

The use of emotionally focused therapy with polyamorous relationships

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Abstract

Approximately 5% of people in the United States engage in some form of consensual non-monogamy (CNM; *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 2018, 47, 1439). Therapists are becoming increasingly aware of the need to treat members of CNM relationships, including polyamorous relationships. To date, no research has been conducted and little has been written about applying existing couple therapy models normed on heterosexual, cisgender, monogamous relationships to CNM or polyamorous relationships. Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) is an empirically supported treatment for relationship distress that offers promise for working with polyamorous relationships due to the model's systemic and attachment theoretical foundations. We propose EFT is an ideal model for working with polyamorous relationships because of the focus on externalizing, interpersonal and intrapersonal emotional and experiential coherence, and the attachment bond. Building and sustaining multiple attachment relationships allows for the fulfilment of a diverse range of relational needs and wants as well as provides a secure base for individual and relational exploration. In this article, we first provide general information about polyamory and discuss the research on attachment theory and polyamory. We then provide a step-by-step conceptualization of how EFT therapists can expand the model to include extra-dyadic attachment relationships. In addition, we include specific ways in which the model would need to be adapted when working with polyamorous clients. We conclude with recommendations for EFT therapists working with polyamorous relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

Consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships (i.e., relationship structures in which all partners have agreed to have multiple romantic and/or sexual partners) are becoming increasingly visible and more normalized (Haupt et al., 2017). This includes polyamorous relationships, which are “a form of CNM in which adults negotiate multiple loving relationships with their partners' consent” (Henrich & Trawinski, 2016, p. 1). Yet, no treatments for relationship distress have been developed using CNM samples, nor has any empirically supported therapy model been applied to working with CNM and/or polyamorous relationships. Emotionally focused therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2019; Johnson & Greenberg, 1985a) is a uniquely well-suited treatment for working with polyamorous relationships due to the theoretical underpinnings of attachment and systems theories as well as the interventions that aim to increase intrapersonal and interpersonal emotional coherence and connection. This article discusses how EFT can be applied when working with polyamorous relationships. We examine the self of the therapist's work, describe each step and stage of EFT, and delineate the use of the metaprocess of the EFT Tango with polyamorous relationships. We begin with a brief review of EFT and CNM prior to synthesizing the current research on polyamory and attachment theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotionally focused therapy

EFT (Johnson, 2019; Johnson & Greenberg, 1985b) is an empirically supported treatment for relationship distress (Spengler et al., 2022). EFT posits distress results from iterative restrictive emotional responses which reinforce patterns of disconnection (Johnson, 2019). EFT shifts these patterns toward secure attachment by increasing emotional coherence and mutual empathy (Johnson, 2019).

Variations of consensual non-monogamy

CNM is an umbrella term for relationships in which all partners give explicit consent to engage in romantic, intimate, and/or sexual relationships with more than one person. CNM offers a framework to develop and sustain relationships that may be romantic, aromantic, sexual, non-sexual, and/or focused on structural needs (e.g., housing, finances). Variations of CNM relationships can include the following: (1) open or “monogamish” relationships (i.e., dyadic partner relationships that are sexually non-exclusive), (2) swinging (i.e., casual sexual interactions between multiple couples), (3) “relationship anarchy” (i.e., engaging in multiple equally prioritized relationships), and (4) polyamory (Hamilton et al., 2021).

A brief introduction to polyamory

Polyamory has been described as a personal identity (Klesse, 2006), a relationship structure (Easton & Hardy, 2017), and a relational orientation (Blumer et al., 2014). Polyamorous relationships (e.g., polycules) can involve sexual, emotional, spiritual, companionate, financial,

structural, and/or parenting relationships. While there are clinical considerations for each relationship structure, our intent is not to provide a comprehensive description. Rather, this article aims to provide an overview of polyamorous relationships in the context of EFT. We highly recommend the reader consult other literature (e.g., Easton & Hardy, 2017; Kauppi, 2022) for additional information.

There are various configurations of polyamorous relationships. For example, a Vee includes three individuals; one person is intimately connected with two people who are not romantically and/or sexually involved with each other. A triad is a relationship in which all three people involved are sexually and/or romantically involved with each other. A Z or an N is a common variant of a Vee: often two couples are connected when two individuals from those couples are also romantically and/or sexually involved. A quad, sandclock, or web is a group of four or more people who are somehow intimately connected. This structure may be open, allowing for engagement in other relationships, or closed (Hamilton et al., 2021; Kauppi, 2022).

This article specifically focuses on non-hierarchical multiamorous relationships. Relationship hierarchy describes how individuals functionally rank the importance of their intimate relationships and determines how people interact with others based on that ranking (Gahrman, 2017). For example, people in monogamous relationships often prioritize their romantic partner over friendships. Non-hierarchical relationships support equity, personal agency, and autonomy by allowing the needs of each partner to be considered and met based on the relationship agreements in place. These structures are built on trust and accountability and often require radical honesty. We chose to focus on this type of relationship configuration because it is the least commonly described and addressed in the literature and we aim to find a method to talk about EFT beyond a dyadic, monocentric understanding of romantic relationships.

Participation in polyamory varies across gender and sexual orientation (Levine et al., 2018). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) persons are more likely to engage in CNM relationships compared with their heterosexual counterparts (Levine et al., 2018). Specifically, bisexual individuals engage in significantly higher levels of CNM compared to both gay men and lesbians (Hauptert et al., 2017).

Very little research has been done exploring the motivations of people who choose CNM. Moors et al. (2021) report autonomy, beliefs and values, relationality, sexuality, growth, and pragmatism are all reasons people choose to have polyamorous relationships. Hnatkovicova and Bianchi (2022) support these findings, reporting that relational need fulfillment, personal growth and autonomy, identity development, expression of values, exploration of minoritized identities (e.g., bisexuality), community belonging, and the desire for sexual diversity all lead people to engage and remain in polyamorous relationships.

Polyamory and attachment theory

Attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988) describes the human survival mechanism of establishing affectional bonds with significant others, which influences emotional regulation and how people ask for and receive care and comfort in relationships (Johnson, 2019). Little research has been conducted describing the association between attachment and polyamory, and only one article (Katz & Katz, 2021) describes attachment through the lens of polyamory. What research has been performed generally concludes polyamorous individuals utilize secure attachment strategies more often than those in monogamous relationships (Moors et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2011; Kolmes & Witherspoon, 2017). Specifically, Morrison et al. (2011) found polyamorous individuals were more likely to display a secure attachment strategy compared to monogamous individuals (52% vs. 44%) and Kolmes and Witherspoon (2017) indicated all partners in their case study displayed secure attachment strategies.

However, the remaining literature exhibits mixed findings. Ka et al. (2020) reported individuals displaying an anxious attachment strategy engaged in polyamorous relationships for attention and affection. Indeed, Morrison et al. (2011) indicated that 20% of polyamorous participants in their study displayed an anxious attachment strategy compared with 13% of monogamous persons. On the other hand, Moors et al. (2015) found anxious attachment was not associated with either willingness to engage in polyamorous relationships or current or past practice of polyamory. Moors et al. (2015) and Moors et al. (2023) also found attachment avoidance was positively correlated with willingness to engage—but not actual engagement in—polyamorous relationships. Indeed, individuals in polyamorous relationships are less likely to display higher levels of avoidance compared to monogamous individuals (Moors et al., 2015, 2019; Morrison et al., 2011).

While the extant literature addressing polyamory and attachment is limited, it is important to note that the existing empirical evidence does not show polyamorous relationships stem from individuals with disorganized attachment strategies. This dispels a long-held myth that polyamory itself could be understood as a disorganized attachment strategy writ large. Similarly, the available evidence demonstrates polyamorous individuals utilize secure attachment strategies more often than individuals in monogamous relationships, thus elucidating that secure attachment characterizes polyamorous relationships.

EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY WITH CLIENTS IN A POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIP

EFT is a strong model for working with polyamorous relationships for several reasons. Primarily, EFT has a strong research base (Beasley & Ager, 2019; Spengler et al., 2022) and the dedication of EFT practitioners to conceptualizing multicultural work within the model (e.g., Allan et al., 2022; Guillory, 2021; Nightingale et al., 2019; Soleimani et al., 2015; Tseng, 2022) signifies the application of the model across contexts and cultures. In addition, the non-pathologizing nature of EFT, its roots in systems theory and attachment theory provide a secure base for treating polycules. The following paragraphs will elucidate our proposed conceptualization of EFT as applied to polyamory.

Self of the therapist work

EFT therapists working with polyamorous clients may encounter challenges when deconstructing hegemonic mononormativity (i.e., the inherent assumption that exclusive dyadic relationships are the preferred and only way to engage in romantic relationships). Despite evidence that a person can have multiple attachment relationships (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Overall et al., 2003), attachment theory has traditionally been interpreted as dyadic (Katz & Katz, 2021). It is important EFT therapists are aware of their thoughts and feelings regarding extra-dyadic attachment relationships and increase their knowledge of attachment theory as a process independent of monogamy, as this will impact the therapeutic relationship, safety, and the therapist's ability to address their client's relational concerns. It is essential that therapists practice within their competency and are aware of when their personal biases, past experiences with non-monogamy, and/or lack of experience indicate they should recuse themselves from working with polyamorous relationships.

We recommend therapists self-reflect on their biases related to their internal narratives about non-monogamy. This self-reflection may include concepts related to emotional and sexual intimacy, singularity and plurality, internalized cultural messaging about monogamy and non-monogamy, and learning about various forms of CNM, as well as the therapist's internal

responses to each. Specifically, supervision with a therapist familiar with and affirming of CNM is an excellent method to enhance skills, provide support, and work through biases. In addition, therapists may benefit from immersive experiences such as attending a meet-up, support group, convention, or gathering space centering education and awareness of CNM individuals and relationships. For example, a therapist who finds themselves struggling with the polysexuality of swingers may find it beneficial to attend a sexual attitudes reassessment (SAR), i.e., a professional development experiential process that facilitates the examination of sexual attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices as well as seek supervision.

In addition to supervision and engaging in CNM positive professional development opportunities, therapists could access various books and media to increase their knowledge, comfort, and competence when working with polyamorous relationships. For example, the show *You, Me, Her* and the movie *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* positively portray polyamorous relationships. Books such as *Sex at Dawn*, *The Ethical Slut*, and *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (and their clients)* are helpful resources. Finally, podcasts such as *Multiamory* and *Life on the Swingset* may also be helpful for increasing familiarity with CNM.

Navigating jealousy in polyamorous relationships presents a unique challenge. It is important for EFT therapists to explore their own experiences and beliefs about jealousy in intimate relationships. Jealousy in polyamory is seen as an expression of underlying emotions such as fears of abandonment, rejection, inadequacy, threat, or loneliness (Easton & Hardy, 2017). EFT therapists working with polyamorous relationships should view jealousy like any secondary emotion, despite that jealousy is often avoided in monogamous relationships (Davidson, 2002). For example, in EFT emotions such as anger and guilt are often seen as secondary (Johnson, 2019). These emotions block access to deeper, primary emotions such as fear, and sadness (Johnson, 2019). EFT therapists working with jealousy should explore the relationship of jealousy to attachment emotions and needs similar to how they would explore anger and guilt.

Expanding regulation options

A central goal of EFT is to increase co-regulation between romantic partners (i.e., the ability to regulate distressing emotions and behaviors with the help of safe, soothing, and connected others; Johnson, 2019). When describing emotionally focused individual therapy (EFIT) Johnson (2019) describes the use of an imagined other (i.e., an internalized experience) as a source of comfort during times of distress. From an attachment framework, this can be an excellent way to help members of polycules soothe when they are not physically able to contact their partners. For example, when partner A is on a date with partner C, partner B can regulate by imagining telling partner A about their distress and accessing a felt sense of comfort.

Furthermore, polyamorous relationships open doors to accessing a variety of ways to regulate, rather than focusing *solely* on co-regulation between romantic partners. Other emotion-focused therapies (e.g., Greenberg & Goldman, 2008) provide methods to expand each individual's ability to regulate when in emotional distress. Drawing from these theories, it is important to view self-regulation as key to health and well-being as well as to expand each individual's options for multiple types of regulation. Therefore, resourcing individuals outside of dyadic relationships becomes necessary. For example, being with friends while a partner is on a date provides an opportunity for co-regulation outside of the romantic dyad, meditation supports self-regulation, and consistent check-ins provide a way for all partners to co-regulate.

There are a wide variety of therapeutic tools and models used to expand options for regulation, including EFIT, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR); Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), behavior therapy (BT), cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), mindfulness, and meditation. All of these can be

important interventions the EFT therapist can integrate to help polycules expand their options for regulating distressing emotions. Integration may occur at various stages, including as a separate intervention at the start of therapy, a therapeutic intervention at the beginning of a session, or during step two of the Tango.

When integrating self-regulation in session, the therapist should ensure that all partners participate. For example, a therapist may help one member of the polycule (partner A) practice accessing their internalized experience and felt sense of one of their partners (partner B). Then, the therapist should process with partner A the experience of accessing this felt sense before expanding to an enactment with the entire polycule. The therapist may ask partner A to share their experience as well as ask the other members of the polycule about their experience of observing partner A regulate using their internalized experiences. The therapist should focus on validating and consolidating attachment themes between all partners to support both self and co-regulation.

Stage one: De-escalation and stabilization

Assessment

Broadly, assessment in EFT involves an exploration of cycles of closeness and distance, relationship strengths, agendas and goals for therapy, conducting an attachment and sexual health history, and an appraisal of how intimate partner violence, substance use, or extra-dyadic attachments play a role in the relationship's negative cycle(s). The process of assessment focuses on practical ways in which relationships become stuck in conflict and distance, try to solve relationship problems, and how emotion is regulated. Assessment sessions typically involve one conjoint session followed by two individual sessions (Johnson, 2019). When working with a polycule, the same screening rules for engaging in EFT apply (e.g., current and severe intimate partner violence is a contraindication).

When working with polyamorous relationships, it is important for the therapist to spend time thinking about who they are working with from both an assessment and alliance perspective. Specifically, assessment with polyamorous relationships involves elucidating who the therapist is working with and part of working with polyamorous relationships is understanding the range of ways to 'do' CNM. There are clinical considerations for joining with each type of polyamorous relationship. For example, if the presenting problem involves communication about shared space, it may be worthwhile to include all nesting partners (i.e., all partners that live together). While we cannot offer a linear decision-making model for who to include in therapy, in line with Kauppi (2022), we recommend all partners with decision-making power be included. Therapists may need to adjust the structure of sessions depending on how the polycule arranges their relationship and which relational subsystems need to be addressed based on their interactional dynamics and relational history.

Therapists should ask about relationship agreements. Specifically, it is important to assess the presence of agreements rather than rules. Agreements are based on secure or the desire for secure attachments. Rules, on the other hand, are often attempts to exert power or control (intentionally or unintentionally) over one or more partners in the polycule. Assessment may include exploratory open-ended questions such as "how did you come to that decision?", "how does that decision impact your relationship(s)?", and "do you engage in poly fidelity/closed polyamory or do you each explore and build your own relationships as individuals?". Other questions may include "how would you describe the structure of your relationship?"; "do you have children with any of your partners?," and "do you share finances with any of your partners?". While we cannot include an exhaustive list of questions, several authors (e.g., LaSala, 2001; Kauppi, 2022) provide polycule-friendly assessment questions. For EFT-specific

assessment questions, Johnson (2019) outlines the questions EFT therapists ask to assess attachment and relational dynamics.

Polyamorous relationships cannot rely on the assumptions inherent in monogamy. It is necessary for therapists to specifically ask what and how the client negotiated emotional, spiritual, sexual, romantic, and social connections. This information empowers the therapist to know when and how to intervene relationally. The therapist should discern to what degree the relationship's challenges are due to the stressors of polyamory compared with issues common to romantic relationships generally (Finn et al., 2012) and should include ongoing discussions of how sociocultural and sociopolitical factors impact the relationship.

The EFT therapist also should assess if the client members have sufficient emotional regulatory capacity and relational safety for the therapist to conduct attachment histories and sexual health histories conjointly. Johnson (2019) recommends attachment histories are conducted separately. While we agree this is a useful practice, it may be impractical with multiple members of a polyamorous relationship due to time, perceived urgency of the presenting problem, and financial constraints, among others. Provided each member consents, there is sufficient safety in the relationship, and each member can effectively experience, express, and adaptively use emotion (Eisenberg et al., 2000), conducting attachment histories and sexual health histories conjointly may expand understanding for each member's relational experiences and behaviors. We strongly emphasize consent, as each member of the polycule has the right to decide what they want to be shared and when with every other member.

We, of course, recommend the EFT therapist working with polyamorous relationships flexibly assess for physical, emotional, psychological, and financial safety within the relationship separately. This may occur in individual sessions if desired and affordable. It may occur in partial sessions with the therapist spending minimal and sufficient time asking about safety. For example, a therapist working with a triad may meet with each member for 20 min of a 60-min session to assess for safety.

Finally, we recommend asking specifically about infidelity using the client's words. Johnson (2019) specifically uses the phrase “competing attachments” (p. 133) when describing the assessment process. We challenge EFT therapists to shift their understanding of a ‘competing attachment’ from any extra-dyadic attachments to any relationship that falls outside the agreed upon arrangements made by the polycule. We encourage EFT therapists working with polyamorous relationships to embrace multiple attachments and assess specifically for *breaches of trust* in the client's past and present relationships.

Step one: Assessment and alliance building

Previous research on alliance in EFT indicates task alliance (i.e., the methods used to achieve the collaborative goals the client and therapist have created are germane and efficacious) has the greatest impact on therapeutic outcomes (Johnson & Talitman, 1997). Creating and maintaining therapeutic alliance in couple/relationship and family therapy is particularly challenging as alliance is preserved not only across time but also with multiple individuals (Sprenkle & Blow, 2004). Therefore, alliance formation with polyamorous relationships should draw on the principle of multidirectional partiality (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1974) by understanding, empathizing, and validating the various, and potentially conflicting, perspectives of each partner. Therapists should also actively engage all members, maintain consistent attention to the alliance throughout the duration of therapy, and emphasize joining behaviors. Joining behaviors include using the client's language, conveying respect to each member of the polycule, instilling hope, reframing, and providing support (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). When working with polyamorous relationships, it is essential to use the client's language. While we have offered some general definitions of polyamory in this article, each of these terms and definitions is as

unique as the relationship that uses them. This indicates therapists need to ask specifically about terminology and their idiographic meanings.

An essential part of stage one is the creation of safety. EFT's emphasis on validation, relentless empathy, and the use of client words are strengths when working with polyamorous relationships and creating safety (Johnson, 2019). Safety in EFT is associated with vulnerable emotional risk-taking between partners (Johnson, 2019) as well as throughout the entire therapeutic system (Friedlander et al., 2006). When the therapist is aware of when the negative interaction cycle occurs and can create new experiences in the therapy room, therapy itself becomes a secure base for emotional risk-taking and new levels of engagement (Welch et al., 2019). Safety can be more challenging to create with polyamorous relationships, as there are multiple adults with different levels of emotional engagement in each relational subsystem. Therefore, the creation of safety becomes paramount. EFT therapists working with polycules should move slowly and be responsive, engaged, and attuned to how their interventions impact each member. Each intervention focuses on the consent of all parties. Empathic reflections, validation, and normalization are essential skills that will need to be used slowly and tentatively to ensure acceptance by the entire polycule.

Furthermore, EFT therapists should ensure they are aware of when and how negative cycles occur within the polycule, as interrupting these cycles is key to developing safety (Welch et al., 2019). The EFT therapist should ensure that the structure of the poly relationship is continually validated; it is essential that the therapist believes and then assures the relationship that the solution to the presenting problem is not to become monogamous. For example, when working with a triadic relationship, an EFT therapist may say: "I think I get it. When you end up in this cycle with your *partners*, you feel dejected, sad, and alone. In these moments, all you want to do is find your way back to them, but you just do not know how."

EFT assessment also generally involves analyzing the function attachment behaviors to classify partners as 'pursuers' or 'withdrawers.' This assessment is conducted to understand attachment strategies and to determine the course of treatment (e.g., withdrawer re-engagement occurs prior to pursuer softening). Generally, pursuers have been described as having an anxious attachment strategy (Johnson, 2019), and attempting to meet their relational needs by 'hyperactivating' their need for closeness through demands for care and/or rumination on perceived rejection and/or abandonment). Withdrawers, on the other hand, are often described as utilizing an avoidant attachment strategy (Johnson, 2019), and suppress their attachment needs and emotions through distancing and defensive behaviors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2023).

When working with polycules, it is possible to encounter a variety of relational cycles, including withdraw/pursue, withdraw/withdraw, or pursue/pursue due to both the complexity of the relational system and that attachment strategies are both context- and relationship-dependent (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Overall et al., 2003). For example, partner A may generally utilize an anxious attachment in relationships and does so with partner B. With partner C, however, partner A uses a secure attachment strategy due to the level of attunement, engagement, and responsiveness between them. Partner C, while securely attached to A, displays a more anxious strategy with B. Partner B, also anxious, utilizes an anxious attachment strategy with A. Therefore, when classifying dyadic cycle patterns, A and B's cycle may be classified as pursue/pursue, A and C may or may not display a negative interaction cycle and B and C may also be classified as pursue/pursue, unless one displays more emotional suppression and avoidance than the other.

Step two: Identification of the negative interaction cycle(s)

When working with polyamorous relationships, therapists need to understand each partner's positions within the relationship cycles, secondary and primary emotions, how sociocultural

factors impact the cycles, and how each dyadic cycle may trigger larger cycles within the various relationships and/or overall relationship structure. The EFT therapist working with polycules will need to repeat each intervention multiple times. This may occur between and across dyads, triads, and quads. The therapist would focus on helping all members distill and disclose their attachment emotions to one, two, and/or multiple partners.

The therapist may also find themselves working with various subsystems within the larger polycule. There are several possible reasons this may occur. The polycule may conceptualize their relationship as made up of primary and/or secondary relationships. If this is the case, a certain subsystem of the relationship may request and/or need more focused attention by the therapist than other subsystems. It is possible that one subsystem improves either earlier on or more dramatically than other subsystems. This may indicate the therapist needs to spend more time working with certain members of the relationship to benefit the polyamorous structure. Systems therapists are frequently used to working with different subsystems of families to accomplish different goals such as creating a deeper connection between a certain relationship or providing another subsystem the opportunity to problem solve.

Furthermore, EFT therapists may spend more time initially focusing on behavior. There are also several reasons for this occurrence. First, it is more common in attachment-based family therapies (i.e., emotionally focused family therapy and attachment-based family therapy) to spend more time focusing on behavior compared to couple therapy. Second, with multiple cycles occurring in the room simultaneously the therapist may need to spend more time tracking secondary emotions as they relate to client action tendencies prior to deepening to primary emotion and attachment needs. Third, it is essential for the EFT de-escalation process that each client take ownership of their action tendencies (Johnson, 2019). With multiple members in the room, it may simply take more time to process these action tendencies.

Step three: Accessing underlying attachment emotions

Step three of EFT involves a deepening and distillation of previously unacknowledged attachment emotions (Johnson, 2019). When working with any relationship, this involves understanding how gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other marginalized identities impact engagement with emotional experiencing. Furthermore, ongoing experiences of prejudice and/or needing to hide engagement in multiple relationships may continuously challenge both internal working models of self and other. Therefore, EFT therapists should focus on how attachment needs are met in the context of ongoing challenges to the polyamorous relationship. As EFT therapists are starting to engage in more intense attachment themes for each partner, which further reveals patterns of relational engagement and disengagement, it is important these patterns are noted and attended to in Stage Two of EFT.

Furthermore, when working with hierarchical polyamorous relationships, we recommend against the concept of ‘veto power,’ (i.e., a practice which attempts to attain security by allowing certain partners to have the option of forbidding other partners from engaging in certain events, sexual activities, and/or relationships) as this often is a false sense of power imposed by a partner to address insecurities such as anxiety, jealousy, envy, and unexplored heteropatriarchal views of sex and intimacy. The use of such power shifts the context of non-monogamy away from consent, which requires the individual agency and autonomy of all partners, toward a power imbalance that can negatively impact the health of relational subsystems. EFT therapists can assist those involved in therapy to explore the primary and secondary emotions that may be driving the desire to implement ‘veto power’ and help the relationship shift toward agreements based on security and trust, thus honoring the autonomy and agency of all partners.

Step four: Reframing the problem as the cycle, attachment emotions, and unmet attachment needs

The goal of stage one of EFT is cycle de-escalation and stabilization (Johnson, 2019). When working with polyamorous relationships, the process of stabilization will appear similar. An understanding and externalization of negative interaction patterns allows the polycule to frame the negative relationship dynamics as the common enemy and accessing primary emotions enables more vulnerable communication, increasing empathy and acceptance.

Finn et al. (2012) recommend externalizing mononormativity through affirmation of engagement in polyamory. By helping polycules separate themselves from the often internalized belief that monogamy is the preferred—and potentially only—way to engage in relationships, the therapist aids the client in separating the problems imposed on the polycule by hegemonic mononormativity. EFT therapists are often skilled at reframing negative interaction patterns as extra-dyadic cycles rather than intrapersonal problems. Working with polyamorous relationships often requires additional emphasis on externalization to destigmatize the relational complexity that may occur.

Reframing likely involves increased attributions of problems to the challenges of navigating internalized hegemonic mononormativity as well as new ways of relating that can bring excitement and joy. For example, EFT therapists may experience extra-dyadic connections as joyful discoveries rather than the relational and existential threat assumed in monogamy. New partners may engender complexity, which requires the EFT therapist to openly explore how a myriad of emotions, including fear and excitement, enter the polycule's cycle.

Stage two: Restructuring

As with stage one work, stage two work involves a move from an intrapersonal experience to an interpersonal experience (Johnson, 2019). Although some interaction patterns within polyamorous relationships are likely to be dyadic, it is important that the EFT therapist helps the client move from an intrapersonal experience to a relational experience involving all attachment relationships within the polycule. For example, when one member of a polycule shares their attachment fears, the therapist can expand these fears to include all partners. The therapist may also help each member learn how to soothe each other's attachment fears.

It is possible that one member of a polycule may feel outside or less integrated into the relationship. Depending on the relationship, this may be comfortable and/or intentional. However, for relationships in which all partners desire to be fully integrated (i.e., all members are attachment figures) additional therapeutic attention is necessary. Therefore, a goal of stage two may be to reintegrate all partners into the relationship. Partners on the inside are helped to become aware of the outside partner's fears and needs. The therapist works with the inside partners to become a safe haven for these needs and/or a safe place to self-regulate, thereby allowing the previously outside partner to be reincorporated into the relationship.

Step five: Accessing of disowned emotions, need, and parts of self

It is common for partners in stage two to disclose feelings of unworthiness or feeling unlovable. For individuals in polyamorous relationships, these attachment narratives may be related to their polyamorous and/or other identities such as race, sexual orientation, gender, and ability status, among others. It is therefore incumbent on the EFT therapist to be aware of how these identities impact each member of the relationship's attachment fears and longings. Attachment narratives may also be related to systemic messages based on mononormativity. Common

messages of “unworthiness” or “feeling unlovable” may be exacerbated by needing to hide their relationship structure from family members, social groups, and employers—resulting in internalized messages of shame and rejection that show up within the relationship(s). Therapist support enables the deconstruction of these messages and builds resilience and self-agency separate from societal expectations based on monogamy.

Step six: Promoting acceptance of Partner's experience and creating new interaction patterns

Step six is characterized by the acceptance and responsiveness toward new levels of intrapersonal and interpersonal coherence (Johnson, 2019). All partners are helped by the therapist to become more emotionally responsive, accessible, and engaged in every other partner's experience of attachment fears and needs. The EFT therapist helps each partner recognize and respond to the deep attachment longings and fears across the poly group so that any one partner can see and respond to fears and bids for connection.

It is likely that step six will also involve focusing on accepting one's identity as polyamorous. Other papers (e.g., Allan & Johnson, 2017; Nightingale et al., 2019) have discussed the importance of accepting and integrating a marginalized identity as part of stage two. As polyamory can be considered both a relational identity (Blumer et al., 2014) and a relationship structure (Easton & Hardy, 2017), the level of acceptance of this aspect of identity may be more important in some relationships than in others.

Step seven: Facilitating expression of attachment needs and wants

The therapist helps each member of the polycule ask for comfort and support from a place of vulnerability as well as aids the other members to meet these needs. As individuals within the polycule may display different attachment strategies in each dyad, triad, and quad, steps five through seven may need to be repeated with each individual or various configurations of the polycule, to fully re-engage more withdrawn members of the relationship and soften more pursuing or anxious partners. EFT therapists may also need to continue to destigmatize meeting relational needs in a myriad of ways and a variety of relationships.

Stage three: Integration and consolidation

Stage three involves the celebration of progress and the shift to dealing with pragmatic problems (Johnson, 2019). Therapy is characterized by discussions that are no longer fully overwhelmed by attachment threats (Johnson, 2019). Rather, the polycule can rely on attachment security when creatively problem-solving and navigating pragmatic concerns. The discussion of practical struggles may take the form of navigating discrimination and prejudice within a monogamist society. The EFT therapist focuses on helping partners access their ability to seek closeness during distress and consolidates the secure base the relationships provide against external discrimination. People in polyamorous relationships may encounter additional practical problems. For example, a parenting polycule may need more time to solidify parenting structures because of the additional complexity of navigating multiple parenting styles. As such, the EFT therapist may need to spend more time working through these pragmatic issues and provide additional poly-friendly resources.

Stage three work with polyamorous relationships may also involve a restructuring of relationship dynamics and agreements. This could be a change in relationship configuration and/

or a change in structural, social, emotional, or sexual agreements within the polycule. For example, a shift in relationship structure could involve a previously open quad becoming a closed quad or a previous open V becoming a closed triad. This point should not be taken to mean that polyamorous relationships cannot succeed. We would challenge EFT therapists to remain open, flexible, and empathically attuned to their clients's needs, including the need to shift relational dynamics and relational structure.

The EFT Tango

The EFT Tango is ubiquitous across the steps and stages of EFT. Therefore, we chose to specifically address the use of the Tango with polyamorous relationships. There are five iterative 'moves' of the Tango. First, the therapist reflects present process, focusing on emotions and attachment experiences. Second, the therapist begins 'affect assembly'. Affect assembly involves distilling five distinct components that form an emotional experience: trigger or cue, immediate appraisal, bodily response, meaning-making, and action tendency. Once an emotion has been distilled, the therapist then choreographs an enactment. The Tango concludes with the therapist helping each partner to integrate their expanded options of interacting with their partners. When working with polycules, the enactment may need to be dyadic, triadic, or quadratic, depending on the relationship's dynamics and structure.

The sequencing of enactments will also be important. For example, a therapist may work through moves one through three of the Tango with one person. However, when it comes to moving four, another member of the relationship may be more emotionally activated, and the Tango may need to begin again prior to the therapist working to process the enactment and validate new relationship patterns. It is important to attend to the 'hottest' emotion in the room, while simultaneously being aware of how this pattern may draw some partners in and isolate others. In this case, the therapist needs to explicitly draw attention to these patterns as a method to integrate all partners. Due to the complex nature of the enactment, we recommend the EFT therapists spend additional time integrating and validating the changing dynamics of the relational system. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal changes and new ways of relating should be emphasized to celebrate the transforming relationship dynamics.

We also recommend that the EFT therapists be transparent about the therapeutic process with all members of the polycule. Therapists should clearly explain the process and how each partners' opportunity to witness the sequencing of the enactments is of benefit both to themselves as an individual and to the success of the polycule's shared therapeutic goals. The opportunity for one or more of the partners to witness and notice their own experience as the therapist works with other members provides space for the non-engaged partner(s) to track and notice their own internal experience. It is beneficial to explain and explore this way of working early on, as a means to attend to partners who may already be impacted by the more complex dynamics within the relationship and therapeutic process.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several conceptual articles written about working with polyamorous clients (Bettinger, 2005; Davidson, 2002; Finn et al., 2012; Girard & Brownlee, 2015; Timm, 2018; Trexler, 2021; Weitzman, 2006; Zimmerman, 2012). However, minimal research has been conducted about therapists working with polyamorous clients and no research has been done expanding any couple therapy models to polyamorous clients. We have offered a way of reconceptualizing and expanding EFT when working with polyamorous relationships. Considering the developing statistics related to polyamory (e.g., Hauptert et al., 2017; Moors et al., 2021), we recommend

further research to explore the expansion of previously dyadic models to encompass polyamorous relationships.

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