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Second CRILF Report on Polyamory Studies Sociodemographic Attributes and Attitudes

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Report Commented On: “[Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada](#)”, Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family

The [Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family](#) completed its second report on polyamory in January. The Institute’s [first report](#), completed in April 2017, addressed how the legal issues arising from the formation and dissolution of polyamorous relationships are dealt with under the domestic relations legislation of Canada’s common law provinces, and included a preliminary analysis of the data gathered from a national survey administered over the course of seven weeks in the summer of 2016. The new report takes a much deeper look at the survey data and examines the sociodemographic attributes and attitudes of people identifying as polyamorous, with the goal of obtaining a better understanding of the prevalence and nature of polyamorous relationships to inform the development of family justice policy and legislation.

People who are polyamorous are, or prefer to be, involved in intimate relationships with more than one person at the same time. Polyamorous relationships vary in interdependence and commitment, and in expectations of sexual and emotional fidelity. An individual may be simultaneously involved in a number of romantic relationships without those partners being in a relationship with each other, or significant, committed relationships may exist among all involved. An individual may be involved in a primary dyadic or polyamorous relationship that is committed and enduring, while one or more members of that relationship maintain more peripheral secondary relationships with others. Or, an individual may be involved in a number of concurrent relationships that are more sexual than romantic in nature and involve a diminished expectation of permanence and interdependence.

Between late-June and early-August 2016, the Institute published a survey advertised primarily through social media networks and websites. 480 valid responses were received, and of those who were prepared to state their residence, and slightly more than a quarter of respondents were not, most said that they lived in British Columbia (35.1%), Ontario (27.8%), Alberta (19.4%) and Quebec (9.3%).

More than four-fifths of respondents said that they were either in a polyamorous relationship at the time they completed the survey (69.5%) or had been within the previous five years (11.7%), and their relationships were most likely to involve three adults living in two or more households. Slightly more than two-fifths of respondents said that a child lived in their household full- or part-time under the care of a parent or guardian, yielding a total of 310 children living with 163 respondents.

Most respondents said that they were between 25 and 34 years of age (42.3%) or between 35 and 44 (31.5%). Consistent with the few other studies of polyamorists undertaken to date, the majority of respondents to the Institute's survey identified as female (59.4%) with less than a third identifying as male (30.8%) and smaller numbers identifying as genderqueer, gender fluid, transgender and other gender identities. Most respondents described their sexuality as either heterosexual (37.3%) or bisexual (31.7%); other respondents said that they were pansexual (24.4%), polysexual (21.7%), homosexual (4.2%), queer (2.1%) or asexual (1.9%).

Compared to the general Canadian population, respondents are younger, more likely to describe themselves as being of Caucasian or European ancestry, more likely to describe their religious affiliation as agnostic or atheist, more likely to have an undergraduate, graduate or professional degree, and more likely to have incomes between \$25,000 and \$99,999 per year. Respondents are, conversely, much less likely to describe themselves as Aboriginal or a member of a visible minority, to describe their religious affiliation as Christian, to have achieved a high school diploma or lower level of education, and to earn less than \$25,000 per year.

The report digs deeper into the demographic data obtained from respondents, and analyzes the correlation between factors such as age, gender identity, sexuality, income, educational attainment, relationships status and province of residence. Among other fascinating conclusions, the study found that:

- Respondents identifying as neither male nor female were much more likely to have been in a polyamorous relationship at the time they completed the survey than respondents identifying as male and female.
- More respondents identifying as female or as another gender earned less than \$60,000 per year, and fewer earned \$60,000 or more per year, than respondents identifying as male. Respondents identifying as neither male nor female were more likely to have incomes below \$25,000 per year than other respondents.
- Respondents with incomes of \$60,000 or more per year were more likely to describe their religious affiliation as atheist than lower-earning respondents, who were more likely to describe their affiliation as agnostic.
- Respondents aged 35 to 54 were more likely to describe themselves as heterosexual, and less likely to describe their sexuality in any other term, than younger respondents. Respondents identifying as female were more likely to say they are bisexual than other respondents.
- Respondents identifying as male or female had similar levels of educational attainment, and were equally likely to hold an undergraduate or higher degree. Respondents identifying as neither male nor female were less likely to have achieved an undergraduate or higher level of educational attainment.

The demographic data were also used to analyze respondents' views on attitudinal statements such as *everyone in a polyamorous relationship should be treated equally regardless of gender or gender identity* and *everyone in a polyamorous relationship has the responsibility to be honest and forthright with one another*. Although almost all respondents agreed with the statement on equality (94.6%), respondents with an undergraduate or higher degree, heterosexual respondents, and respondents with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more were less likely to strongly agree with

the statement. Likewise, while almost all respondents agreed with the statement on honesty (98.4%), respondents with annual incomes of \$60,000 or more were less likely to strongly agree with the statement and respondents identifying as pansexual and polysexual were more likely to strongly agree with the statement than respondents who were bisexual, homosexual or heterosexual.

Other attitudinal statements put to respondents concerned equality of treatment regardless of parental status, equality of parenting responsibilities regardless of gender and the freedom of relationship members to leave their relationship if and when they choose. Still other statements concerned respondents' views on the impact of the criminalization of polygamy, on the attitudes of others toward polyamory, and on the frequency of polyamory in the general Canadian population. A strong majority of respondents agreed that the number of people who identify as polyamorous is increasing, and that the number of people openly involved in polyamorous relationships is increasing.

Almost 70% of respondents said that the [criminalization of polygamy](#) had negatively affected public perceptions of polyamorous relationships; respondents identifying as male or female, heterosexual and with a university degree or higher level of education were less likely to strongly agree with this statement than other respondents. However, the prohibition of polygamy did not significantly affect respondents' willingness to pursue or be openly involved in polyamorous relationships. Almost three-quarters of respondents disagreed with the statement *Canada's antipolygamy law has prevented me from pursuing polyamorous relationships*, and the respondents most likely to strongly disagree with the statement included respondents with a university degree or higher level of education, respondents identifying as homosexual, and respondents with gender identities other than male or female.

Although the study provides new insight into the attitudes and relationships of polyamorous individuals, the survey instrument used was flawed as it failed to capture the complete diversity of polyamorous relationships and left a number of respondents feeling excluded and "othered". The report makes a number of recommendations for law reform and public and professional legal education, as well as recommendations for further research. The Institute recommends that research be undertaken to explore:

- The prevalence of polyamory and polyamorous relationships within the general population.
- The development, composition, variability and durability of polyamorous relationship, including closer study of the characteristics of primary and secondary relationships.
- Trends and practices in the parenting of children in polyamorous relationships.
- The barriers experienced by people in polyamorous relationships in accessing social services, including private and public health care benefits and retirement benefits.
- The nature of the discrimination experienced by people in polyamorous relationships and its impact on polyamorists' ability to participate in Canadian society.
- The experience of polyamorists in family law processes, the extent to which the legislation on domestic relations impacts their lives and whether they wish that legislation to impact their lives at all.

The interesting and innovative research described in the Institute’s report is among the very first in Canada to examine the experiences and attitudes of those involved in a form of family that appears to be growing in popularity and prevalence, and was funded by an operating grant generously provided to the Institute by the [Alberta Law Foundation](#).

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