



The Mainstreaming of Polyamory

Remarks made by polyamory advocate and educator Anita Wagner of practicalpolyamory.com
at Polyamory Pride Rally in Central Park, NYC, on October 4, 2008

Today, whether or not we've given it much thought, we are all witnessing the mainstreaming of polyamory, and we've come a long way from the early days of polyamory and its roots in the free love movement.

For many years polyamory stayed on the fringe of society, with some of its more radical denizens taking pride in keeping it there. Some were clearly resistant to the idea that polyamory as a model for relationships is a concept to be shared with people living traditional lives. These same people tended also to resist being spoken for and any sort of formal organizing to establish a polyamory movement.

But over time the media, especially daytime broadcast media and specifically daytime "trash TV" talk shows, took notice and devoted programming to the subject. In the bad old days of the mid to late 1990s, daytime talk shows like Sally Jesse Raphael and Jenny Jones invited well-meaning but naïve polyamorists on their shows and proceeded to subject them to abuse and humiliation by stirring up hostility in the studio audience and directing it at the poly guests who just wanted to tell their story. Over time the community learned its lessons and began to refuse such invitations. For a time polyamory stayed well below mainstream radar.

As time passed and as the divorce rate held high and steady, legitimate mainstream media interest began to shine an ever-brighter light on polyamory and asked the question, "Is polyamory a legitimate alternative to traditional monogamy?" Over time mainstream newspaper articles and electronic internet news sources began to treat polyamory in a more evenhanded fashion, permitting polyamory spokespeople to get the message out without denigrating them in the process. Daytime talk shows like Montel Williams, John Walsh and most recently Tyra Banks began to more consistently treat the subject with more respect. Of course, this has not always been uniformly the case, but there has been a trend of steady improvement.

As polyamory came out of obscurity, mainstreamers began taking notice, especially those who recognized that mainstream monogamy as promised wasn't working for them. Cheating was creating major difficulties for them, and they began to despair. Unfortunately, due to the polyamory community's non-mainstream image, they've had a difficult time finding community with which they can identify and feel safe.

Nevertheless, via online resources, people in monogamous relationships found out that there is an alternative. This has resulted for many in mixed marriages, if you will, that is, the poly/mono kind, where one partner wishes to open the marriage and one doesn't. Their numbers continue to grow, and their need for help in finding their way to stability is substantial.

Along the way, dedicated organizations like the Institute for 21st Century Relationships have devoted their energies to teaching workshops at professional conferences attended by sex researchers and marriage and family therapists to increase awareness of the legitimacy of this alternative to traditional monogamy. Professionals are

beginning to understand that open relationships can and do work for many people and are learning how to counsel their clients more appropriately and competently.

The numbers of people interested in researching alternative relationships continues to grow. Today there is a very active poly researchers yahoo group, as well as the Community-Academic Consortium of Research into Alternative Sexualities, a/k/a/ CARAS, with the worthy goal of fostering legitimate, peer-reviewed research to shed more light on and eliminate misconceptions about polyamorous relationships.

The most recent and welcome sign of positive progress in the mainstreaming of polyamory is the publishing in 2008 of the book *Open: Life, Sex and Love in an Open Marriage* by Jenny Block. Until now, there were no books written on polyamory from a mainstream perspective. Jenny did us the great favor of courageously writing a memoir about her and her husband's experiences opening their marriage. This summer the book was referenced in articles in mainstream women's magazines like *Marie Claire* and *Glamour*. *Ladies Home Journal* featured an article on couples with non-traditional marriages, such as long-distance marriages, May-December marriages, etc., and a polyamorous marriage was included as a part of an array of ten or so less common marital arrangements that are nevertheless well-accepted by mainstream society.

Today the picture is brighter than ever. The mainstreaming of polyamory is well under way, and as community organizers and advocates it is our duty to be prepared to continue to effectively participate in the ongoing public dialogue about alternatives to monogamy in a way that debunks misconceptions and helps mainstreamers understand that they do indeed have options as to how they arrange their intimate relationships. This means that we must present ourselves and our message in a way that helps them relate to us. This means becoming comfortable with putting a less radical face on polyamory so as not to distract the listener from the message. And it means continuing to effectively communicate via media opportunities that ethical non-monogamy is achievable via quality education in the skills required and letting the world know that social stigma need not continue to prohibit choosing what works better for some people.

Today we are witnessing the emergence of new polyamory community leadership that together with long-time advocates who get polyamory from a sub-cultural context can combine their efforts and commitment to supporting the mainstreaming of polyamory. Happily, there are also clear signs of increased community support for organizing polyamory as a movement.

We are proud of who we are, proud of our poly families, and proud to share the truth about legitimate options in intimate relationships. Let us all commit ourselves to facilitating the growth of mainstream polyamory by making more and more high-quality, accessible educational materials and programs available to those who seek them. The Loving More organization is committed to this goal and is prepared to work with other community organizers in this time of exciting possibilities.

Today there is more and more diversity amongst polyamorists as to age, race, economic circumstance and political views than ever before, and this is a good thing. The more mainstream polyamory becomes, the less bias there will be toward poly families. There will be fewer challenges to face when coming out to family, friends and co-workers.

The poly mantra is said to be "Communicate, Communicate, Communicate", and this is wise advice as to the way we conduct our relationships. Similarly, my poly advocacy mantra is "Facilitate, Facilitate, Facilitate!" I invite you to join me in pride in who we are and as we work together to let everyone know they have options by facilitating the mainstreaming of polyamory.