



Glossary of Polyamory Related Terms

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Cheating – In a relationship, any activity that violates the rules or agreements of that relationship, whether tacit or explicit. In traditional monogamous relationships, any sexual activity with anyone outside that relationship is generally viewed as cheating. In a polyamorous or swinging relationship, sexual activity with people outside the relationship may or may not be seen as cheating, depending on the context of that sexual activity and whether or not it violates the agreements of the people in that relationship. Even in such relationships, most commonly sexual activity without the knowledge and explicit consent of the other members of the relationship is likely to be viewed as cheating.

Compersion – A feeling of joy when a partner invests in and takes pleasure from another romantic or sexual relationship. Compersion can be thought of as the opposite of “jealousy;” it is a positive emotional reaction to a lover’s other relationship. The term was coined by the Kerista Commune.

Couple privilege – The presumption that socially sanctioned pair-bond relationships involving only two people (such as marriage, long-term boyfriend/girlfriend, or other forms of conventional intimate/life partnerships) are inherently more important, “real” and valid than other types of intimate, romantic or sexual relationships.

Ethical Non-monogamy – Any relationship that is not sexually and/or emotionally exclusive by the explicit agreement and with the full knowledge of all the parties involved. Responsible / Ethical non-monogamy can take several forms, the two most common of which are polyamory and swinging, and is distinct from cheating in that everyone involved knows about and agrees to the activity. Responsible non-monogamy often explicitly spells out the conditions under which it is permissible for one person to take on additional partners, and often includes some form of safer-sex agreement such as a condom contract as well.

Fluid Bonding – 1) Sexual practices which involve the exchange of bodily fluids, such as barrier-free sexual intercourse and BDSM: blood play. 2) A formal agreement within a relationship to confine exchange of bodily fluids and barrier-free sexual contact to the people in that relationship (or closed loop polycule), each of whom has previously been screened for sexually transmitted diseases.

Metamour – (Literally, meta with; about + amor love): The partner of one’s partner, with whom one does not share a direct sexual or loving relationship.

Monogamy – (Literally, mono one + gamos marriage) Formally, the state or practice of having only one wedded spouse. Informally, the state or practice of having only one wedded spouse at a time, or more generally, having only one sexual partner or only one romantic relationship at a time. Monogamous: of or related to the practice of monogamy, as in monogamous relationship: a relationship permitting one and only one romantic or sexual partner.

Open Relationship – 1) Any relationship that is not sexually monogamous. 2) Any relationship that permits “outside” sexual entanglements, but not loving or romantic relationships. Some folks use the term open relationship as a synonym for polyamory. To other people, the term excludes polyamory, and is used specifically to describe relationships that are sexually non-monogamous but that still expect that the people involved will not fall in love or engage in romantic relationships outside the couple, as for example with many swinging relationships. It’s important to be careful when using this term, as it may carry very different connotations for different people.

Polyamory – (Literally, poly many + amor love) The state or practice of maintaining multiple sexual and/or romantic relationships simultaneously, with the full knowledge and consent of all the people involved. Polyamorous: of or related to the practice of polyamory, as in polyamorous relationship: a relationship involving more than two people, or open to involvement by more than two people; polyamorous person: a person who prefers or is open to romantic relationships with more than one partner simultaneously. Polyamory is not necessarily related directly to marriage or to polygamy; a person may have no spouse or only one spouse and still be polyamorous. In 1992, when the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary contacted Morning Glory Zell to ask for a formal definition and background of the word; part of her response was “The two essential ingredients of the concept of ‘polyamory’ are ‘more than one’ and ‘loving.’ That is, it is expected that the people in such relationships have a loving emotional bond, are involved in each other’s lives multi-dimensionally, and care for each other. This term is not intended to apply to merely casual recreational sex, anonymous orgies, one-night stands, pick-ups, prostitution, ‘cheating,’ serial monogamy, or the popular definition of swinging as ‘mate-swapping- parties.’”



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Polyandry – (Literally, poly many + andros man) The state or practice of having multiple wedded husbands at the same time.

Polycule – A romantic network, or a particular subset of relationships within a romantic network, whose members are closely connected. Also used to describe a sketch or visualization of a romantic network, as these drawings often resemble the depiction of molecules used in organic chemistry.

Polygamy – (Literally, poly many + gamos marriage) The state or practice of having multiple wedded spouses at the same time, regardless of the sex of those spouses. Polygyny is the most common form of polygamy in most societies that permit multiple spouses. For that reason, many people confuse the two.

Polygyny – (Literally, poly many + gynos woman) The state or practice of having multiple wedded wives at the same time. According to some sociologists, polygynous societies represent the most common form of society, with 850 of the 1170 societies recorded in Murdock's Ethnographic Atlas being polygynous. Modern Muslim societies are polygynous, and certain religious traditions, including Fundamentalist Mormonism (FLDS) in the United States, advocate polygyny.

Relationship Orientation – A preference for sexual or loving relationships of a particular form; as, for example, a preference for relationships that are monogamous, for relationships that are polyfidelitous, for relationships that are polyamorous, and so forth. Just as some people feel that their sexual orientation is fluid and a matter of choice where other people feel that their sexual orientation is fixed and not subject to choice, so do some people feel that their relationship orientation is subject to choice whereas others feel their relationship orientation is not a matter of choice.

Serial Monogamy – A relationship pattern in which a person has only one sexual or romantic partner at a time, but has multiple sexual or romantic partners in a lifetime, and may change partners frequently. Arguably the most common form of relationship in the United States, serial monogamy is predicated on the idea that a person can love more than one other person romantically in a lifetime, but not at the same time.

Tertiary Partner – A person (or persons) in a relationship that is generally quite casual, expects little in the way of emotional or practical support, or is very limited with respect to time, energy, or priority in the lives of the people involved. A tertiary relationship may be very limited in scope or priority for many reasons, one of the most common of which is often distance.

Unicorn – Synonym for hot bi babe or HBB, often derogatory, condescending, or ironic. A bisexual person, usually though not always female, who is willing to join an existing couple, often with the presumption that this person will date and become sexually involved with both members of that couple, and not demand anything or do anything which might cause problems or inconvenience to that couple. The term is often used to be dismissive of a couple seen to be only superficially polyamorous. Because of the demands that this type of couple places on the woman (that she be single and not take on any additional partners, and become involved with both members of the couple equally, and often “complete” their family as a surrogate mother and housekeeper and/or breadwinner and not do anything that may threaten or disrupt the existing couple), many in the poly community call this type of woman a “unicorn”, as in mythical and not likely to be found, even though there are plenty of bi-poly women around.

Veto Power – A relationship agreement, most common in prescriptive primary/secondary relationships, which gives one person the power to end (or not allow to begin in the first place) another person's additional relationships, or in some cases to disallow some specific activity, such as some specific sexual or BDSM-related activity. A veto may be absolute, in which one partner may reject another partner's additional relationships unconditionally, or may be conditional and used more as a way to indicate a serious problem in a relationship. Not all polyamorous people recognize or permit veto power. Veto is most common in primary/secondary relationship configurations.

For a more thorough list of glossaries, more research, or as a footnote to where I found a number of the descriptions above, please visit: LovingWithoutBoundaries.com/glossary-key or also morethantwo.com/polyglossary.html