"It's someone who means a lot to me, and who means even more to mom": Children's views on the romantic partners of their polyamorous parents

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Abstract

Polyamory is a relationship style that allows individuals to develop multiple romantic relationships simultaneously. Although studies show that many polyamorous people have children, very little is known about the experiences of children growing up in such a family context. Based on 18 semi-structured interviews with Canadian children living with polyamorous parents, we examined the level of emotional closeness they felt towards their parents' romantic partners, and what these adults meant to them. We found that these children generally appreciated their parents' partners. These adults were seen by our participants as someone who contributed positively to their lives. More specifically, the participating children —especially pre-teens and younger children— described their parents' romantic partners as adults: 1) to have fun with, 2) who contributed to their material well-being, 3) who took care of them, and 4) who, through their own children, contributed to expanding their circle of friends. Finally, some children — mainly teenagers and pre-teens— talked about these adults primarily as people who contributed positively to their parents' lives. Overall, this study makes an important contribution to the literature on family diversity.

Résumé

Le polyamour est un mode relationnel qui permet aux personnes impliquées de développer plusieurs relations amoureuses simultanément. Quoique des études

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montrent que bon nombre de personnes polyamoureuses ont de enfants, on en sait très peu sur le vécu des enfants qui grandissent dans un tel contexte familial. À partir de 18 entrevues semi-dirigées menées auprès d'enfants de parents polyamoureux canadiens, nous examinons le niveau de proximité affective qu'ils ressentent à l'égard des partenaires amoureux de leurs parents et ce que ces adultes représentent pour eux. Nous constatons que les enfants interviewés apprécient généralement les partenaires de leurs parents. Ces derniers sont considérés par ces enfants comme des personnes ressources qui contribuent de façon positive à leur vie. Plus précisément, les participants —particulièrement les préadolescent·e·s et les jeunes enfants — décrivent les partenaires amoureux de leurs parents comme des adultes: 1) avec qui avoir du plaisir, 2) qui contribuent matériellement à leur bien-être, 3) qui prennent soin d'eux, et 4) qui, grâce à leurs propres enfants, contribuent à élargir le cercle d'ami·e·s. Enfin, quelques enfants —principalement les adolescent·e·s et préadolescent·e·s— parlent de ces adultes avant tout comme des personnes qui contribuent de façon positive à la vie de leurs parents. Au final, cette étude contribue de façon significative à la littérature sur la diversité familiale.

Introduction

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) is an umbrella concept that encompasses all forms of intimate relationships in which partners allow themselves, in a transparent and mutually consensual way, to have sexual experiences and/or romantic connections beyond the confines of the traditional dyadic couple. Recent studies show that around one in five people in Canada as well as in the United States have had a CNM relationship in their lifetime (Fairbrother et al., 2019; Haupert et al., 2017). Among those who practice CNM, many have children (Alarie et al., 2021; Battams, 2018; Boyd, 2017; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2014). The literature on families with CNM-practicing parents is still scarce, despite the fact that the need for knowledge regarding the realities of these families was raised as early as the 1970s (Rubin, 2004). Most of the qualitative studies on CNM and the family focus on the parents' perspective (Alarie, 2024; Alarie et al., 2021; Arseneau et al., 2019; Boyd, 2017; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020; Sheff, 2010). While a few studies were conducted with children growing up in such a family context (Goldfeder & Sheff, 2013; Sheff, 2014), we still know very little about these children's experiences and perspectives regarding their parents' non-conventional relationship style. We begin to fill this knowledge gap with a qualitative study conducted with 18 Canadian children living with polyamorous parents. In this article, we explore the emotional closeness felt by these

children towards their parents' romantic partners, and what these adults represent for them.

Consensual non-monogamy and the family

CNM includes different relationship styles, such as swinging, open relationships, and polyamory. Swinging is a term generally used by couples who enjoy exchanging partners with another couple for sexual purposes (Conley et al., 2018; Matsick et al., 2014), whereas open relationship describes couples where partners allow each other to have sexual experiences outside of their relationship, usually independently from one another (Conley & Moors, 2014; Matsick et al., 2014). It both cases, developing romantic feelings for other people outside of the couple is usually not part of the agreement. Polyamory, on the other hand, allows individuals to develop several romantic relationships simultaneously (Klesse, 2006; Sheff, 2014). Some people practicing polyamory have a "primary partner" and "secondary partners," while others prefer non-hierarchical relationship structures (Sheff, 2014; Weitzman, 2006). Polyamorous individuals often use the term polycule to refer to the people they are sexually or romantically linked to; similar to constellation, a polycule describes the network of people who are connected together through their polyamorous relationships (Sheff, 2014).

Research on family in the context of CNM shows that there can be various family configurations as well as different types of living arrangements (Alarie, 2024; Alarie et al., 2021; Boyd, 2017; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006; Sheff, 2014). In their respective studies on CNM-practicing parents, Alarie (2024) and Sheff (2014) noted that while most of the participating parents lived with their children in a one-or-two-parent household, some CNM-practicing parents lived with their children and two (or more) romantic partners under the same roof. Studies show that polyamorous parents often conceive of family membership beyond legal or biogenetic kinship, and identify loved ones who are loving, reliable and trustworthy as part of their family. These chosen families can include non-cohabiting intimate partners, their partners' partners (i.e., metamours) and close friends, in addition to legally recognized family members (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020).

While many CNM-practicing parents are openly out to their children and invite their non-cohabiting romantic partners to get involved in family activities, others prefer keeping their extra-dyadic intimate life separate from family life and have not explicitly informed their children (Alarie et al., 2021; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Schadler, 2024). Indeed, rejecting the traditional dyadic intimate relationship model does not automatically translate into wanting to create a multi-parent family. Many reasons can explain CNM-practicing parents' decision not to inform their children of their relationship style, such as wanting to avoid stigmatization, worrying about the potential legal complications for their family if their involvement in CNM was to be known, being unsure as to whether CNM is the right fit for them or whether they see themselves practicing CNM forever, or perceiving children as unable to understand issues related to sexuality and intimate relationships (Alarie et al., 2021).

Some studies examined parents' perceived benefits and challenges of combining CNM and family (Alarie, 2024; Arseneau et al., 2019; Boyd, 2017; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010;

Schadler, 2024; Sheff, 2010, 2014). By involving their romantic partners in their family life, these parents believe they are providing additional parent or attachment figures for their children, allowing them to benefit overall from more love and attention (Alarie, 2024; Alarie et al., 2021; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). According to CNM-practicing parents, exposing their children to CNM teaches them to develop healthy, positive and respectful interpersonal relationships based on honest communication and transparency (Alarie et al., 2021; Sheff, 2014; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Many parents also perceive their relationship style as providing their children with a relationship and family model that is centered around committed effort and stability (Sheff, 2014; Veaux & Rickert, 2014), and as encouraging their children to be open-minded and accepting of differences (Alarie, 2024). Finally, having extra-dyadic romantic and/or sexual experiences is commonly depicted by CNM-practicing parents as allowing them to take time for themselves and recharge their batteries, which they perceive as beneficial for their mental health and as contributing to increased relationship satisfaction (Alarie, 2024).

However, these same parents also point to certain challenges associated with CNM, such as the lack of legal recognition and social acceptance of CNM relationships and multi-parent families (Alarie, 2024; Alarie & Bosom, 2022; Arseneau et al., 2019; Sheff, 2014; Pallotta-Chiaroli, 2010). In particular, many CNM-practicing parents worry about whether their relationship style could be considered reasonable grounds for having custody of their children taken away from them (Alarie, 2024; Alarie et al., 2021; Sheff, 2014). Many CNM-practicing parents report feeling pressure to exhibit a perfect family life as a way to ward off prejudice (Alarie et al., 2021; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2010). This is particularly true for LGBTQ + parents who have to face mononormative expectations of the family, but also heteronormative ones. As we have shown elsewhere (Alarie, 2024), many LGBTQ + parents involved in multi-partner relationships believe that the legalization of same-sex marriage has not entirely erased heteronormative conceptions of appropriate families in their country, and many of them choose to pretend to be monogamous outside of queer spaces in order to shield their families from additional scrutiny. Lastly, some CNM-practicing parents report worrying that their children could be bullied by their peers, or that their children could be negatively emotionally impacted if they were to break up with one of their partners (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2010, 2014).

Very few studies address the perspective of children growing up in a CNM context. According to ethnographic studies conducted by Sheff (2010; 2014) over a 15-year period and with 22 American children aged 0–17 growing up with polyamorous parents, the presence of more than two adults in the family environment provides several advantages for the children, such as getting more attention, care and time from significant adults, receiving more gifts at special events and being exposed to a greater number of positive role models to draw inspiration from. It also allows them to create family ties with other children beyond biogenetic kinship and have more siblings (Sheff, 2014). However, in cases where parents and their romantic partners lived under the same roof, some children—especially teenagers—complain of loss of privacy in the home, jealousy between children in the household and having to adapt to different parenting styles (Sheff, 2014). Some children also feel at risk of

stigmatization because of their parents' relationship style and may feel resentful towards their parents (Sheff, 2014).

The present study

While there are no official statistics confirming how many families comprise of polyamorous parents, we do know that there are many families like this (Battams, 2018; Boyd, 2017; Sheff, 2014). Because of the stigma attached to CNM as well as the lack of legal recognition and protection for multi-partner unions and multi-parent families (Alarie, 2024; Arseneau et al., 2019; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2010), the experiences of children growing up with polyamorous parents are likely to be different from children living in similar but more socially accepted family structures with multiple caregivers/ parental figures, such as stepfamilies or multigenerational households. Studying the experiences of children growing up with polyamorous parents is crucial to understand the reality of different types of families, and to create programs and social policies that serve the diverse needs of such families. Based on interviews with Canadian children of polyamorous parents, this qualitative study explores how children growing up with CNM-practicing parents perceive the different adults and children orbiting in their family universe. Precisely, we seek in this paper to answer the following research questions: 1) How close do these children feel towards their parents' romantic partners? and 2) What do these adults mean to them?

Methods

Participants

The eligibility criteria used to select participants were: (a) being between the ages of 5 and 17 inclusively; (b) having one or both parents identifying as polyamorous and being currently involved in two (or more) romantic relationships; (c) knowing at least one of their parents' romantic partners; (d) residing in the province of Quebec (Canada); and (e) being fluent in French or English. Children who met these criteria were invited to participate in the study. We chose to limit participation to children aged five years old or older because it is more difficult to get clear and elaborate answers from younger children. Following approval by the Research Ethics Board of the Institut National de la Recherche Scientifique (INRS), recruitment began through polyamorous parents who participated in a previous study on parenting experiences in the context of CNM (see Alarie, 2024; Alarie & Bosom, 2022; Alarie et al., 2021). Only parents whose children met this study's inclusion criteria were contacted. Five of those parents—who came from different households—agreed to have their children participate in the research project. To broaden the sample, a recruitment ad was posted on the Facebook pages of a number of discussion groups dedicated to polyamory as well as on the Facebook page of the principal investigator (first author).

Polyamorous parents who showed an interest in our study first received a document describing the research project, alongside a child-friendly version of the document to be

read together with their child. Parents were instructed to assess their child's interest in participating in the study after having read the child-friendly document with them, and not to put pressure on their child if she or he was hesitant. For children aged 13 and under, written consent was first obtained from the parents. The child's desire to participate in the study was then confirmed orally directly with him or her using tools developed in our previous research with children (Côté et al., 2018). In all cases, the child's disinterest or refusal to participate took precedence over parental consent. For children aged 14 and over, written consent was obtained directly from them.

Before scheduling the interview, parents were asked to fill out one pre-interview questionnaire per household, which contained sociodemographic questions regarding each parent and cohabiting romantic partners, as well as a question regarding the name of non-cohabiting romantic partners and other people in the child's family universe. Considering that the coming out process differs significantly between different poly-amorous parents and that some polyamorous parents prefer to avoid labeling themselves and their romantic partners as such (Alarie et al., 2021), the questionnaire also included open-ended questions regarding what kind of information about polyamory they had told their children and what words we should use during the interview to describe their relationship style. The information provided in the pre-interview questionnaire allowed us to have a good understanding of the children's family structure and of their parents' polycule, and to know the parents' wishes regarding the kind of information we could share or not with their children.

Since previous studies on polyamorous families suggest that teenagers differ from younger children with regards to the benefits and challenges they associate with growing up in a polyamorous household (Sheff, 2014), we aimed to recruit children of different ages in our study sample. We stopped recruiting additional polyamorous families once we reached saturation, meaning that new information was no longer forthcoming in the data collection process (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Roy, 2015). The final sample includes 18 participants aged between 5 and 16, including 3 boys and 15 girls living in 10 different households. More specifically, eight participants were aged between 5 and 7, six children were aged between 8 and 11, and four children were aged between 12 and 16.

In the majority of cases (7 out of 10 households), the participants lived with their parents and siblings (if any), while their parents' romantic partners lived elsewhere. Only three children in the sample cohabited with one or both of their parents' romantic partners. None of the children in the study had grown up since birth in a multi-parent family, with more than two parents responsible for them. Romantic partners had been in the children's lives for an average of two years (minimum 4 months and maximum 5 years). In some households, there was only one romantic partner in the child's life, whereas in other households there were two or three. A total of 42 romantic partners were reported, for the whole sample. Nine of the ten households represented in the sample included at least one adult who identified as LGBTQ+, and only one out of ten households comprised of at least one adult who identified as a person of color.

Data collection

This study relies on a methodological procedure tested and used by the project's co-investigator (third author) to examine the perspective of children growing up in non-normative families (Côté et al., 2019; Côté, Gross, et al., 2020). This procedure is based on the child-centered approach (Côté et al., 2020; Tisdall et al., 2008), which considers that children possess a particular creativity that enables them to think about complex family relationships in singular ways and differently from adults (Chatham-Carpenter, 2012; Côté et al., 2018; Tasker & Granville, 2011). In line with this approach, the participants in the present study are seen as social actors capable of reflexivity and of participating in the construction of knowledge that concerns them (Christensen & James, 2017; Lavoie, Côté, & Trottier-Cyr, 2020).

Interviews were conducted in 2020 through Zoom video calls by the principal investigator or the research assistant (second author) in French or English, according to the participants' preference. To enable children to speak freely, parents were not allowed to attend the interview and were informed that their children's words would remain confidential, unless they revealed something that would compromise their safety or development. Two tools were used during the interview: (1) a three-field map—inspired by Samuelsson et al. (1996)'s five-field map—which has been used extensively in studies of family diversity (see Brannen et al., 2000; Côté et al., 2019; Côté, Gross, et al., 2020; Roe et al., 2006; Sturgess et al., 2001) and (2) narrative accounts (Dubeau et al., 2008). Together, these tools allow us to understand children's mental representations of the family. The three-field map was divided, like a pie, into three relationship categories: "My family," "My friends" and "Other people." The child was represented in the center, like a bullseye, and three circles representing different degrees of emotional closeness (i.e., "I like him/her a lot," "I like him/her" or "I like him/her a little") radiated outward around him/her (see Figure 1).

An interview protocol with a pre-established list of questions was used to elicit narrative accounts. First, the children were invited to freely identify people they considered to be important in their lives and to situate them on the three-field map displayed on the screen. They were then asked to explain who these people were and why they positioned them on the map as they did. Following the children's spontaneous evocation of people in their lives, we proceeded to a second level of questioning that involved asking them who was invited to their last birthday party or, if their birthday was coming up soon, who they wished to invite to their birthday party; this allowed them to potentially identify people not mentioned in the previous stage. Then, if the children still had not mentioned their parents' romantic partners (and the partners' children, if any), they were asked: "Mom (or Dad) told me about X (first name of the romantic partner or his/her child). Who is this person for you?" After receiving the explanation, we asked the child if he or she wished to add the person to their map.

Once the three-field map was completed, we asked a few additional open-ended questions allowing participants to elaborate on how they understood family ties, such as: "Imagine that an alien just landed on Earth. He doesn't know anything about how humans live and he wants you to explain what certain words mean. What would you say to explain
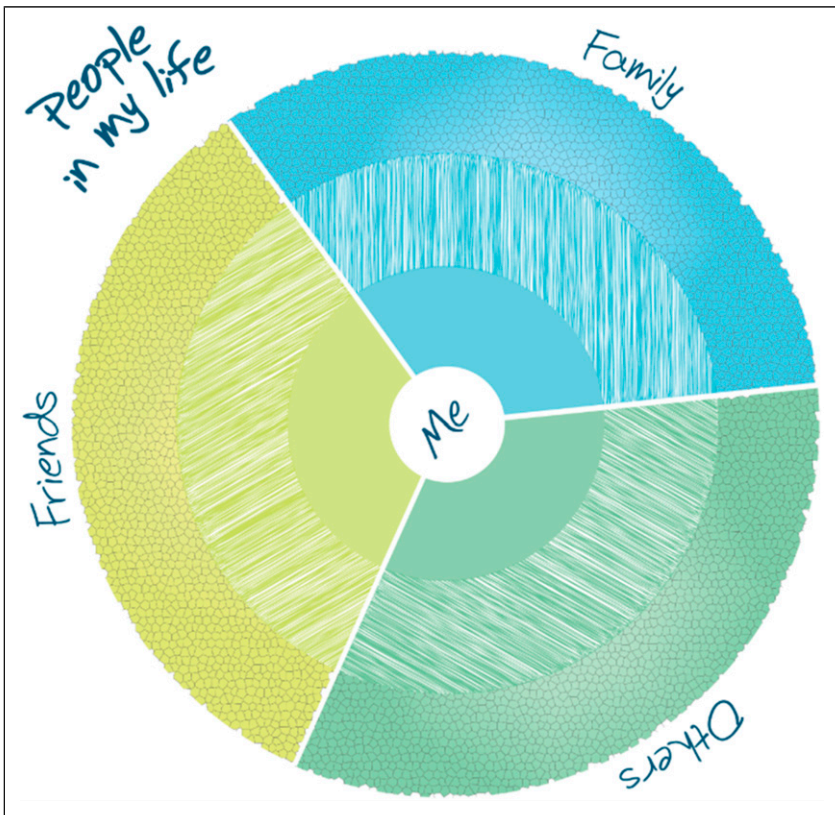
Figure 1. Three-field map.

the word 'family'? The word 'mother/father'?", and "Do you have any friends who have a family like yours? What is the same/different from your family?". And if the parents had previously given us consent in the pre-interview questionnaire, we asked: "You told me (OR your parents told me) that your mom/dad was polyamorous. Can you tell me more about it?". The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes and were recorded. The children received a gift in the mail to thank them for sharing their experiential knowledge with members of the research team.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed in full. We began the data analysis process by reviewing each participant's discourse in relation to their three-field map, in order to understand how they perceived the different adults and children orbiting in their family universe. Then, we compared the participants' three-field maps, examining where the children placed their parents' romantic partners (and their children, if any) on the map in terms of emotional

closeness. Inspired by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, we analyzed the reasons offered by the participating children for placing their parents' romantic partners (and their children, if any) in the different sections of the map representing levels of emotional closeness, and categorized the children's explanations into various themes. The first round of coding was done by the research assistant. Then, as a team, the three of us reread the excerpts associated with the different themes, verified the relevance of codes and themes, generating new ones and merging/subdividing others (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012). This process allowed us to ensure coding agreement between members of the research team and to finalize the coding tree (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Lastly, in order to explore whether children at different developmental stage have different experiences, we divided our sample into three age groups — teenagers (i.e., 12–16 years old), pre-teens (i.e., 8–11 years old) and younger children (i.e., 5–7 years old) — and looked for age-related patterns, both in terms of where romantic partners were placed on the map, and how they were described by the participating children.

Below, we provide an overview of how romantic partners were placed on the children's three-field maps, followed by the children's explanations regarding what these adults meant to them. We conclude the section with a brief commentary on how mono-normativity affected some of the children's ability to explain how their parents' romantic partners fit in their family universe. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and any other information that could identify a child or his/her parents has been changed to protect confidentiality. All participants' quotes were translated to English, if they were originally in French.

Positionality statement

Our research team comprised of scholars who varied in terms of age, sexual orientation, relationship style, family context, academic status, and previous personal and research experience with children or polyamorous individuals. The principal investigator is a White female professor and mother, who openly identifies as polyamorous and queer, and who has extensive research experience with polyamorous parents. Second author is a childfree mixed race female doctoral student in her twenties who identifies as monogamous and heterosexual. Third author is a White female professor and mother who is in a monogamous relationship and identifies as heterosexual, and who has research experience with children and non-traditional families where more than two adults coexist in the children's family universe. The diversity within our team allowed us to incorporate a range of viewpoints as we developed the data collection material and conducted the analysis, thus providing richness to our analysis and conclusions and reducing potential biases (Cornish & al., 2014; Hall & al., 2005).

Results

We found that the participating children generally appreciate their parents' romantic partners. These adults were seen by the participants as resource people who make a positive contribution to their lives. More specifically, the children —especially pre-teens

and younger children— described their parents' romantic partners as adults: 1) to have fun with, 2) who contribute materially to their well-being, 3) who take care of them, and 4) who, insofar as they have children, contribute to widening their circle of friends. Finally, some children — mainly teenagers and pre-teens— spoke of these adults above all as people who make a positive contribution to their parents' lives, by making them happy.

Adults appreciated by children

The three-field maps and interviews showed that children generally appreciate their parents' romantic partners, regardless of the relationship category ("my family," "my friends" or "other people") in which they placed the adult in question, or the moment during the interview when he or she was mentioned. Two-thirds (12/18) of the children placed one of their parents' romantic partners in the "I like a lot" circle, while half (9/18) placed them in the "I like" circle. Only a few (4/18) children opted for the "I like a little" circle for at least one of their parent's partners, and a few (4/18) chose not to include a romantic partner on their map. As previously mentioned, most participating children mentioned more than one romantic partners in their lives. Children who reported several romantic partners did not always place them in the same relationship category or in the same emotional closeness circle.

There were age-related patterns in how children rated their level of emotional closeness to their parents' romantic partners, based on how they placed those adults on their three-field map. That said, given the small sample size, the findings from this type of cross-analysis should be interpreted with caution. We found that younger children (i.e., 5–7 years old) and pre-teens (i.e., 8–11 years old) were more likely than teenagers (i.e., 12–16 years old) to place their parents' romantic partners in the "I like a lot" circle. Conversely, teenagers were more likely to place their parents' romantic partners in the "I like a little" circle or to feel no particular closeness (i.e., off their map) compared to younger children and pre-teens.

In addition to age-related patterns, we found that the frequency with which children saw their parents' romantic partners could influence the emotional bond children had with them. Indeed, children who said they saw their parents' romantic partners often were more likely to feel strongly attached to them and to consider them important in their lives. For instance, Ayden, aged 9, said he felt closer to his parents' romantic partners, whom he sees on a daily basis, than to other significant adults, whom he sees more sporadically. He explained: "The more I see them, the more I get attached to them." Similarly, children who lived with one (or two) of their parents' romantic partners all reported "liking them" or "liking them a lot"; none of them placed their parents' cohabiting romantic partners in the "I like a little" circle or outside of their three-field map.

No children in this study expressed animosity towards their parents' romantic partners or mentioned conflictual interpersonal dynamics with these adults. That said, one participant, Laura, reported that she was dismayed at first when her mother came out as polyamorous, and felt apprehensive about the way her mother's new relationship style would impact her life. While she eventually came to terms with her mother's polyamorous

lifestyle, the 16-year-old girl explained that her mother newfound interest for multipartner relationships initially created tensions between to two of them. She explained her reaction:

> At first, it did affect me. I was like, 'What is this sh*tshow?!' [I wondered]: How is it gonna affect my life? I was hurt... But then I realized, it wouldn't change a thing to throw fits at my mom, that she wouldn't change her mind […] Growing up, we've been told that you can only love one person, that you have children with that one person… and now, what. So it was quite a choc. […] Us children, we need time to adapt, to prepare ourselves [for this new reality]"

In order to ensure healthy family dynamics and facilitate the introduction of new romantic partners in the family, a few children — mainly older participants— mentioned it was important for polyamorous parents to be selective with regards to which partners they wished to introduce to their children, and to respect their children's pace when planning to include new partners in family activities. These participants reported appreciating the fact that their own parents had been respectful of their needs and boundaries, which prevented them from feeling discomfort or resentment towards their parents' romantic partners. For instance, elaborating on how she felt about her mother having several romantic partners, Zoey, 13 years old, stated: "[When she came out] my mom told my sisters and I that she wouldn't invite them home, unless it was to officially present them to us. Like she wouldn't introduce us to someone she went on a date twice. And that reassured me. Because meeting new people, all of the time, at a certain point, it becomes, like, overwhelming."

Someone to have fun with

When explaining why they liked their parents' romantic partners, children often indicated that their parents' romantic partners were fun, that they entertained them and made them laugh. For example, when asked why she was so fond of her father's girlfriend, Emma, a 6-year-old girl, pointed to her jovial and entertaining personality as well as the fact that they spent a lot of time together: "She's funny. She's fun. She's at our place a lot." This theme was also common among older participants, such as Ines, a 14-year-old girl. Explaining why she considered her mother's boyfriend as someone she "likes a lot", she stated: "I've known him for a year. And he is fun! I love spending time with him."

Some of the younger children reported that they had created a bond with their parents' romantic partners through play. Diego, a 9-year-old boy who lived with his polyamorous mother and one of her romantic partners, described his mother's cohabiting partner as someone to have fun with on a daily basis: "To me, he's kind of like a cool person who lives with us and who I like. [...] We often play video games together, on TV, which is like right there [points to TV]. I like to sit on the sofa next to him and watch him play." Conversely, children who said they played little or not at all with their parents' romantic partners were less enthusiastic about them.

Many participating children explained that their parents' romantic partners taught them new interesting things or shared a hobby with them, which they appreciated. For example, 9-year-old Ayden said he was able to create a special bond with one of his mother's

romantic partners, because he introduced him to a new hobby, which he now enjoyed doing with him: "One of the things that's cool about him is that he's the one who showed me how to do magic." Some children pointed to the romantic partner's gender or age as a factor influencing the level of emotional closeness they felt towards that person, explaining that it influences the likelihood of them having shared interests or hobbies. For instance, 12-year-old Margo felt closer to her mother's girlfriend than to her mother's boyfriend. According to her, the fact that her mother's girlfriend was younger than her mother's boyfriend, and the fact that she was of the same gender as her meant that the two of them quickly found things in common. This facilitated the creation of a strong emotional bond with her mother's girlfriend: "Well, first of all, she's a girl, so we get on better and I'm happier talking to her. She's a bit younger, so we get on better. We have the same taste in music."

An adult who contributes to my material well-being

Some pre-teens and younger children also reported appreciating the presence of their parents' romantic partners in their lives because those adults gave them access to various material resources. For example, 5-year-old Jade said she appreciated one of her mother's romantic partners in part because she could take advantage of the various facilities in their backyard when she would visit: "In the back, [they] have a huge pool, that's ready for swimming. And they have a big hot tub that's up and running. Plus, at the bottom of the water, there are colors! [excited tone]" Romantic partners were described by the children as contributing to their material comfort, by buying them things or sharing their possessions with them. For instance, Justin, age 5, mentioned liking his father's romantic partner because she offered him flowers and gifts occasionally. As for Joelle, age 6, she explained her affection for her father's girlfriend, who had recently moved in with them, in part by saying that she enjoyed having full-time access to the girlfriend's dog now. No teenagers brought up that theme when explaining how they felt towards their parents' romantic partners.

An adult who supports and cares for me

Many of the children reported appreciating that their parents' romantic partners are there for them, providing care and support. These adults were described by the participants as actively looking after them on a daily basis, and as confidants or as people they can count on in times of need. This is true of 9-year-old Celia, who saw her father's non-cohabiting partner as a friend she could confide in: "She's a friend—not the closest—but still a friend. We get on very well together and talk to each other." Similarly, Ines, aged 14, reported that while she appreciated both of her parent's partners, she felt closer to her mother's boyfriend than to her father's girlfriend. She explained that it was easier for her to confide in her mother's boyfriend, as she felt he understood her better: "Well, I think we're a bit alike … like … in character. [We have] an easy time understanding each other." Margo, 12 years old, explained that when she was going through something difficult and needed to confide in someone, she usually talked to her mother's girlfriend, who is a good listener:

"[When I'm sad] I go to Clara [my mom's girlfriend], because when I talk to her, she doesn't interrupt me… unlike my mom".

An adult to bring me friends my own age

Of the 13 children who had been in contact with the children of their parents' romantic partners, 10 talked about them during their interview. Many said they enjoyed playing with the children of their parents' romantic partners or considered them an integral part of their lives. For example, when asked how they wanted to celebrate their birthdays, several children in this study said they wanted to invite their parents' romantic partners and their children. Clemence, a 7-year-old girl, enthusiastically described the birthday party she attended for the daughter of her mother's non-cohabiting partner: "When she turned three, we went to celebrate her birthday in a big park. There were lots of games, it was so much fun!" While some participants seemed indifferent towards the children of their parents' romantic partners, none of them reported conflicts with these children.

An adult first and foremost for my parents

For a minority of participants — mostly teenagers and pre-teens— romantic partners were described as being a positive contribution primarily to their parents' lives. Indeed, compared to younger children, older participants were more likely to describe their own lives as being distinct from their parents' lives, which explained, according to them, why they had not developed a particularly significant relationship with their parents' romantic partners. However, this did not translate into negative feelings towards those adults. As 14-year-old Ines explained, although she did not consider her mother' non-cohabiting romantic partner and his wife to be part of her family, she did "like them a lot." She reported considering inviting them to important family events because of their special place in the lives of her mother and her younger sisters: "I think I'd like to invite him [romantic partner] and his wife, because even though they're not necessarily part of *my* [emphasis] family, they're part of my mom' and my sisters' family. I think my sisters see them as family."

In a similar vein, Samia, aged 10, expressed not feeling close to her mother's romantic partner even though she appreciates the love he has for her mother: "Since he lives in another city, we [my brother and I] hardly ever see him. So for me, he's in my life, but not very much. At the same time, he's my mother's boyfriend, so he's part of my life. [...] He's nice to me and he's nice to my mom. So I like that a lot." Some children considered their parents' romantic partners to be there more or less exclusively for their parents, which allowed them to justify their low level of emotional closeness to them. This was the case for Laura, aged 16, who did feel any particular emotional closeness with her mother's non-cohabiting partner, a man her mother had been dating for three years: "Well, for me, I think of him as my mother's boyfriend ... I'm not that close to him, but I don't hate him either ..."

A note on mononormativity and children's ability to describe their reality

As the data collection progressed, we noticed that many children struggled with finding the right words to explain their perceptions of family ties and how different people in their parents' polycule fit into their lives. When describing the people in their own family universe, some children borrowed words commonly used by those living in stepfamilies, such as "stepdad" and "stepmom", which allowed them to explain their family structure in a way that is comprehensible for non-polyamorous people. Some other children, however, found themselves uncomfortable with using words that had not been created to describe the specificity of polyfamilies, and seemed to be at a loss of words to accurately describe their family reality. For instance, Zoey, a 13 years-old, tried to explain how her mother's non-cohabiting boyfriend fit in her family universe, but could not find the right words. At a certain point during the interview, she referred to him as her stepdad, but later indicated that it would not be the right word to describe him.

> [Interviewer]: You talked about Brad before. You said he was your stepdad…
>
> [Zoey] Yeah… [Hesitating tone]
>
> [Interviewer]: Yeah? You seem unsure…
>
> [Zoey]: Well… I see him as my mom's boyfriend, not really as my stepdad… But I can't explain why [laughs]. I don't know… [pause] I think it's because… because he has another family… It doesn't bother me, but I find it makes it look less like he's my 'stepdad'."

Overall, while the children in this study still managed to explain — with various level of details— who their parents' romantic partners were and how they fit in their family universe, it appears that many of them felt somewhat constrained by the conventional mononormative language regarding family structures and ties.

Discussion

This study sheds light on the emotional closeness between children and their polyamorous parents' romantic partners, as described by the children themselves. This study shows that children living in a polyamorous household usually think of their parents' romantic partners as resource persons, which fosters the development of a positive conception of these adults within the child. Many children explained their affection for their parents' partners by highlighting how these adults cared for them and supported them, emotionally and materially. This echoes studies carried out with CNM-practicing parents who described their extra-dyadic romantic partners as helpful, loving and supportive not only for themselves but also for their children (Alarie, 2024; Sheff, 2014). Polyamorous parents commonly report that their children benefit from their multi-partner relationship model, since each partner brings different skills, qualities, and knowledge, thus complementing the parents' strengths. Ultimately, the presence of several loving and caring adults in the lives of their children is perceived by polyamorous parents as beneficial for the emotional, social and intellectual development of their children (Alarie, 2024).

There is well-documented evidence that access to quality social support from the extended family and entourage has a direct positive impact on the parent–child relationship. Indeed, the support offered by loved ones —be it financial assistance in the event of economic hardship, babysitting or respite services, advice regarding child rearing— enables parents to adapt more quickly to the stressful events that punctuate parenting life (Bradley, 2019). What's more, benefiting from a broad support network is a significant mediator in the relationships between parental stress and positive parenting practices (Liu et al., 2020), and an important protective factor against child neglect and abuse (Sattler, 2022). Children whose families benefit from a broad support network are also more likely to present a high level of adjustment (Bradley, 2019).

The affection the children in this study have for their parents' romantic partners aligns with the realities of other children living in family configurations where more than two adults coexist in their family universe. Indeed, studies on families whose children were born through gamete donation (Côté et al., 2019; Côté, Gross, et al., 2020; Malmquist et al., 2014; Gartrell, 2021), surrogate motherhood (Jadva et al., 2012) or through adoption (Pagé et al., 2022) report similar findings. These studies show that the narratives which children have about people in their lives are strongly influenced by those of their parents; in other words, a child is likely to develop a positive conception of a person if that person is talked about in a positive way in its surroundings.

Further parallels can be drawn with stepfamilies in terms of children's relationships with their stepparents. Studies show that children can develop satisfying relationships with their stepparents when the parents and stepparents get along (Coleman et al., 2001), and when they are allowed to feel affection towards their stepparents without this harming the relationship with their parents (Papernow, 2013). The context of parental separation also has an impact on the relationship with the new romantic partner (Unterreiner, 2018); some children perceive their parent's new romantic relationship as a loss, which is associated with mourning for the family of origin (Cartwright, 2005). Parental separation can also create loyalty conflicts in children, which hinders them from nurturing affection towards their parents' new partners (Papernow, 2013). The literature on stepfamilies also informs us that if the child receives support from his or her parents, more specifically if the parents take time with the child, respect his or her emotions and continue to prioritize their role as parents, the child will adapt more easily to family reconfiguration (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002).

Studies on stepfamilies and on family configurations where more than two adults coexist in the child's family universe can help us explain why the children in our sample talked positively of their parents' romantic partners and felt little antipathy towards them, despite the unconventional nature of their parents' romantic relationships. By and large, children in this study perceived these adults as additions to their family and did not consider them as destroying their parents' partnership or their family unit. Similarly, since romantic partners were presented as adults added to the family universe without supplanting either parent, children of polyamorous parents were not faced with a conflict of loyalty to their parents. They therefore had free rein to develop affection for their parents' romantic partners, if they so wish.

The children in this study who saw their parents' romantic partners often —such as those who cohabited with one or two of their parents' partners— were more likely to feel strongly attached to them and to consider them important in their lives. That said, studies of polyamorous and stepfamilies reveal that children's feelings of antipathy can emerge and generate challenges for families if the child perceives a decrease in time spent with their parent due to a romantic partner (Alarie, 2024), or if their family situation changes against their will, such as if they have to move in with a romantic partner and their children (Cartwright, 2005; Sheff, 2014). Research on stepfamilies (Cartwright & Seymour, 2002; King et al., 2015; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010) and on polyamorous parents (Alarie, 2024) also shows that emotional closeness between children and their parent's new partner is not automatic, and that some children may struggle with adjusting to the presence of this new adult in their lives. In this sense, when introducing a new romantic partner or planning to move-in with a romantic partner, polyamorous parents should take the time to discuss it with their children, and give them time to adapt to the transition, in order to ensure their well-being.

In that context, it is essential that polyamorous parents be offered various psychosocial tools and services adapted to their reality, since many of them are at risk of feeling helpless in the face of their children's reaction (real or anticipated) to the changes taking place in their family structure (Alarie et al., 2021). However, there are very few resources of this kind to date and many polyamorous parents don't know where to turn for advice or support. In addition, CNM-practicing individuals commonly report that their most recent therapist was not well versed in issues surrounding CNM and many felt as if they were being judged (Schechinger et al., 2018). Therefore, professionals working in social work and family psychotherapy should be offered continuing development opportunities to allow them to properly guide polyamorous parents.

Limitations and future directions

Although our study provides an innovative insight into the reality of children raised in a polyamorous family environment, it does have certain limitations. Firstly, the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the public health restrictions implemented in Quebec in 2020 inevitably impacted children's relationships with their parents' romantic partners, notably by limiting physical contact between people not living in the same household, which had repercussions on our data. Second, some children did not elaborate much on the place that a romantic partner occupied in their life, limiting our ability to understand whether they conceived of these adults in a particular way compared to other adults in their lives. In fact, similar to the literature on polyamorous adults (Ritchie & Barker, 2006), our interviews highlight the influence of mononormativity, particularly in terms of language, as many children were at a loss of words to accurately describe their family reality. This difficulty in describing one's non-conventional family reality is also well documented among children born of third-party assisted reproduction (Indekeu et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2021).

Third, as with any investigation, one cannot exclude the possibility of self-selection and social desirability biases. It is possible that parents in well-functioning polyfamilies

were more inclined to approach us about the study, or that some children tried to paint an overly positive image of their family, as a way to protect their family from criticism. Fourth, while it is not the goal of qualitative research to make claims of statistical representativeness (Roy et al., 2015), the gender imbalance in our sample is worth mentioning. We did not find any indications that the boys in our study differed from girls with regards to how they perceived their parents' romantic partners; however, the small proportion of male participants in our sample prevents us from making conclusions regarding the potential impact of a child's gender on their experience. This angle could be an interesting avenue of inquiry for future research.

Fifth, the sample comprised mostly of White children, which may affect the transferability of our findings. Considering the way that racism affects cultural representations of morally acceptable sexuality and family structures (Clardy, 2018; Sheff & Hammers, 2011), future research should explore, with a larger sample, the experiences of children of color growing up with polyamorous parents. Comparing polyamorous families and with other multi-parent family configurations in different ethno-racial contexts — such as African American families where children grow up with a social father in addition to their biological parents (Durnell et al., 2018) — might also be a rich area to investigate in future work. Lastly, only a few children in this study cohabited with their parents' romantic partners (and their children, if any), and none of the participants had been raised in a multi-parent family since birth. Despite these limitations, the current findings provide a strong starting point for future research on children's experiences and perspectives regarding family dynamics and relationships in the context of polyamory.

Overall, this study contributes in important ways to the literature on family diversity. More specifically, it provides a better understanding of how children living with polyamorous parents perceive their relationships with their parents' romantic partners, and sheds light on the reasons behind their level of appreciation of these adults. Given the mononormative societal context in which negative preconceptions about polyamorous families are common (Alarie & Bosom, 2022), giving a voice to children growing up in a polyamorous family environment is particularly relevant. Research on polyamorous families is all the more important in view of the debates on multi-parent families that have taken hold in Quebec and other Canadian provinces in recent years (see, for instance, MacDonald, 2018).

Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research cannot be shared with any person, in order to protect confidentiality. The materials used in the research cannot be publicly shared but are available upon request. The materials can be obtained by emailing: milaine.alarie@inrs.ca.

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