Polyamorous Jealousy: Group Differences in Jealousy and Mate Retention Behaviors between Polyamorous and Monogamous Relationships

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between jealousy and mate retention behaviors in the context of polyamorous and monogamous relationships. Seventy-nine individuals completed an online survey measuring relationship style, jealousy (emotional and cognitive), and mate retention behaviors (intersexual direct guarding, intersexual negative inducements, intersexual positive inducements, intrasexual public signals of possession, and intrasexual negative inducements). For direct guarding and intersexual negative inducements, emotional jealousy mediated the relationship between relationship styles and mate retention behaviors. It was also found that the polyamorous sample engaged in more public signals than the monogamous sample, independent of jealousy. This study expands on the limited body of research on people in polyamorous relationships, as well as expanding on the relationship between jealousy and mate retention behaviors.
Polyamorous Jealousy: Group Differences in Jealousy and Mate Retention Behaviors between Polyamorous and Monogamous Relationships

Jealousy has been a topic of interest for researchers for many years, primarily in the context of monogamous couples. Much research has been done exploring sex differences in jealousy (Edlund & Sagarin, 2017), and differences in jealousy by sexual orientation (Sheets & Wolfe, 2001), but the differences in jealousy between monogamous and polyamorous relationships have only recently begun being investigated.

Polyamory is often defined as “ethical non-monogamy”, an arrangement where people in a romantic relationship openly engage in multiple sexual or romantic relationships with the full knowledge and approval of everyone involved (Klesse, 2011). A polyamorous relationship’s primary goal is not to allow for excessive sex, but rather to allow for the formation of more emotionally intimate relationships. According to Morrison, Beaulieu, Brockman, and Beaglaoich (2013), self-identified polyamorous people differ from a control population primarily in two ways. Polyamorous men and women experienced more intimacy in their relationships compared to monogamous men and women, and polyamorous people had higher levels of sociosexuality (or interest in sexual activity outside the context of a committed relationship).

Polyamorous relationships can exist in a variety of different forms: a primary dyadic relationship with one or more secondary relationships, a closed quad relationship, where members are romantically involved with all others and outside romantic relationships are not welcomed, a relationship network, where all relationships sit equal to all others, but not everyone in the network has relationships with everyone else, as well as many other relationship configurations (Barker, 2005). These relationship structures are negotiated based on the current
participants’ needs and desires, through effortful and continuous communication (Wosick-Correa, 2010).

The study of polyamory can expand understanding of current psychological constructs by providing a foil to relationships that are assumed to be the norm. By providing a foil to conventional monogamous relationships, polyamorous relationships can highlight different aspects of current models and expand understanding of how those models function. Previous research has studied jealousy and mate retention behaviors, as well as the relationship between the two. Additionally, previous research has studied the relationship between polyamory and mate retention behaviors, as well as polyamory and jealousy. This study aims to establish a model for the relationship between polyamory, jealousy, and mate retention behaviors, with jealousy as a mediator in the relationship between polyamory or monogamy, and mate retention behaviors.

**Jealousy**

Jealousy in romantic relationships is most often measured through responses to real or imagined infidelity. Because polyamorous relationships are so varied and are dependent on individual preferences and needs, each relationship is intentionally negotiated and structured throughout the course of the relationship. This continuous emphasis on communication allows for renegotiation of the relationship terms as circumstances change. Wosick-Correa (2010) proposes the idea of agentic fidelity, the idea that people in polyamorous relationships express loyalty through self-knowledge and a personalized commitment to behaviors or boundaries based on each relationship. Because of this, although people in polyamorous relationships are not always entirely truthful or honest with their partners, breaches in the terms of a relationship are
conceptualized as rules violations rather than cheating and do not necessarily threaten the core of
the relationship the same way that infidelity in a monogamous relationship would. Bringle and
Buunk (1986) found that people’s responses to infidelity that seriously threatens their
relationship are the strongest in terms of jealousy and physiological response. This suggests that
people in polyamorous relationships would be less likely to feel jealousy, or to feel it less
intensely, since their partner(s) having other sexual or romantic relationships is a deliberate part
of their relationship model. Additionally, even when rules violations happen, they are less
threatening to the relationship since renegotiation of rules is a common practice throughout
polyamorous relationships, and therefore are less likely to elicit very strong emotional or
physiological reactions.

In Pfeiffer and Wong (1989), jealousy is broken up into three dimensions, cognitive,
emotional, and behavioral. Cognitive jealousy encompasses the thoughts, suspicions, and worries
associated with jealousy. Upset feelings and physiological arousal are included in the dimension
of emotional jealousy. Behavioral jealousy consists of manifestations of the other two
dimensions, behaviors that are intended to detect infidelity or deter it. Rydell and Bringle (2007)
propose an alternative model that only includes two dimensions of jealousy, reactive and
suspicious jealousy; reactive jealousy encompassing the responses to situations of real, imagined,
or threatened infidelity, and suspicious jealousy encompassing trait dimensions like personal
history and insecurities. In their paper, Rydell and Bringle found that reactive jealousy correlated
highly with emotional jealousy, as conceptualized in Pfeiffer and Wong, and suspicious jealousy
correlated highly with cognitive jealousy.

**Mate Retention Behaviors**
Buss (1988) argued that mate guarding seen in animals was a concept that could be applied to the mating practices of humans. He laid the framework for the study of human mate retention behaviors by creating a measure that outlined 19 retention tactics organized into two main categories: intersexual manipulations and intrasexual manipulations. Furthermore, these categories were each subsequently broken down so intersexual manipulations included direct guarding, positive inducements, and negative inducements, while intrasexual manipulations included public signals of possession, and negative inducements. The use of mate retention behaviors is often driven by jealousy, or the threat of infidelity (Buss & Shackelford, 1997).

Mogilsky, Memering, Welling and Shackelford (2017) investigated the relationship between polyamorous relationships and mate retention behaviors. Research found that participants in monogamous relationships exhibited more mate retention behaviors across all dimensions, and in positive inducements in particular. Based on data gathered from relationship satisfaction, jealousy, and mate retention behaviors, Mogilsky et al. suggested that communication between polyamorous partners about their sexual and/or emotional relationships with others may be a form of mate retention behavior exclusive to polyamorous relationships, as well as a helpful behavior for partners to process jealousy. This study drew from websites marketed toward polyamorous people for its samples of polyamorous and monogamous individuals, limiting the differences between groups. However, people likely to frequent websites for polyamorous individuals do not necessarily make up a representative sample of monogamous participants. The present study addresses this limitation by drawing samples from separate sources.

The Current Study
This study aims to explore the relationship between jealousy and mate retention behaviors in polyamorous versus monogamous relationships (see Figure 1). Due to similarities in the behavioral dimension of jealousy and mate retention behaviors, behavioral jealousy is not included in the model. Based on previous research, it is anticipated that people in polyamorous relationships will experience less jealousy than those in monogamous relationships, leading to fewer mate retention behaviors. However, the relationship may be more complex, since jealousy can be split into cognitive and emotional dimensions, and mate retention behaviors have five different categories.

**Method**

**Participants**

Seventy-nine participants were recruited from established polyamorous networks on Facebook and undergraduate psychology students at Northern Illinois University. The average participant age was 26, with a range from 19 to 56. 69% of the sample was female, 23% was male, and 8% of the sample was trans (this category includes both binary and non-binary trans participants). 72% of respondents were Caucasian, 13% were Latinx or Hispanic, 6% were Black or African American, 1% was Asian, and 6% were biracial. 62% of respondents identified as heterosexual, 32% of respondents identified bisexual or pansexual, 1% of respondents identified as gay or lesbian, and 4% identified as other.

In order to qualify for the study, participants had to either be in a current committed romantic relationship, or have been in one previously. To differentiate between monogamous and polyamorous relationships, participants were asked whether they were involved romantically and/or sexually with more than one partner during this relationship. Additionally, participants
were asked whether all partners were aware of the involvement and/or whether all partners had given their approval for this relationship structure.

44 participants who hadn’t been emotionally or sexually involved with more than one person during this relationship were coded as monogamous. 26 participants who had been either emotionally or sexually involved with someone besides their partner while everyone in the relationship were aware and gave approval were coded as polyamorous. A third coding for non-polyamorous non-monogamy was created to account for participants who were sexually or emotionally involved with more than one person during their relationship and kept it a secret. 8 participants were coded in this category. 4 participants indicated they were involved with more than one person during their relationship, that everyone knew, and that not everyone had given their approval. These 4 cases were coded based on rater judgement using the short descriptions every participant gave of their relationship, 1 was coded as polyamorous and 3 were coded as non-polyamorous non-monogamous. 1 case was dropped because of insufficient data for coding.

Participants who selected that they have been in a relationship with more than one person were instructed to think of their primary partner, if they have one, otherwise they were encouraged to pick the partner they’ve been with the longest, or, if none of those apply, to simply choose one consistent partner and think of them for all the subsequent questions (see Appendix).

Measures

**Couples Satisfaction Index.** This 16-item scale was developed after investigation of the relationship satisfaction measures widely available for research purposes (Funk & Rogge, 2007). Cronbach’s alpha for the measure was \( \alpha = .98 \). The main item prompted “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship,” and it was rated from 0
(Extremely Unhappy) to 5 (Extremely Happy). Subsequent items in the measure rated responses on from 0-5 using 0 (All the time) to 5 (Never), 0 (Not at all) to 5 (Completely), and 0 (Not at all True) to 5 (Completely True).

**Multidimensional Jealousy Scale.** This 24-item scale was developed by Pfeiffer and Wong (1989). It measures jealousy on three axes: cognitive, behavioral, and emotional. Seventeen of the original 24 items were included, as subsequent investigation provided evidence for a valid short form of the same measure (Elphinston, Feeney, & Noller, 2011). Items were altered for the present study to allow for non-heterosexual relationships (i.e., “someone of the opposite sex” was replaced with “someone else”, or “someone my partner might be attracted to” when further clarification was necessary). The behavioral dimension of questions was dropped because behavioral aspects of jealousy were already addressed with the measure for mate retention behaviors, resulting in a total of 12 items from the MJS.

In the cognitive dimension of the measure, participants were asked how often they had the following thoughts, and responses were rated on a 7 point bipolar scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (All the time). The wording in the items was adjusted to make secrecy more salient for non-monogamous relationships (i.e., “I suspect that they are currently seeing someone else” was changed to “I suspect that they are currently seeing someone else behind my back”). Cronbach’s alpha for cognitive jealousy was $\alpha = .77$. For the emotional dimension, participants were asked how they would react to the following situations, and responses were rated on a 7-point bipolar scale ranging from 1 (Very pleased) to 7 (Very upset). Cronbach’s alpha for emotional jealousy was $\alpha = .81$. 
**Mate Retention Inventory.** The short form used in this study included 38 items that examine 19 different mate retention tactics, with two items per tactic (Buss, Shackelford, McKibbin, 2008). The items are summed to generate a total mate retention score ($\alpha = .77$). Each item is a behavior, and participants rate how often they performed the behavior in the past year on a scale from 1 (*Never*) to 4 (*Often*). Participants who indicated no current relationship were instructed to think of their most recent relationship, and indicate how frequently they performed the behavior in a span of one year.

**Results**

**Group Differences**

Because the sample size for the non-polyamorous non-monogamous group was so small, it was not included in analyses. Scores for jealousy had a range of 1 to 7, and there was a statistically significant group difference in overall jealousy scores. For the dimension of emotional jealousy, the polyamorous sample displayed statistically significant lower rating of emotional jealousy relative to the monogamous sample, but cognitive jealousy had no significant difference based on relationship type. (See Table 1.)

Scores for Mate Retention had a range of 1 to 4. No statistically significant difference in overall mate retention behaviors was found, however analysis of individual dimensions of mate retention behaviors provided more detailed results. For intersexual behaviors, there was a statistically significant difference between the polyamorous and monogamous samples for direct guarding, with the polyamorous sample displaying less direct guarding behaviors than the monogamous sample. No statistically significant difference was found for negative inducements or positive inducements. For intrasexual behaviors, the polyamorous sample displayed more
public signals than the monogamous sample, but there was no statistically significant difference for negative inducements. (See Table 1).

**Hypothesis Testing**

I hypothesized that polyamorous individuals would report lower levels of mate retention behaviors compared to monogamous individuals and that this difference would be mediated by lower levels of jealousy. This mediation model was testing using Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three step regression approach with Hayes’s (2017) bootstrap method of testing the indirect effect. Table 2 displays the results of these analyses with the third column displaying the regression coefficient for relationship style predicting jealousy, the fourth column displaying the partial regression coefficient for jealousy predicting mate retention behaviors (holding relationship style constant), the fifth column displaying the partial regression coefficient for relationship style predicting mate retention behaviors (holding jealousy constant), and the sixth column displaying the indirect effect of relationship style on mate retention behaviors mediated by jealousy (the significance of the total effect of relationship style on mate retention behaviors can be determined from the comparisons in Table 1).

For overall jealousy and overall mate retention behaviors, the predicted pattern of mediation emerged: the effect of relationship style on mate retention behaviors was fully mediated by jealousy. When additional mediation models were tested using the separate components of jealousy and mate retention behaviors, the mediation model was supported for emotional jealousy mediating the effect of relationship style on direct guarding and intersexual negative inducements. The mediational model was not supported for emotional jealousy mediating the effect of relationship style on positive inducements (for which polyamorous
individuals did not differ significantly from monogamous individuals) or public signals (for which polyamorous individuals reported significantly higher levels than did monogamous individuals). Likewise, the mediational model was not supported for cognitive jealousy (for which polyamorous individuals do not differ significantly from monogamous individuals). (See Table 2.)

Discussion

The hypothesis for this study was that overall, relationship style (polyamorous versus monogamous) would predict mate retention behaviors, mediated by differences in jealousy. Overall, this effect was supported, however a more detailed analysis revealed that only a few dimensions of the variables accounted for the overall effect. Scores of cognitive jealousy weren’t significantly different between polyamorous and monogamous participants, but scores for emotional jealousy were, meaning the overall relationship was driven entirely by differences in emotional jealousy. One possible explanation for the lack of group differences on the cognitive jealousy scale is simply that polyamorous individuals exhibit the same fears and insecurities that drive emotional jealousy, but their emotional response is less, because of innate differences, a different approach for managing jealous thoughts, or some combination thereof.

Additionally, only two dimensions of mate retention behaviors fit the mediation model, direct guarding and negative inducements. This can be partially explained due to the lack of significantly different responses between the two samples on the positive inducements and the intrasexual negative inducements categories of mate retention behaviors. Interestingly, the polyamorous sample rated higher on public signals than the monogamous sample by a significant amount, but it was independent of jealousy. This merits further exploration in future studies, but
one potential explanation is that public signals are used by polyamorous people to reassure partners that their relationships are important as a tactic for managing jealousy.

One major limitation of this study was the sample size. With only 26 respondents coded as polyamorous, and 78 respondents total, there could be doubt cast on its generalizability. Additionally, since the monogamous sample came primarily from psychology students enrolled in Northern Illinois University, they’re likely not the ideal reference population. In both cases, the reach of survey distribution limited the scope of the study.

Another limitation was in the coding of participants as either polyamorous, monogamous, or neither. The wording for one of the questions asked whether all partners had given their “approval” for how the relationship was being conducted, but approval is an ambiguous term. Future studies should consider using the term “consent” instead, as that is much less ambiguous and directly relevant to whether a relationship is consensually non-monogamous, as polyamory is often defined.
References


Appendix

Survey Questions for Present Relationship

Introduction

In order to qualify for this survey, you must be 18 years or older. You must also be in a current committed relationship or have been in one at some point in the past.

1. What is your current relationship status?
2. Have you previously been in a committed romantic relationship?
   a. Yes  b. No
3. About how long have you been in your current relationship? (In days, months, and years)
4. Have you engaged in sexual activity with more than one person since this relationship started?
   a. Yes  b. No
5. Have you engaged in romantic activity with more than one person since this relationship started?
   a. Yes  b. No
6. Have all of your partners been aware of the others?
   a. Yes  b. No
7. Have all of your partners given approval for how you are conducting your relationship?
   a. Yes  b. No
8. Do you identify as polyamorous or as part of the polyamorous community?
   a. Yes  b. No
9. Please briefly describe your relationship (for example, engaged and living together, married and living separately, closed triad living separately, etc.).

For the rest of this survey, you will be asked questions focusing on a single partner. If you have a primary partner, please think of them for all future questions. If you don’t have a primary partner, please think of the partner you have been with the longest. If neither of these...
apply, simply pick a partner and think of them consistently when answering all following questions.

**Couples Satisfaction Index**

1. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.
   
   a. 6-point scale, ranging from Extremely Unhappy to Extremely Happy

2. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?
   
   a. 6-point scale, ranging from All the Time to Never

3. How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?
   
   a. 6-point scale ranging from Not at All to Completely

4. How well does your partner meet your needs?
   
   a. 6-point scale ranging from Not at All to Completely

5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
   
   a. 6-point scale ranging from Not at All to Completely

6. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
   
   a. 6-point scale ranging from Not at All to Completely

7. How true are the following statements (6-point scale ranging from Not at All True to Completely True):
   
   a. Our relationship is strong.

   b. My relationship makes me happy.

   c. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner(s).

   d. I really feel like part of a team with my partner(s).

**Mate Retention Behaviors**
Think of your current relationship and indicate the choice which best reflects how frequently you performed the act within the past one year. (4-point scale, ranging from Never to Often)

1. Called to make sure my partner was where they said they’d be
2. Did not take my partner to a party where they could meet other potential partners
3. Insisted that my partner spend all their free time with me
4. Talked to another potential partner at a party to make my partner jealous
5. Became angry when my partner flirted too much
6. Pleased that I could not live without my partner
7. Told my partner that we needed a total commitment to each other
8. Pointed out to my partner the flaws of another potential partner of theirs
9. Bought my partner an expensive gift
10. Performed sexual favors to keep my partner around
11. Made myself “extra attractive” for my partner
12. Complimented my partner on their appearance
13. Gave in to my partner’s every wish
14. Told my friends how much my partner and I were in love
15. Put my arm around my partner in front of others
16. Asked my partner to wear my ring
17. Told other potential mates for my partner that my partner was a pain
18. Stared coldly at someone who was looking at my partner
19. Got my friends to beat up someone who was interested in my partner
20. Snooped through my partner’s personal belongings
21. Took my partner away from a gathering where they might meet other partners
22. Spent all my free time with my partner so they could not meet anyone else
23. Showed romantic or sexual interest in someone else to make my partner angry
24. Threatened to break up if my partner ever cheated on me
25. Told my partner I was dependent on them
26. Asked my partner to marry me
27. Told my partner that someone they could have interest in was stupid
28. Took my partner out to a nice restaurant
29. Had a physical relationship with my partner to deepen our bond
30. Made sure that I looked nice for my partner
31. Displayed greater affection for my partner
32. Went along with everything my partner said
33. Bragged about my partner to other people they could date
34. Held my partner’s hand when other people were around
35. Gave my partner jewelry to signify they were taken
36. Told other people my partner could date that my partner was not a nice person
37. Gave someone a dirty look when they looked at my partner
38. Slapped someone who made a pass at my partner

**Multidimensional Jealousy Scale**

**Cognitive Jealousy.** How often do you have the following thoughts about your partner? (7-point scale ranging from Never to All the Time)

1. I suspect that they are currently seeing someone else without telling me.
2. I suspect that they might be attracted to someone else.
3. I suspect that they might be physically intimate with someone else behind my back.

4. I think they are secretly developing an intimate relationship with someone else.

5. I think they are crazy about people they could be attracted to.

**Emotional Jealousy.** How would you emotionally react to the following situations? (7-point scale ranging from Very Pleased to Very Upset)

1. Your partner comments to you about how great looking another person is.

2. Your partner shows a great deal of interest or excitement when talking to someone they could be attracted to

3. Someone your partner could be attracted to is trying to get close to them all the time

4. Your partner is flirting with someone else

5. Your partner is dating someone else

6. Your partner hugs and kisses someone they could be attracted to

7. Your partner works very closely with someone they could be attracted to

Note: This version is for participants in a current committed relationship. Participants who are considering a past relationship are given the same survey with the questions in past tense.
Tables and Figures

![Conceptual model for interaction between relationship style, jealousy, and mate retention behaviors.](image)

*Figure 1.* Conceptual model for interaction between relationship style, jealousy, and mate retention behaviors.

**Table 1**

*Mean Group Differences*

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Polyamorous</th>
<th></th>
<th>Monogamous</th>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>Overall Mate Retention</td>
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### Table 2

**Regression Analyses**

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<th>Jealousy (J)</th>
<th>Mate Retention Behaviors (MRB)</th>
<th>Relationship Type (RT) $\rightarrow$ J</th>
<th>J $\rightarrow$ MRB (holding RT constant)</th>
<th>RT $\rightarrow$ MRB (holding J constant)</th>
<th>RT + J $\rightarrow$ MRB (the indirect effect of RT on MRB via J)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>-1.47*</td>
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<td>0.08</td>
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<td>0.07*</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.18*</td>
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<td>Negative Inducements</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
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<td>0.19*</td>
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Note: sample sizes varied by conditions due to incomplete responses.