamous relationships, and 7.22% of respondents only ever having been in completely non-monogamous relationships (3 participants chose not to respond). When asked about their current relationship(s), most respondents answered that their relationship was strictly non-monogamous (48.96%), followed by 27.08% of respondents engaging in somewhat non-monogamous relationships, participants in both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships making up 11.46% of the respondents, 9.38% of respondents engaging in completely monogamous relationships, and 3.13% of respondents engaging in somewhat monogamous relationships. Here, 4 participants chose not to respond. When asked what words participants who had previously been or were in non-monogamous relationships at the time of the survey used to describe their relationship (a question which also allowed multiple answers, yielding 156 total responses), the majority of respondents (43.59%) selected polyamorous, followed by 20.51% using open (as in open relationship), 17.95% using non-monogamous, 10.90% preferring consensually non-monogamous (or CNM), 3.85% using relationship anarchy, and 3.21% using other terms (polyaffectionate, swinger, polyfidelity, ethically non-monogamous, and monogamish).

The following questions were primarily short answer. Monogamy, to most of the survey participants, was the exclusive romantic and physical relationship between two individuals. Some mentioned that marriage was required for them to consider a relationship monogamous,

while others defined monogamy as riddled with possessiveness, as a restrictive dynamic, and in one case, “a toxic status quo that should be discarded by most”. Non-monogamy was defined mostly as an umbrella term for many kinds of relationships and defined with terms like ‘freedom’ or ‘flexibility’. There was a clear separation here between people who viewed non-monogamy as having a primary partner but ability to be physically intimate with others, and people for whom non-monogamy meant ‘polyamory lite’, wherein all parties were free to do what they choose without specific boundaries or a significant emotional connection. Polyamory was defined by almost all respondents as involving love and multiple relationships, between consenting, aware, and communicative parties. Inserted after this is another multiple choice, where 90.7% of respondents indicated that they thought there was a difference between non-monogamy and polyamory. Asked to explain the difference, most respondents emphasized non-monogamy as an umbrella term under which polyamory exists, and that polyamory is more relationship-centric than other kinds of non-monogamy.

On determining whether LGBTQIA+ identity makes it easier to embrace non-monogamous relationship dynamics, a staggering 87.75% believed this to be the case (31.63% definitely yes, 56.12% probably yes), with only 10.2% answering probably not and 2.04% answering definitely not. Asked to elaborate, most respondents suggested that they believe this to be the case based on LGBTQIA+ peoples’ existence in opposition to the ‘norms’ around sexuality and gender, which might help them to question traditional relationship dynamics. As one respondent stated, “It’s easier to step outside of the box if you don’t live in it.” It was also heavily suggested that people who are LGBTQIA+ have to teach themselves how to form relationships, which makes them more open minded as people and open to considering alternative options. Slightly less common but still mentioned were themes of consent (which

many respondents believed LGBTQIA+ people are more adept at discussing and obtaining) and an almost pessimistic view- Society already dislikes LGBTQIA+ people, so they have very little to lose by engaging in the kinds of relationships that can result in further ostracization. A strong majority of the respondents (96.94%) believed that relationships that weren't monogamous were probably (16.33%) or definitely (80.61%) stigmatized, and as many as 67% believed that this stigma was probably (47.87%) or definitely (19.15%) comparable to the social stigma surrounding LGBTQIA+ relationships and identities. A significant portion, though, determined that this stigma was probably (24.47%) or definitely (8.51%) not comparable to LGBTQIA+-centric stigma.

The results from all three interviews were consistent with the data from the "Queering Relationships" survey. All respondents identified with one or more labels within the LGBTQIA+ acronym and had been or were in non-monogamous relationships. The individuals all understood non-monogamy to be more of a continuum under which polyamory fit, although one respondent indicated that there wasn't much of a difference in her opinion. Monogamy was defined as an exclusive relationship between two people, and polyamory as multiple romantic or physical relationships occurring between consenting and informed parties. All interviewees agreed that LGBTQIA+ identity makes it easier for an individual to partake in non-monogamous dynamics, because of the ways they were already in opposition to social sexual/relationship norms. Similarly, all interviewees agreed that non-monogamous relationships are socially stigmatized but disagreed that the stigmas were comparable to those faced by LGBTQ+ people- Argued using their experience with both sets of stigmas.

## **Analysis**

The correlations analysis explored a large number of relationships among the demographics and the questions specified for this study, so this study will only report as statistically significant those with probability levels of  $p < .01$ , anticipating the possibility of 2 false positive results (unless the p levels are much lower).

The *misconceptions* scale showed a significant number of correlations. Both of the first two predictions proved to be accurate, the first more so by the “Capstone” survey.

*Misconceptions* were correlated with heterosexuals ( $p=0.307$ ), meaning that non-heterosexuals were less likely to harbor misconceptions about polyamory. In fact, individuals with a larger network of LGBTQIA+ friends were more likely to know what polyamory means ( $p=0.307$ ) and less likely to harbor misconceptions ( $p=-0.268$ ). Individuals that claimed to know what polyamory means were less likely to harbor misconceptions ( $p=-0.321$ ) and more likely to know that non-monogamous relationships are more stigmatized than monogamous ones ( $p=0.324$ ).

Some interesting correlations with scales and other modules of the survey helped to display what kind of people are likely to be less knowledgeable about or accepting of both polyamory and LGBTQIA+ identity. Men were more likely to believe misconceptions about polyamory ( $p=0.223$ ) and less likely to say they knew what polyamory means ( $p=-0.281$ ). People studying in the College of Liberal Arts were more likely to know what polyamory is ( $p=0.189$ ). Respondents who themselves were extremely religious strongly believed misconceptions ( $p=0.35$ ), as they did when they ranked their parents high on the religiosity scale ( $p=0.296$ ). This was also significant if the respondent was evangelical ( $p=0.221$ ), although no other religions significantly impacted misconceptions or knowledge. Spiritual respondents often knew what polyamory means ( $p=0.252$ ), as well as “religious no’s” ( $p=0.25$ ), who bought into few misconceptions ( $p=-0.266$ ). Individuals who fit into the *conservative ideology* scale were



extremely likely to hold misconceptions ( $p=0.501$ ) and rarely knew what polyamory is ( $p=0.309$ ). Those who fit into the *partier* subgroup were less likely to buy into misconceptions ( $p=0.199$ ), while *jocks* were likely to both buy into misconceptions about polyamory ( $p=0.324$ ) and not know what polyamory is ( $p=0.258$ ). *Nerds* provided no significant information for this study one way or another. Unsurprisingly, people who had misconceptions about sex trafficking also held misconceptions about polyamory ( $p=0.193$ ).

## **Discussion**

The data from the “Queering Relationships” survey and interviews supported the hypothesis that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to engage in non-monogamous or polyamorous relationship dynamics, as heterosexuals made up only 16.47% of survey respondents and 0% of the interviewees. From this survey it can be determined that LGB+ sexuality is more of an indicator of participation in non-monogamous relationships than transgender or nonbinary or any other non-cisgender gender identities. This is due to the low rates of participation by non-cisgender people, as opposed to the relatively high rates of participation from non-heterosexual people.

The second hypothesis is supported by the data from the “Capstone” survey, which indicates that heterosexuals know less about polyamory than their non-heterosexual counterparts. Men, specifically non trans men, were more likely to believe misconceptions, as were conservatives, jocks, religious people, and people lacking knowledge about trafficking (which could suggest a broader lack of worldly awareness). COLA students, “religious no’s”, strictly spiritual people and people who knew more than a handful of gay people proved to be the most

knowledgeable about polyamory, as well partiers (perhaps on account of hyper-socialization and exposure to many different kinds of people).

The third hypothesis was somewhat disproven by the “Queering Relationships” survey. While the interviews supported the delineation between stigma based on sexuality/ gender and stigma based on relationship dynamic, there wasn’t enough interview data to go against the number of survey responses. The majority of the respondents were in some way LGBTQIA+, and the majority of the respondents felt that these stigmas were comparable. It’s impossible to tell whether the LGBTQIA+ respondents were the ones that answered this way because the data is not individualized, but there’s not enough evidence to suggest that they didn’t answer this way.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that people who self-identify as LGBTQIA+ are both more knowledgeable about and more likely to participate in non-monogamous and polyamorous relationship dynamics. This can partially be attributed to their predisposition to identify with or engage in relationships outside of the socially acceptable norm. This study could be improved upon by including more demographic information in the targeted (“Queering Relationships”) survey in order to see how age might affect perceptions of non-traditional relationships, as well as individualized data for more specific results.

## Citations

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