Article

Ace and Poly: The Motivations and Experiences of People on the Ace Spectrum in Polyamorous Relationships

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Abstract: While the past two decades have seen an increase in research into both asexuality and polyamory, little is known about their intersection, that is, people who identify as asexual and engage in polyamorous relationships. Using an online survey, we explored the experiences of participants who identify as asexual or on the ace spectrum (e.g., demisexual, gray-ace) and were in a polyamorous relationship at the time of the survey (N = 321). The majority of our participants identified as White (79.02%), a plurality identified as women (27.1%), and ages ranged from 18 to 53 years old (M = 29.55, SD = 6.77). Two qualitative questions related to motivations for engaging in polyamory were analyzed for this study (N = 224). The first question asked about personal motivations, and the second asked about partner(s)’s influence. Eight codes emerged across the two questions: Needs fulfillment, Exploration/contemplation, Solution to relationship conflict/personal insecurity, a Desire to connect with multiple people, Personal/relationship growth, Rejecting monogamy, Introduced by partner, and Other/no additional context. One additional code was found in Q2: Reluctance/jealousy/distrust. The most common code overall was Exploration/contemplation. Our findings indicate that fulfilling a partner’s sexual needs was not a primary motivating factor for ace individuals engaged in polyamory. Ace individuals were more likely to describe experiences as exploring their identity and fulfilling personal needs for connection and intimacy. These findings indicate that motivations for engaging in polyamory are not solely centered in fulfilling sexual desires, and they may have larger implications for the what the scope of romantic and sexual relationships can look at outside of a monogamous and heteronormative context.

Keywords: ace spectrum; asexual; polyamory; relationships

1. Introduction

While the past two decades have seen an increase in research into both asexuality and polyamory, little is known about their intersection, that is, people who identify as asexual or on the asexual spectrum and engage in polyamorous relationships. According to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network [1], one of the most prominent online resources related to asexuality, someone who is asexual “does not experience sexual attraction” [1]. The asexual, or “ace”, community also encompasses identities on the ace spectrum, including people who rarely experience sexual attraction (e.g., graysexual) or only experience it under specific conditions (e.g., demisexual, only experiencing sexual attraction after establishing an emotional connection) [2,3]. While experiencing little or no sexual attraction, people on the ace spectrum may have a romantic orientation (e.g., biromantic, heteroromantic, etc.), experience romantic attraction, and desire romantic relationships [1,2].

Polyamory is a type of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) wherein partners engage in multiple sexual and romantic relationships with the consent of all parties involved [4].
Romantic or emotional relationships without sex can be part of a polyamorous relationship structure [4]. A study of single adults in the United States found that 16.8% wanted to engage in polyamory and 10.7% had experience with polyamory [4]. According to the 2019 Asexual Community Survey, 10.3% of ace respondents (n = 10,160) considered themselves polyamorous and 21.7% were unsure or questioning [5]. Compared to asexual and questioning respondents, a greater proportion of gray-asexual and demisexual respondents identified as polyamorous [5].

People who engage in CNM relationships report a number of reasons for establishing this type of relationship structure. Wood and colleagues [6] identified six themes in respondents’ reasons for engaging in CNM: autonomy, beliefs and value systems, relationality, sexuality, growth and expansion, and pragmatism. These motivations were related to both individual and relational needs and do not support stereotypical views of CNM relationships as unsatisfying or unstable. Indeed, people in CNM relationships often find them satisfying, experiencing need fulfillment, variety in activities, and personal growth and development [7]. People in polyamorous relationships specifically also report high levels of need fulfillment and commitment in more than one relationship [8]. They are also more likely to experience compersion (i.e., pleasure in a partner’s enjoyment of other relationships) and less likely to experience jealousy than people in monogamous relationships [9].

Very few studies have investigated the intersection of asexual identity and the practice of consensual non-monogamy (CNM). Scherrer [10] conducted a qualitative study in which she asked asexual individuals about their thoughts about engaging in CNM. She found that some participants saw CNM as a viable option for having romantic relationships with partners whose sexual desires differ from theirs, and many saw CNM as their “ideal relationship”. Similarly, Dawson et al. [11] found that polyamory has been employed as a means to negotiate and practice intimacy by some asexual individuals.

Copulsky [12,13] has provided general overviews of the prevalence and practice of polyamory within the asexual community. He estimates that polyamory may be twice as popular among asexual individuals in comparison to the general population [13], and he uses a combination of participant data and online testimonials to explore the reasons why polyamory may be particularly appealing to individuals who identify as asexual. Asexual individuals, he argues, may benefit from a relationship structure that allows allosexual partners to fulfill their sexual desires with other partners; this may relieve asexual individuals from the pressure to have sex. Additionally, polyamory may be a useful relationship structure for asexual individuals who are still exploring different aspects of their sexuality, such as interest in different genders and interest in kinks. This hypothesis about kink and polyamory is supported by Vilkin and Sprott’s [14] research, which found that discrepancy among partners in desire for kink is a common experience for people who engage in kink and CNM. Lastly, Copulsky suggests that polyamory may provide flexible relationship boundaries that can exist in-between platonic and romantic (which are often distinguished in our culture by the presence of sex), which may be appealing to asexual individuals [12].

Additionally, Moors et al. [7] found that a motivator for individuals to engage in CNM is the desire of individuals to have their needs met in a way that would be more difficult in a monogamous relationship. This finding was reiterated in Ben-Ze’ev and Brunning’s [15] paper, which stated that polyamory is often used as a solution to romantic compromises. This motivator may be particularly relevant for asexual individuals who are paired with non-asexual individuals that have different sexual desires.

While few studies have actually investigated asexual individuals who engage in CNM, there have been studies that may explain the relationship between sexual orientation and CNM engagement. Sizemore and Olmstead [16] and St. Vil et al. [17] found that non-heterosexual individuals were more likely to be open to CNM relationships and to have ever engaged in CNM, respectively. Neither study indicated whether or not asexual
participants were included in the non-heterosexual groups, but it is possible that a similar dynamic would emerge if asexual orientation is measured.

Geographic location can also influence the dynamics of polyamory. In Canada, polyamorous individuals had higher levels of education and income [18]. In Western Countries, polyamory became more prevalent in the 20th century due to the “traditional, heterosexual” nuclear family structure changing. These changes include higher divorce rates, single-parent households, births out of wedlock, and same-sex unions [18]. Europe has developed the European region of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association to rank counties on LGBT equality and laws [19]. The change in the nuclear household and recognition of LGBT identities and relationships has paved the way for the acceptance of CNM.

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to empirically examine the experiences of people who identify as asexual or on the ace spectrum and who are currently engaged in polyamory in the United States. Based on previous theoretical and anecdotal works on the intersection of asexuality and CNM [10,12], we hypothesized that motivations for engaging in polyamory would relate largely to sexual desire discrepancy, that is, ace individuals in relationships with non-sexual partners would consent to those partners engaging in sexual relationships with others. Western Countries have been more accepting of LGBT and CNM relationships, but these structures may still be met with stigma, discrimination, or a lack of recognition.

2. Materials and Methods

Data for this study were drawn from an online qualitative survey fielded in the summer of 2022 via Qualtrics. The survey was approved by the institutional review board at Indiana University, Bloomington. The survey was piloted by individuals who engaged in or researched CNM, asexuality, or both topics (N = 3). Their feedback was incorporated into the final survey tool. Participants were recruited using a flyer that was posted on the IRB institution’s social media pages. The institution is a prestigious sex research institution that has various connections to sexual minority groups and individuals with diverse sexual behaviors. There was a link provided on the flyer for participants to be taken to the survey. Sharing the link to promote snowball sampling was also encouraged. Participants were provided with a consent form before completing the survey. After the total number of participants approved by the IRB was reached, the survey was closed.

2.1. Participants

To be included in the survey, participants had to be at least 18 years old, identify as asexual or on the ace spectrum, and currently be in a polyamorous relationship. In total, 469 people accessed the survey, and 321 consented to take the survey and passed the screening questions. 224 answered at least one of the write-in response questions relevant to this study (see below).

2.2. Measures

Demographic data were collected for age, country and state of residence, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and romantic orientation. After the demographic section, participants were asked a number of open-ended questions about their current relationship(s). The two questions analyzed for this study were the following:

- Q1. Was pursuing polyamory a self-discovery (you thought of the idea and wanted to pursue it)? How long were you contemplating a polyamorous relationship? Did you have a motivation or specific reasons to engage in polyamory? If so, what were they?
- Q2. Was pursuing polyamory a partner’s idea? After your partner mentioned engaging in polyamory, how did you feel about it? Did your partner bring up specific reasons why they wanted to engage in polyamory with you? If so, what were those reasons?
2.3. Data Analysis

We used inductive coding to analyze write-in responses. A codebook was developed from themes that emerged from the data, and two of the authors coded all the responses. Discrepancies were resolved in a coding conference to produce the final codes for each entry. A single response could be coded for more than one code.

3. Results

There were 224 individuals who wrote responses to Q1, Q2, or both questions. A total of 212 respondents wrote in responses to Q1. Moreover, 190 wrote in responses to Q2.

3.1. Subsection

3.1.1. Demographics

The majority of respondents identified as White or Caucasian (79.02%), being from the United States (73.21%), and not being transgender (61.16%). Moreover, 69.64% identified as a woman or nonbinary (34.82% each). A plurality identified as demisexual (47.32%), followed by gray-asexual (23.21%). See Table 1 for full demographic results.

### Table 1. Demographic data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>Woman: 27.1%</th>
<th>Man: 8.3%</th>
<th>Nonbinary: 20.9%</th>
<th>Agender: 5.8%</th>
<th>Questioning/unsure: 2.1%</th>
<th>A term not listed: 3.0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transgender identity</td>
<td>Transgender: 21.3%</td>
<td>Questioning/unsure: 4.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ace spectrum identity</td>
<td>Asexual: 17.1%</td>
<td>Gray- sexual: 14.3%</td>
<td>Demisexual: 30.1%</td>
<td>Questioning: 2.6%</td>
<td>A term not listed: 4.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional sexual orientation</td>
<td>Straight: 8.1%</td>
<td>Gay or lesbian: 6.4%</td>
<td>Bisexual: 17.5%</td>
<td>Pansexual: 19.2%</td>
<td>Questioning/unsure: 3.8%</td>
<td>A term not listed: 6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic orientation</td>
<td>Heteroromantic: 2.3%</td>
<td>Homoromantic: 3.6%</td>
<td>Biromantic: 8.5%</td>
<td>Panromantic: 20.9%</td>
<td>Questioning/unsure: 2.6%</td>
<td>A term not listed: 4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial identity</td>
<td>African American/Black: 7.5%</td>
<td>Asian: 4.7%</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latin origin: 7.0%</td>
<td>White or Caucasian: 79.02%</td>
<td>Another label/a term not listed: 4.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Range of 18–53, M = 29.55 (SD = 6.77)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.2. Codes

Eight codes emerged for both Q1 and Q2. See Table 2 for code frequency by question.

### Table 2. Emerging codes from interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Q2</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploration/Contemplation</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Connect with Multiple People</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity/Self-Acceptance</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Relationship Growth</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Fulfillment</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduced by Partner</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting Monogamy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution to Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance/Jealousy/Distrust</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Needs fulfillment: fulfilling sexual, romantic, emotional, kink, etc., needs due to a desire discrepancy, distance, differential abilities, etc. Examples include the following:
• “...Even before I knew I was asexual, I understood that there were things I wouldn’t be able to provide for anyone I dated. It only seemed natural to allow them to seek those things elsewhere. And now that I know I don’t have to have sex, polyamory is a natural solution to dating someone who still wants to engage with sex.”
• “...It just made sense to me to be able to consensually seek out intimate companionship with others, without having to end the relationship I was in with a partner who provided for most of my needs, and whom I loved very deeply.”

Exploration/contemplation: previous interest in polyamory, exploring sexuality, learning more about polyamory, or learning more about asexuality, etc. Examples include the following:
• “I learned of polyamory from others while I was not in a relationship. I thought about it for almost a year. I decided I wanted my next relationship to be poly, explained that to [the] next person I was interested in, who agreed.”
• “...We did a lot of research for about 6 months and then opened ourselves to being poly.”

Solution to relationship conflict/personal insecurity: solution to jealousy, cheating, unhappiness/feeling “trapped” in monogamous relationship, feeling as though they are “not enough” for their partner, etc. Examples include the following:
• “My first partner was poly and he introduced me. I decided to try it because my mono relationships never panned out well and I wanted to make him happy. Little did I know that it would make me happy as well.”
• “I wanted freedom to explore my attraction to others of my own gender. My spouse encouraged us to pursue polyamory together at first. We had had several instances of cheating in the past so we wanted to freedom to be able to have other partners without having to ‘hide’ anything.”

Identity/self-acceptance: accepting their desire to be polyamorous/their identity as a poly person. Examples include the following:
• “I’ve been in monogamous relationships for many years of my life, but i wasn’t happy. When i discovered polyamory, it was the best choice for me! I am neurodivergent and being polyamorous works better for me. At first it was difficult, but I’m happy with my current relationships.”
• “It was a self-discovery. It felt extremely similar to how I figured out I was bi and even helped me figure out I’m ace. The conversation with my anchor came up several times before I found the right terms. I just wanted to live and love to my fullest extent.”

Desire to connect with multiple people: finding joy/satisfaction in having multiple partners. Examples include the following:
• “I met my now husband who was polyamorous and he helped me learn more about it. I had always believed in the ability to love more than 1 person since i was a child but never knew there was a term for it.”
• “i had no specific motivation or epiphany, i just happened to feel attraction to multiple people.”

Personal/relationship growth: feeling more confident, feeling free, deepening connections with partners, communication, comparison, and community, etc. Examples include the following:
• “it was exciting and refreshing to (finally) be with someone on the same page whom i was in love with. we felt mutual excitement and warmth to see how we would grow together and different ways in which we love people in our lives.”
• “my main motivation is just because it feels freeing, I don’t feel like i need to be my partners everything and they don’t need to be mine, I don’t have to break up with someone I really love if our life goals don’t match up because we don’t need to live together or raise children together or build a life together, we can just enjoy each other’s time and build our lives with people whose life goals do match ours.”
Introduced by partner: partner was already in a poly relationship before entering the relationship with respondent. Examples include the following:

- “No, my partner being poly did encourage me to look into it but I had known all along that dating them would involve them being poly…”
- “My husband’s idea. He told me from the start that he was polyamorous and I agreed to try it. It took me a year of working through old trauma, insecurity, and jealousy before I finally felt fully comfortable.”

Rejecting monogamy: skepticism of monogamy being the default, monogamy does not work for them, etc. Examples include the following:

- “I’ve always felt trapped and unfulfilled in monogamous relationships which is why I decided to pursue poly relationships.”
- “I felt like I was in a cage during monogamous relationships. Then I started dating someone who already had a partner. And it all felt right.”

Other, no context: responses such as Yes/No or “see above”; additional context not provided.

See Table 3 for codes by ace identity for Q1.

Table 3. Q1 code frequency by ace identity. Percentages are based on the total N of each ace identity group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Asexual</th>
<th>Demisexual</th>
<th>Gray-Asexual</th>
<th>A Term Not Listed</th>
<th>Questioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs fulfillment</td>
<td>N = 8 (17.39%)</td>
<td>N = 14 (13.21%)</td>
<td>N = 8 (15.38%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (16.67%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (37.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration/contemplation</td>
<td>N = 19 (41.30%)</td>
<td>N = 46 (43.40%)</td>
<td>N = 25 (48.08%)</td>
<td>N = 5 (41.67%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (12.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution to relationship conflict</td>
<td>N = 5 (10.87%)</td>
<td>N = 8 (7.55%)</td>
<td>N = 5 (9.62%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (12.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity/self-acceptance</td>
<td>N = 10 (21.74%)</td>
<td>N = 28 (26.42%)</td>
<td>N = 13 (25.00%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (33.33%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (50.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to connect with multiple people</td>
<td>N = 10 (21.74%)</td>
<td>N = 25 (23.58%)</td>
<td>N = 14 (26.92%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (25.00%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (25.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/relationship growth</td>
<td>N = 7 (15.22%)</td>
<td>N = 23 (21.70%)</td>
<td>N = 9 (17.31%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (25.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting monogamy</td>
<td>N = 2 (4.35%)</td>
<td>N = 8 (7.55%)</td>
<td>N = 9 (17.31%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (16.67%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (12.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduced by partner</td>
<td>N = 7 (15.22%)</td>
<td>N = 7 (6.60%)</td>
<td>N = 6 (11.54%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>N = 3 (6.52%)</td>
<td>N = 8 (7.55%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (5.77%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The same eight codes were identified for Q2. One additional code was added:

- Reluctance/jealousy/distrust (Q2 n = 14): When their partner initiated a poly relationship, some participants felt reluctant, experienced feelings of jealousy, or had difficulty trusting partner. For some participants, these feelings went away with time. Examples include the following:

- “Opening my relationship with my first partner was originally his idea. He feels sexual and romantic attraction easily and wanted to pursue other connections casually. We talked it over and intellectually I agreed that it was fine but for years, I felt inadequate and abandoned because it felt like he found other people more desirable than me.”
- “It was my partner’s idea first, and I was initially hurt and confused. My mother has a lot of relationship trauma[sic] and anxiety and put that onto me so it was difficult for me to not see it as cheating.”

See Table 4 for codes by ace identity for Q2.
Table 4. Q2 code frequency by ace identity. Percentages are based on the total N of each ace identity group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Asexual</th>
<th>Demisexual</th>
<th>Gray-Asexual</th>
<th>A Term Not Listed</th>
<th>Questioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs fulfillment</td>
<td>N = 8 (17.39%)</td>
<td>N = 11 (10.38%)</td>
<td>N = 7 (13.46%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (25.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration/contemplation</td>
<td>N = 9 (19.57%)</td>
<td>N = 15 (14.15%)</td>
<td>N = 8 (15.38%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (16.67%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution to relationship conflict</td>
<td>N = 1 (2.17%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (3.77%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity/self-acceptance</td>
<td>N = 4 (8.70%)</td>
<td>N = 11 (10.38%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (3.85%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (25.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to connect with multiple people</td>
<td>N = 10 (21.74%)</td>
<td>N = 25 (23.58%)</td>
<td>N = 14 (26.92%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (25.00%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (25.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/relationship growth</td>
<td>N = 8 (17.39%)</td>
<td>N = 19 (17.92%)</td>
<td>N = 7 (13.46%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (16.67%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting monogamy</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>N = 5 (4.72%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (5.77%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduced by partner</td>
<td>N = 3 (6.52%)</td>
<td>N = 5 (4.72%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (7.69%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance/jealousy/distrust</td>
<td>N = 5 (10.87%)</td>
<td>N = 5 (4.72%)</td>
<td>N = 3 (5.77%)</td>
<td>N = 1 (8.33%)</td>
<td>N = 0 (0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>N = 7 (15.22%)</td>
<td>N = 36 (33.96%)</td>
<td>N = 8 (15.38%)</td>
<td>N = 2 (16.67%)</td>
<td>N = 4 (50.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Discussion

Similar to findings in the 2019 Asexual Community Survey report [5], the majority of our polyamorous sample identified as demisexual or gray-asexual. This may be because demisexual and gray-asexual individuals are by definition more likely to experience sexual attraction than asexual individuals. Asexual people are also more likely than demisexual or gray-asexual individuals to identify as aromantic (i.e., not experiencing romantic attraction) [1] and would, therefore, likely not be interested in one, much less more than one, romantic relationship. However, given our findings, it is important not to exclude asexual individuals entirely from discussions and studies of polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamy.

In keeping with our hypothesis, some ace respondents did report engaging in polyamory to accommodate sexual desire discrepancies in their relationship. However, this did not account for the majority of the reported motivations for engaging in polyamory. As with past research on motivations for CNM [6], our polyamorous ace respondents reported a number of non-sexual reasons for engaging in polyamory, including emotional connection and identity exploration. While partners’ needs were a factor for some respondents, this does not appear to be a driving force at the intersection of polyamory and ace identity.

Globally, the “Exploration/contemplation” code came up the most frequently in our sample, with 100 responses for Q1 and 34 responses for Q2 being coded as such. The most common code in Q2 was Other (n = 57), with responses including “see above”. Q2 immediately followed Q1 in the survey, and this suggests that people were more frequently reporting personal identity, experiences, and desires (the focus of Q1) than satisfying their partner’s needs or wishes (the focus of Q2). Neither low/absent desire for ace individuals nor desire discrepancy between ace individuals and their partners appears to be a strong motivating factor for engaging in polyamory, emphasizing the importance of non-sexual motivations for engaging in these relationships.

The least common codes were “Reluctance/jealousy distrust” and “Solution to relationship conflict/personal insecurity”. This suggests that, rather than being a negative experience or solution to a problem, engaging in polyamory for ace individuals is a positive experience that allows them to explore various intimate, fulfilling relationships. These findings align with previous research on motivations for engaging in CNM [5,7]. Polyamorous relationships are not the result of failed monogamy; they are a distinct and satisfying type of relationship structure.
This study, like much of the asexuality and CNM literature, reflects a predominately White, Western perspective. The majority of our participants (79.02%) were White, and, therefore, their responses may not be applicable to ace-spectrum individuals who are also people of color. While no studies, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, have specifically examined the experiences of people of color who engage in polyamory, past research has shown that people of color can experience racism in romantic relationships [20] and dating [21], which may also be present in polyamorous relationship structures. Participants were also from the United States, and their experiences regarding polyamory may differ from those in a different cultural and legal context. Additionally, a large portion of our sample (30.1%) identified as demisexual, and only 17.1% identified specifically as asexual. Consequently, our results may not fully reflect the experiences of asexual individuals. Our survey was also limited to people who were in polyamorous relationship(s) at the time of the survey, which leaves out individuals who were in different consensually non-monogamous relationship structures or individuals who were previously in polyamorous relationships.

Given that our sample had a number of demographic biases, these results may not be fully representative of ace-spectrum individuals who engage in polyamory. Future studies ought to include a more diverse sample and explore the role that race, culture, and asexual identity specifically play in the intersection of ace-spectrum identity and polyamory. Additional research could also explore lifetime experiences of and motivations for engaging in polyamory and other types of consensual non-monogamy.

Lastly, data about partners’ gender and sexual orientation were not collected for this study. Future research should explore gender and other dynamics within relationships, as well as relationship satisfaction, to further deepen our understanding of ace experiences in polyamorous and other CNM relationships.

This study sought to examine the motivations for ace-spectrum individuals to engage in polyamory. By using a qualitative online survey, we found a number of common themes across our participants’ responses. Ace-spectrum individuals in our sample brought up motivations such as Needs fulfillment, a desire to connect with many partners, personal and relationship growth, Rejecting monogamy, a solution to a relationship conflict, and being introduced to polyamory by their partner. While not a common theme, reluctance, jealousy, and distrust also came up for some participants. Our hypothesis that the primary motivation for ace individuals to engage in polyamory is to rectify a desire discrepancy was partially supported; although Needs fulfillment was a common motivation, it was eclipsed by motivations such as wanting to explore other relationship structures and having a desire to love multiple people. These findings demonstrate that while sexual desire may play a role in an ace individual’s decision to be polyamorous, it is rarely the sole motivator. Much like relationships themselves, motivations for polyamory are more holistic than they are wholly sexual.

Examining the intersection of ace identity and polyamorous relationship structures adds to both the asexual and polyamory literature. Additionally, these findings may have broader implications beyond this intersection. Both asexuality and polyamory, as well as CNM more broadly, challenge dominant Western attitudes that privilege sex and monogamy over other types of relationships. The ace–poly intersection allows us to explore possibilities for non-sexual, non-exclusive intimacy that requires a reimagining of the potential for diverse experiences in human relationships.

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