

**P O L Y A M
J A M :**

CHATTING ABOUT NON-
MONOGAMY IN THERAPY

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Who Am I and Why am I Here?

- He/Him pronouns
- Masters from St. Thomas
 - Sex Therapy Certificate Education from University of Michigan
- 15 years experience as a Sex Educator
 - Smitten Kitten 5 years
 - Faculty for St. Mary's, Argosy, and UW Stout
- 10 years experience as a therapist
 - Trained by Laura Rademacher, Jennie Hilleren, and Roger Khun
 - I run a solo practice serving individuals, couples, and throuples



○ What the Heck is Non-Monogamy?

- Monogamy: The practice or state of having a sexual relationship with only one partner
- Non-Monogamy: The practice of having multiple sexual relationships
- Ethical Non-Monogamy: The practice of centering consent within non-monogamous relationships
- Polyamory: “Many Loves” Having multiple loving relationships



○ A Note About “Ethical”

- Within non-monogamous communities, there is discourse as to the necessity to clarify “ethical non-monogamy” and many may point to the addition of ”ethical” or “consensual” as a form of catering to dominant monogamous frameworks
- Pushes a potential shame based dynamic
- Potentially creates a hierarchy of allowable identities



○ A Note About Poly

- There has been discourse regarding the use of “Poly” in reference to the polyamorous community and the Polynesian peoples creating some confusion
- In this presentation I will typically use “non-monogamous” or Polyam (hence the title of the presentation)
- There will be times where I use poly to refer to specific identities within the polyam communities as it reflects what you may hear from clients





WHERE DID YOU LEARN ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS?

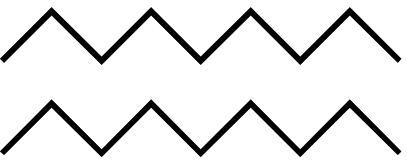
WHAT ARE SOME OF THE RULES OF RELATIONSHIP
DEVELOPMENT?



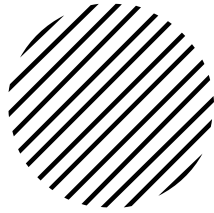


**WHAT DID SCHOOL
TEACH YOU ABOUT
RELATIONSHIP
STRUCTURES?**





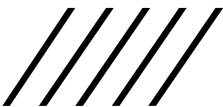
Social Structures



- The concepts of monogamy and non-monogamy are culturally defined.
 - **Compulsory Monogamy:** A system in which monogamy is the unquestioned norm and expectation
 - Monogamy is normalized in culture but in practice may not be as common as we are told
 - Monogamous relationships may define their monogamy differently amongst different couples

○ Mononormativity

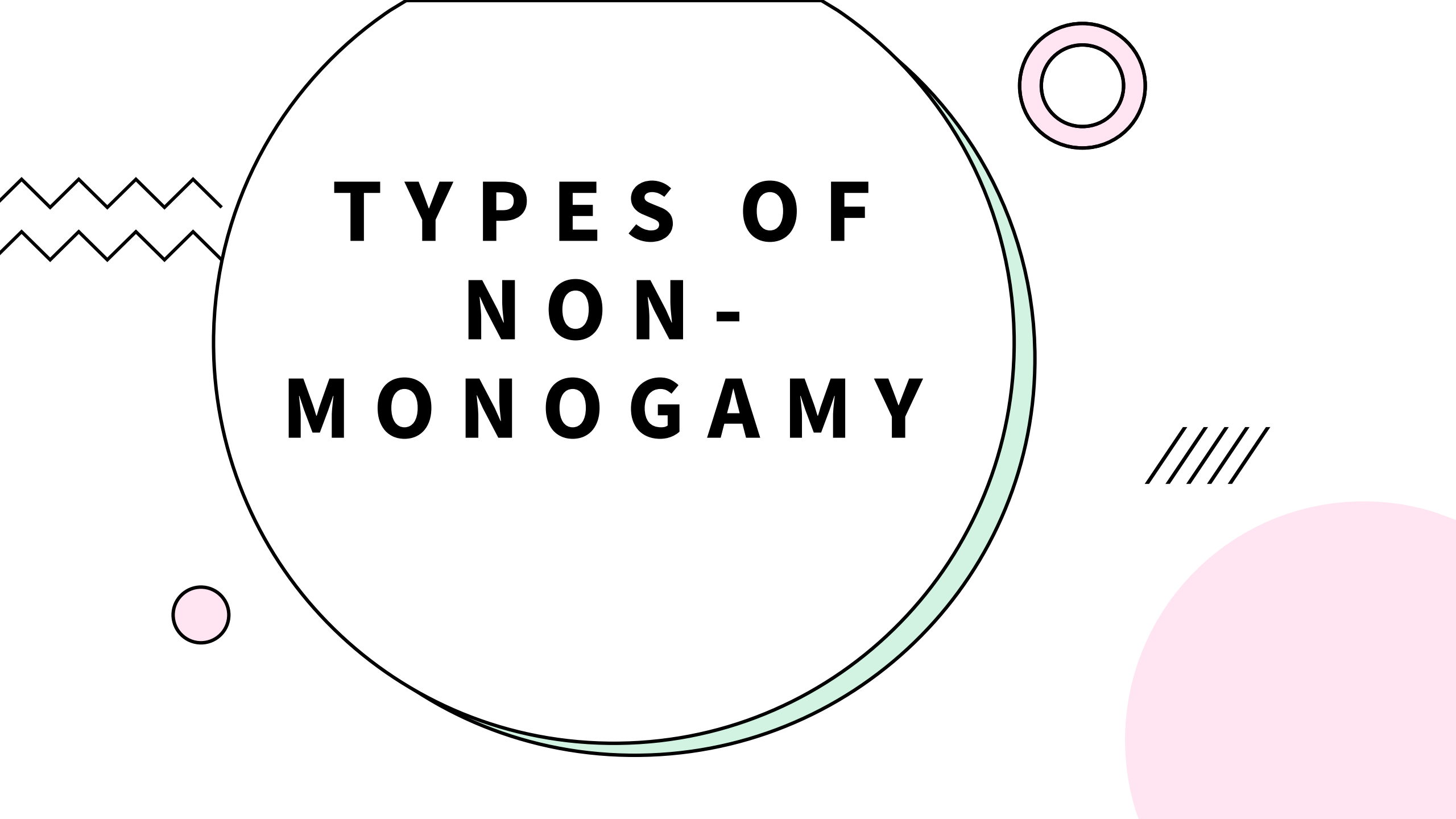
- The way in which culture enshrines a worldview that promotes monogamy as the normal or preferred relational orientation (Powell 292)
- Mononormativity is promoted in media, education, and culture as a whole
- Within mononormative culture, the challenge of **erotic differentiation** may become an issue



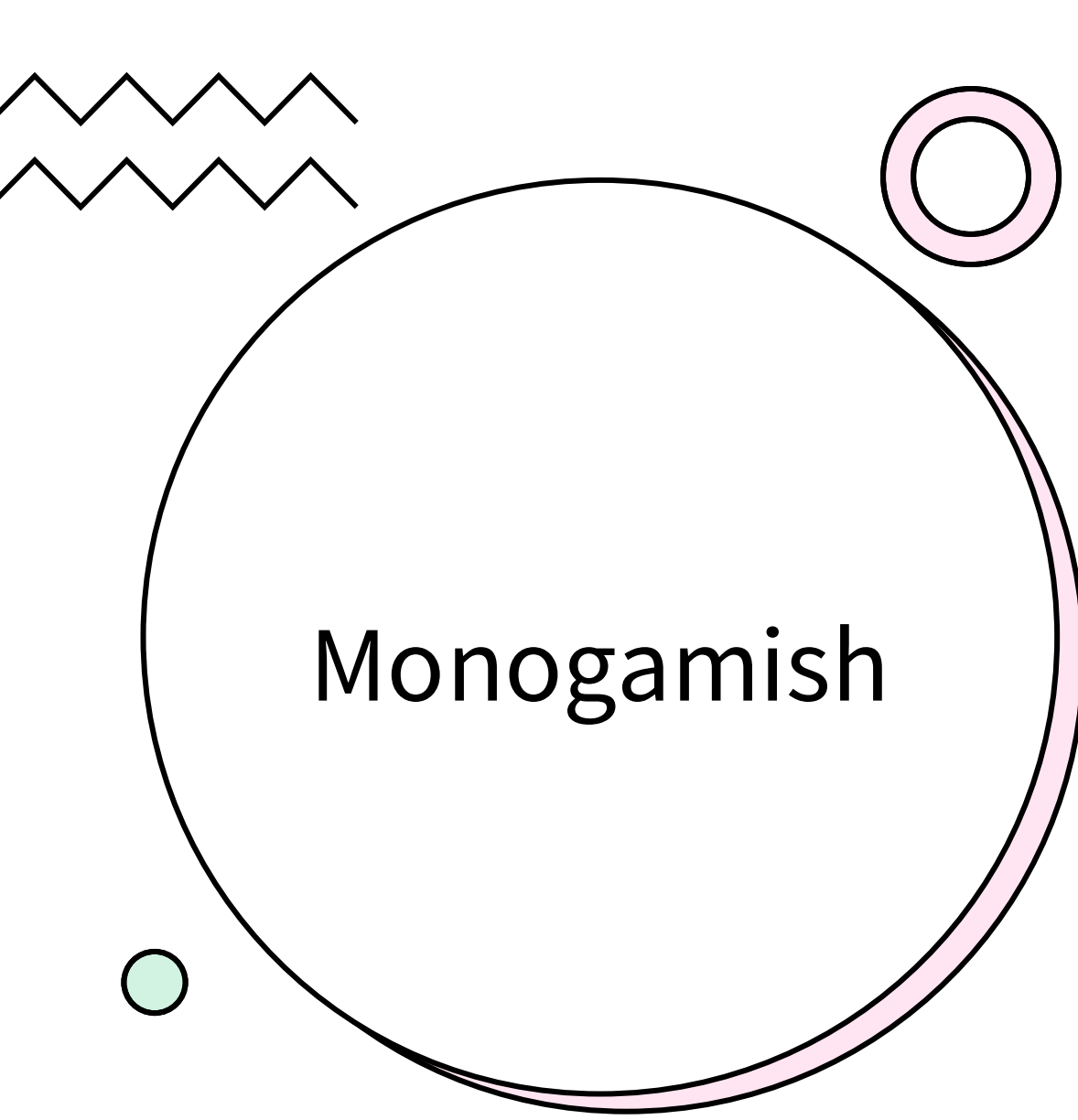


**WHERE HAVE YOU
SEEN
MONONORMATIVITY
IN CULTURE?**





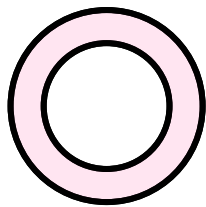
TYPES OF NON- MONOGAMY



Monogamish

- A relationship that is established in monogamy with a few exceptions
- Generally highly boundaried
- Privileges the established relationship as the most important relationship
 - Example:
 - “James and I are ride or die, except if I have the ability to hook up with (INSERT CELEBRITY HERE). They're my hall pass”





Swinging



- Swinging is when multiple couples meet up and engage sexually as a group or engage in sexual activities with people they are not in relationship with

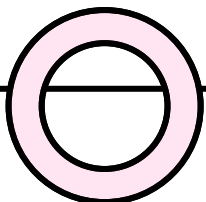
- There is a large social component to swinging
- There are plenty of groups, clubs, and even apps that cater to “The Lifestyle”
- Swinging tends to be focused more on sexual connections but not necessarily relationship development



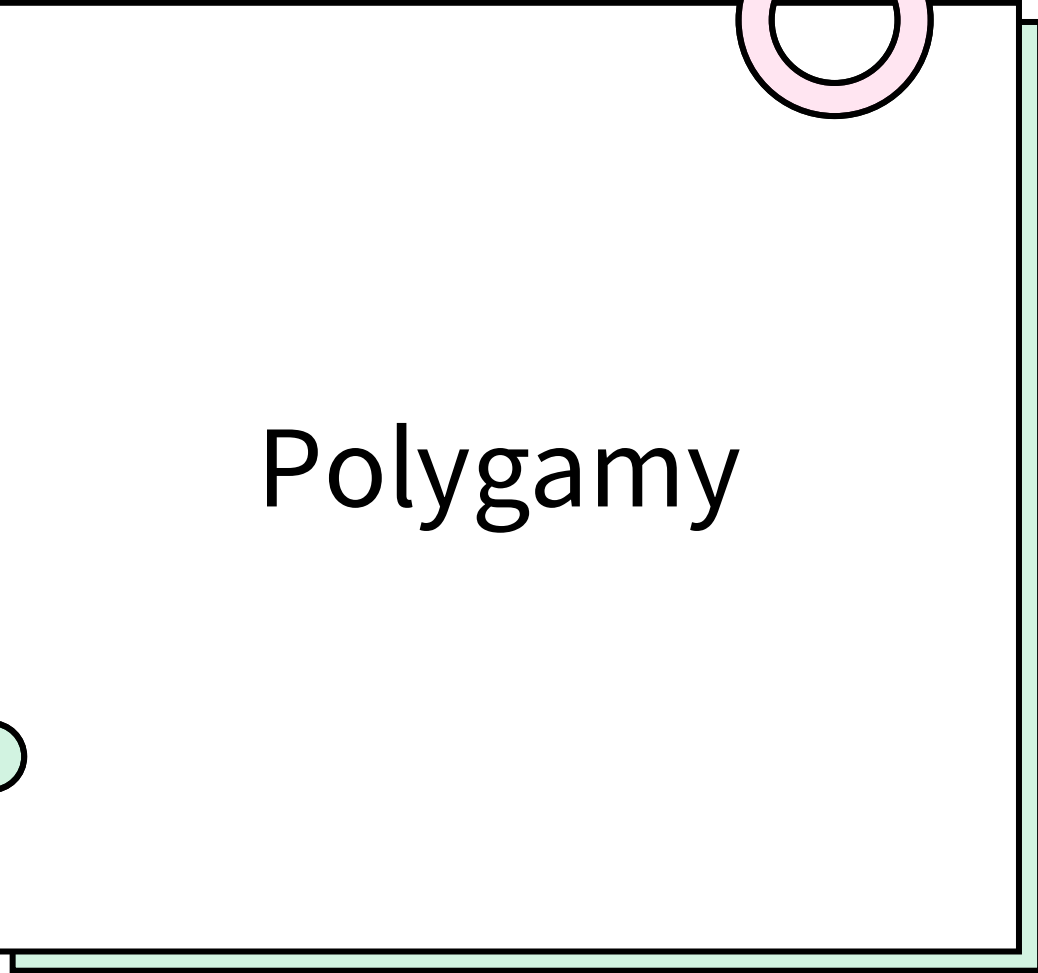
○ Swinging: Terms

- **Soft Swap:** When a partner engages with others but is boundaries against genital contact or PIV (or PIA) sex
- **Full Swap:** See soft swap, but without the boundaries against vaginal or anal sex
- **Hot Wife/Hot Husband/ Hot Spouse:** A dynamic in which one partner is encouraged to explore sexual acts with others with the explicit consent and encouragement of their spouse
- **Cuckholding:** The act of deriving sexual pleasure in seeing one's partner with other sexual partners

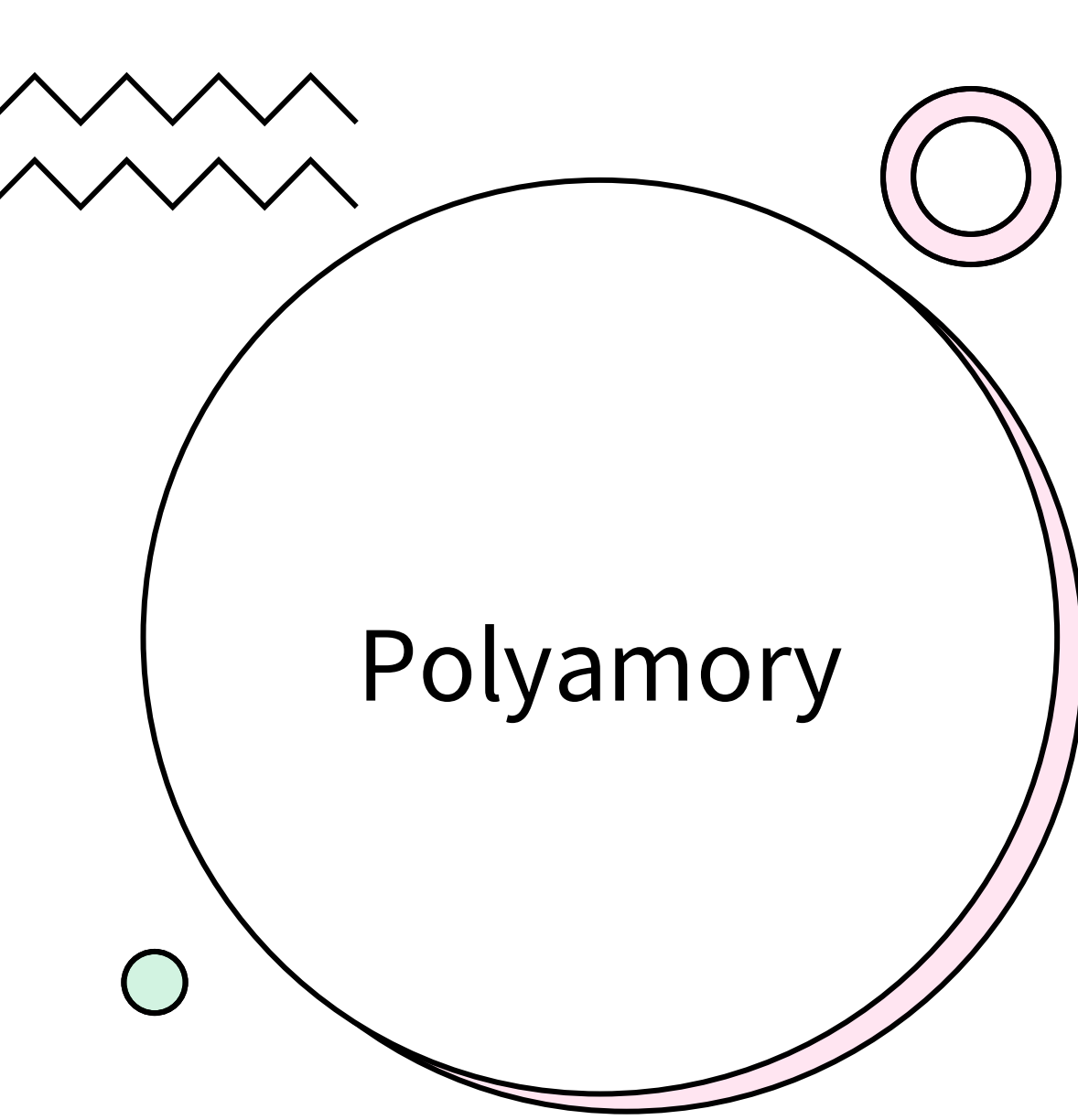




Polygamy

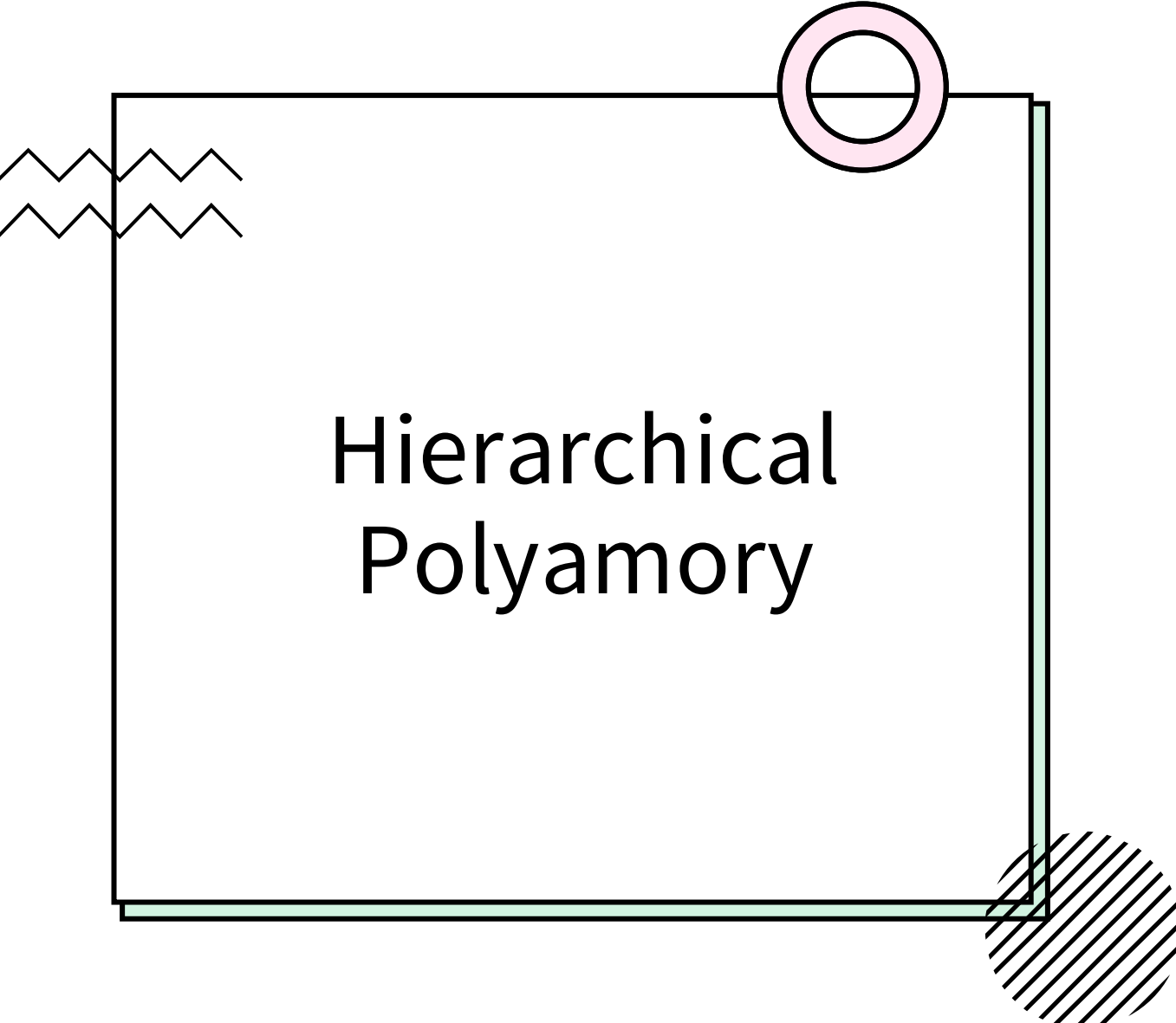


- The practice of being married to multiple spouses
 - Against the law in the U.S.
 - Though some relationships may create space for ceremonial escalation of multiple relationships
 - Polyamory is often confused with polygamy. This is a complicated subject, but generally I defer to just explaining that polyamory is different than polygamy in context to legal definitions
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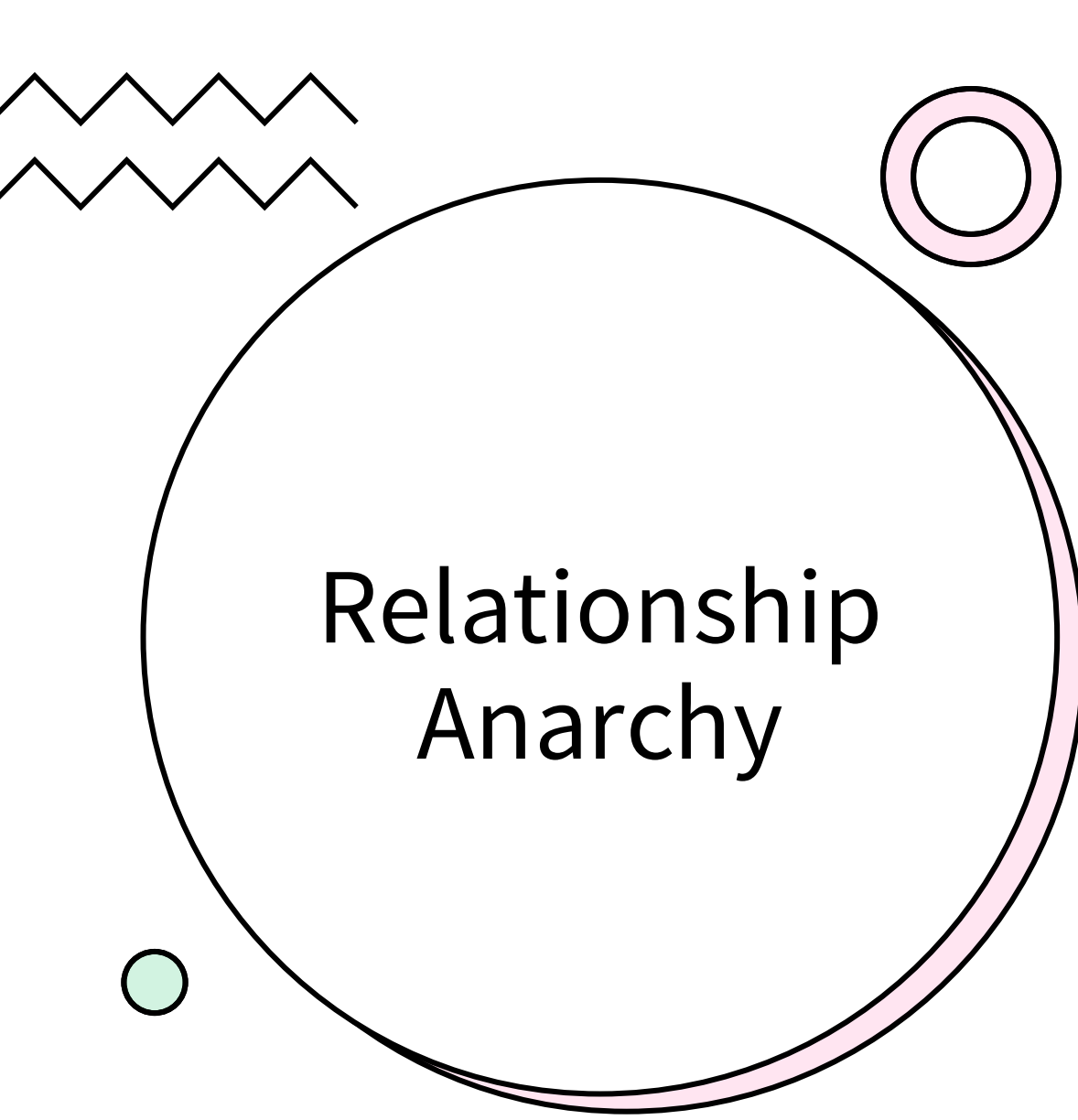
Polyamory

- Having many loves
 - The practice of having multiple romantic and sexual relationships.
 - Polyamory can be practiced solo, partnered, and polyfidelitous relationships
 - **Polyfidelity:** is relationships involving 3 or more people
 - May or may not be based off a hierarchical power system
- 

A diagram illustrating the concept of Hierarchical Polyamory. It features a large black-outlined rectangle. In the top-left corner, there are two sets of three horizontal zigzag lines. In the top-right corner, there is a pink circle with a black outline. In the bottom-right corner, there is a circle filled with black diagonal hatching. A light blue vertical bar is positioned on the right side of the rectangle, extending from the top to the bottom. The text 'Hierarchical Polyamory' is centered within the rectangle.

Hierarchical Polyamory

- Hierarchical polyamory is centered in power structures that focus on strict levels of partnership that power imbalances at different levels
 - Primary Partner:** The most powerful/highest level of partnership
 - Secondary partner(s):** Partners from relationships with less power than the primary relationship
- The system of the hierarchy privileges the primary relationship and is developed in context to said relationship



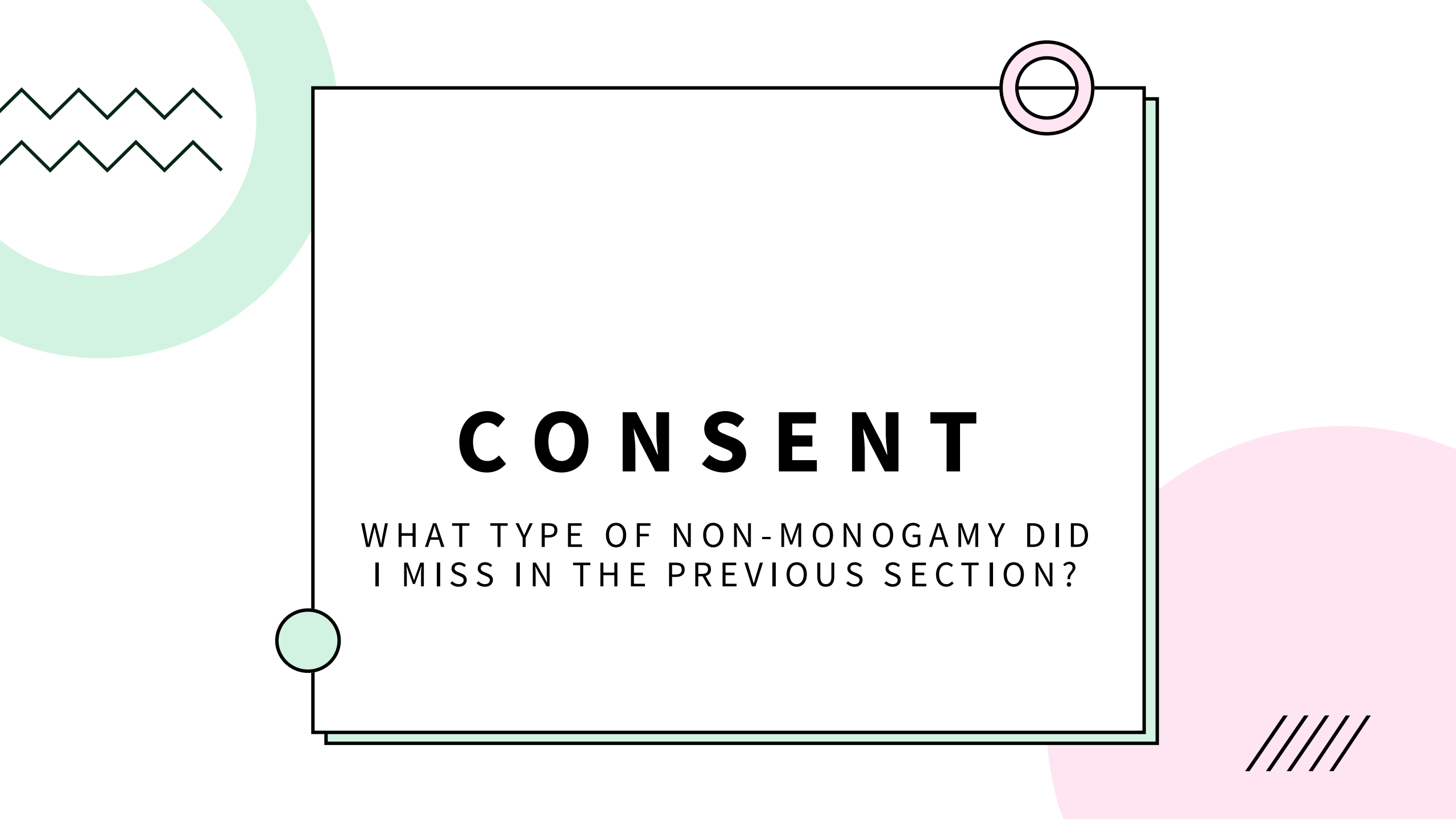
Relationship Anarchy

- A style of relationship in which people do not put friendships and sexual or romantic relationships in different categories but instead allow each relationship to find its own level. (Powell 2018)
 - Not focused on rules within relationships
 - Challenges the “Relationship Escalator” model
 - **Relationship Escalator:** The assumption that relationships have an inflexible upward growth
- 



THE RELATIONSHIP ESCALATOR





CONSENT

WHAT TYPE OF NON-MONOGRAMY DID
I MISS IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION?

○ Affairs

- Technically non-monogamy
- The most common form of non-monogamy
- Cheating is based off the concept of consent violation
- One can be non-monogamous and still cheat
- Cheating is a complicated can of worms.
 - Explore insight over reasons for the consent violation
 - Work toward reconciliation or dissolving the relationship
 - “Some cheat to end a relationship. Some cheat to save a relationship” (Perel)



○ Consent is Key

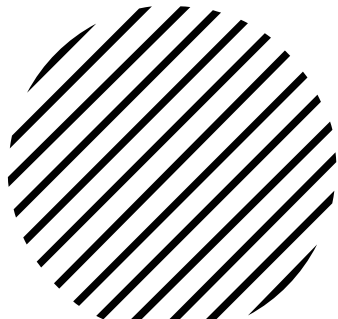
- Ethical non-monogamy is defined via the focus on consent and systemic agreement
- ENM relationships are challenged to communicate to a greater degree and more openly
- Honesty is a primary focus of ENM
 - A primary focus with clients relates to the development of honest and open communication patterns within relationships
- ENM is hard work
 - A common trap I find with client who are new to ENM is that they feel like this will be easy-peasy mac and cheesy





Reasons for Non-Monogamy

- Many folks explore non-monogamous relationships for a variety of reasons.
- When working with clients curious about non-monogamy it's important to welcome the client to consider what they are hoping to get from ENM
- I generally like to ask about what resources they are using to inform their non-monogogamy
- This is a great intervention point for insight development.
 - Explore support and alternatives



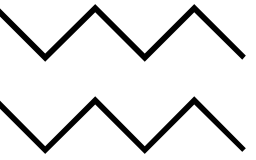
○ Case Example

- Paul and Jean come to therapy seeking assistance in navigating opening up their marriage. This couple has been together for 20 years and has been married for 15. Recently, Jean started taking curling classes and met Chris. In her time curling, Jean and Chris have developed a strong connection.
- Paul and Jean reach out to you to begin the process of exploring opening up their marriage. Paul reports hesitance in opening up, and Jean reports “I identify as polyamorous”
- What questions would you have for Paul and Jean
- What are your first steps in working with this couple?





CHALLENGES TO NON- MONOGAMY



Time/Resources



DATES ARE SPENDY



TIME IS VALUABLE



WORK/LIFE BALANCE IS
OFTEN ALREADY DIFFICULT

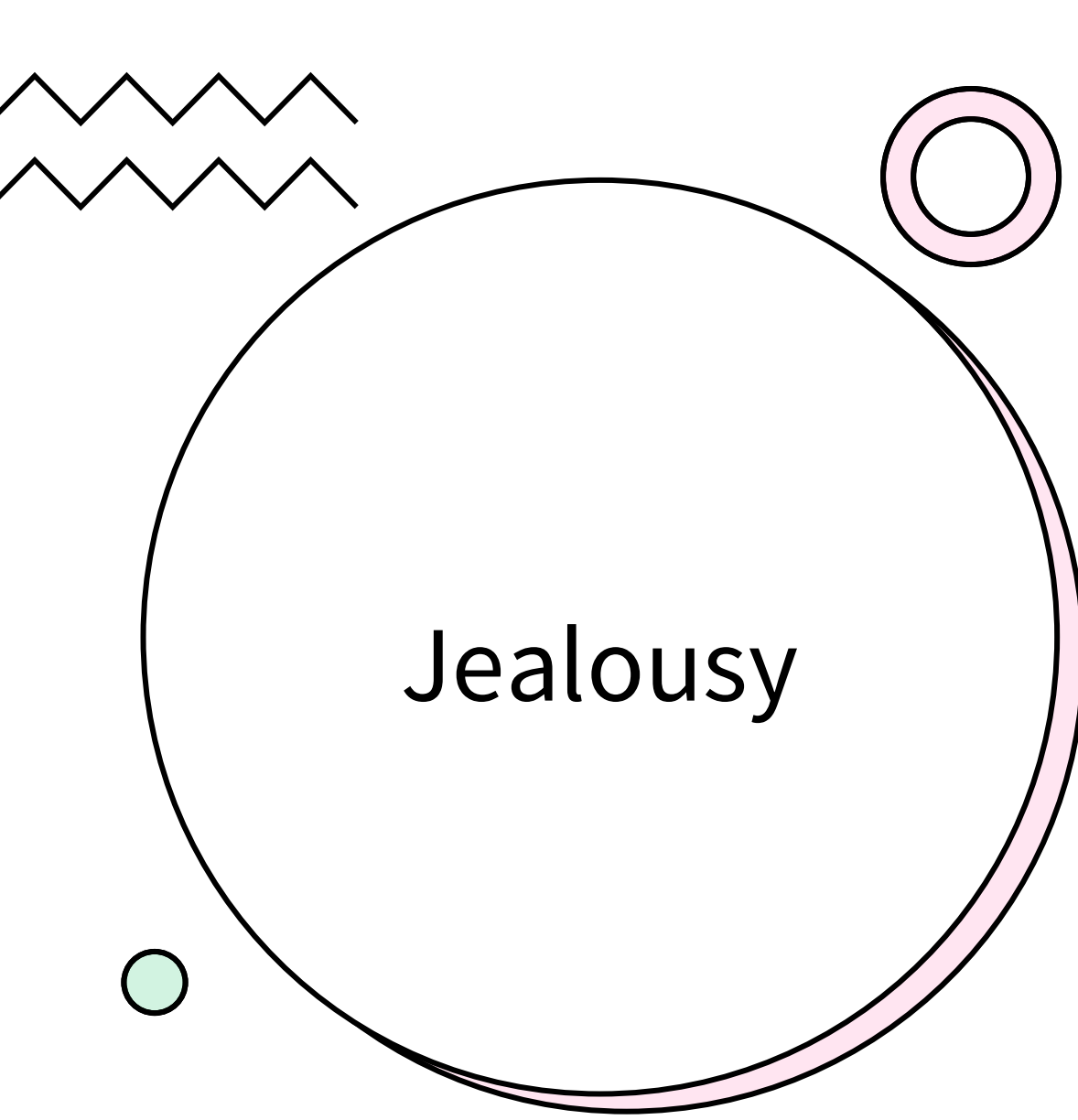




J E A L O U S Y

AND IT'S FRIEND ENVY





Jealousy

- Held within the context of loss, jealousy is one of the greatest challenges for non-monogamous relationships
- The “I’m afraid I will lose you to another”
- Jealousy is not a moral failing for the polyamorist
 - Sometimes jealousy can be seen as shameful, but jealousy is natural and normal
 - It’s not the feeling, it’s the actions connected to the feeling

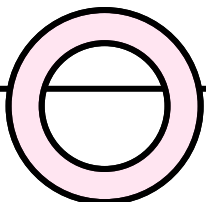


○ Tracking Jealousy Triggers

- Davidson (2020) Outlines the following exercise in tracking jealousy:
 1. How do I know when I am feeling Jealousy? What body sensations do I notice? What emotions feel the strongest? What do my thought patterns look like?
 2. Is there a metaphor that best describes my experience of jealousy?
 3. When was the most recent time I've noticed this response? Was I with a certain person? Have I felt this way around them before?
 4. What do I judge most frequently in others?
 5. What unmet need am I expressing through my judgment?



WHEN WE WANT WHAT OTHERS MAY
HAVE



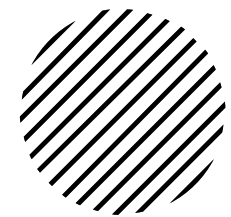
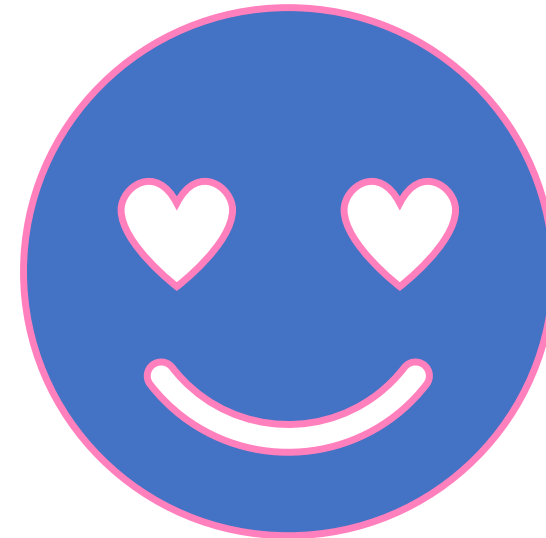
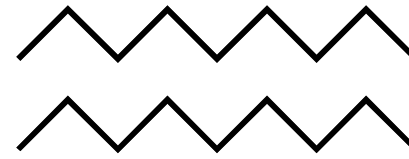
Working with Jealousy and Envy

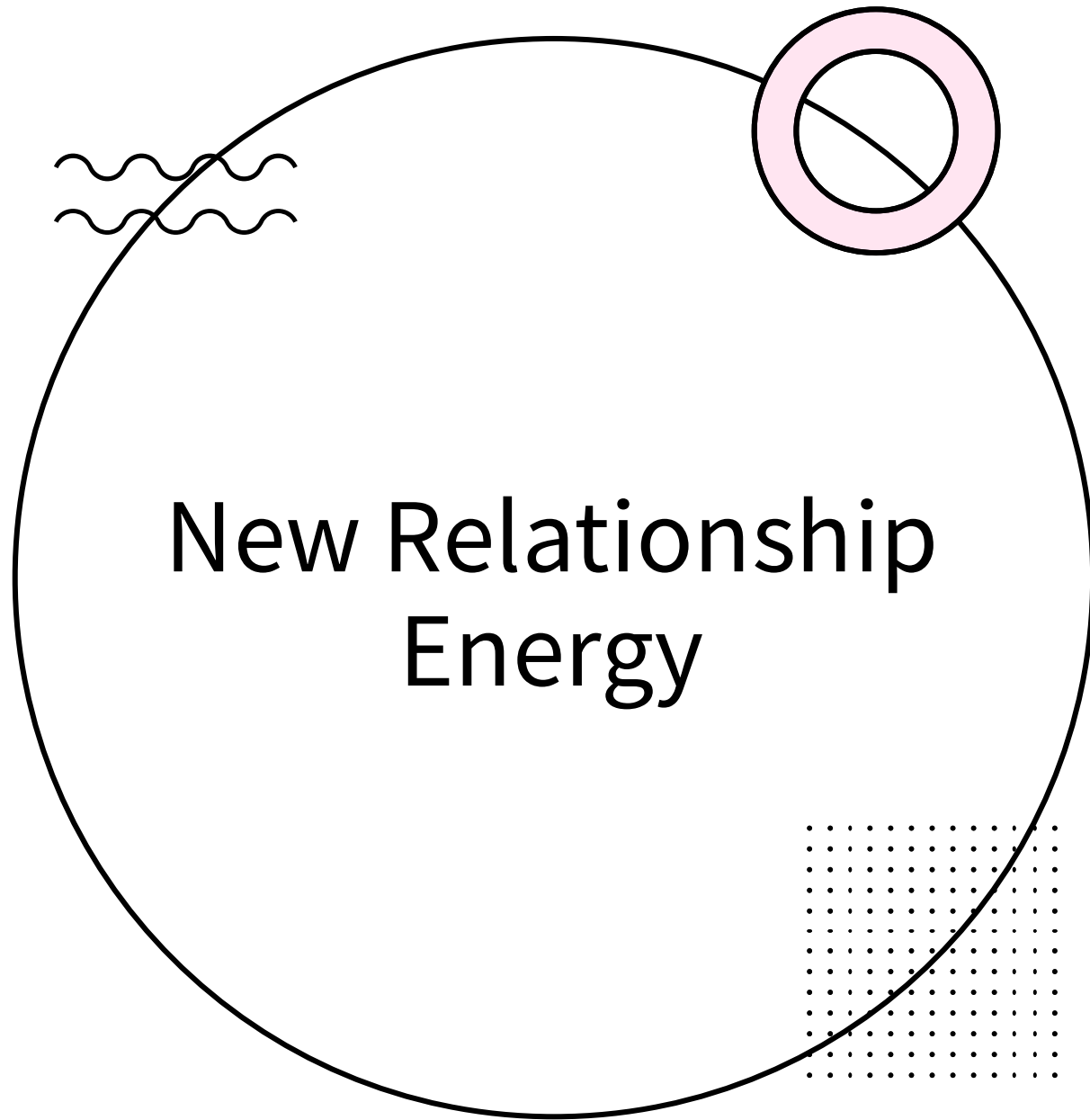
- Rhea Orion points to the following interventions in working with jealousy:
 - Assess the relationship format, perceived causes of Jealousy, and precipitating incidents
 - Teach skills for managing ongoing Jealousy (coping skills)
 - Assist partners in finding ways to keep jealousy to a minimum
 - Cultivate healing (making amends, integrating culture of appreciation)
 - Teach **compersion** as a personal development



Comper...what?

- Compersion is:
 - A feeling of joy when a love one invests in and takes pleasure from another romantic relationship
 - Celebrating the success and experience of another
 - Linked to New Relationship Energy (NRE)





- That warm and fuzzy feeling you get when you start building a connection with someone new
- Literally your body saying: “HEY GO CONNECT WITH THIS PERSON! MAKE BABIES, BE SOCIAL, CONNECT!”
- NRE can be cultivated to flow through all relationships and generally be a positive force
- NRE can also promote less than stellar behaviors



When NRE Goes Bad

- NRE can lead to many challenging behaviors such as:
 - Boundary violations
 - Decreased sleep
 - Decrease in med compliance
 - Decreased food
 - Relapse and substance abuse concerns
 - Work issues
 - Relationship breakdown



○ Case Example: Shane

- Shane is a long-term client of yours who you've worked with for the past three years. In that time Shane has grappled with challenges relating to alcoholism, anxiety, and depression.
- Shane presents to you having recently started seeing Laura. Shane met Laura at a polyamory social held at a brewery.
- In the past month, Shane and Laura have been spending time together. You've noticed that Shane appears more disorganized, more anxious, and reporting concerns around money and time. Shane is also reporting challenges within his other relationships.
- What questions might you have regarding working with Shane going forward?





POLYAMORY

DEFINITIONS AND STRUCTURES



○ Terms and Concepts

- **Primary:** Hierarchical position of most power, closeness, and priority within the relationship structure
- **Secondary:** Within hierarchy, a less privileged partner who may have their relationship partially defined by the primary
- **Nesting Partner:** a live-in partner. Someone who shares residence
- **Anchor Partner:** A partner who holds high importance. Often long term and interconnected relationship
- **Solo Poly:** Having multiple partners but choosing to be one's own primary partner



○ Polyamory Continued

- **Comet:** A partner who is emotionally connected but who is not enmeshed in day to day life. Often long distanced
- **Metamour:** You're partner's partner
- **Polycule:** The network of connections in a polyamorous dating group
- **Hinge Partner:** Someone who is dating separate people who may not be connected to each other.
- **Polyamory under distress:** When a relationship is polyamorous but there is contention regarding the relationship style



○ The Polycule

- Within a polycule there may be different levels of engagement amongst members
 - **Parallel Polyamory:** When partners have separate outside relationships. The polycule is not actively connected
 - **Kitchen Table Polyamory:** When the polycule is open to connection and forming its own system
- It is okay to not like your metamour
 - Just because someone may share a common partner, that does not mean they're going to be your bestie

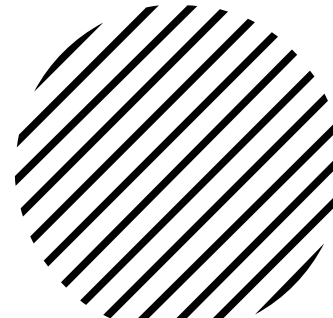




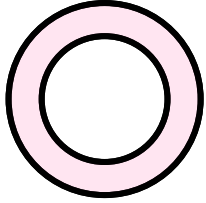
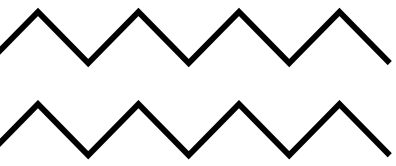
T H E W O R K



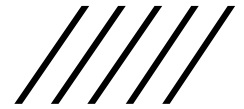
Focus and Interventions for Individuals



- **Focus on insight**
 - Why ENM?
 - What Resources?
 - Goals for ENM?
- **Explore personal narrative**
 - Any hx of boundary crossing?
 - How does the client see their relationship in general?
 - If not partnered, how do they conceptualize intimate connection?
- **Develop skills for clear communication and sitting in discomfort**
 - Mindfulness and basic CBT technique
 - Especially in context to NRE
 - Narrative focus
 - Somatic Experiences
 - Attachment work



Working with Couples

- **Establish a narrative of all members**
 - Who introduced up the concept?
 - When did they do this?
 - What is home life like?
 - **Explore personal feelings related**
 - Focus on legitimacy of feelings
 - Establish healthy boundaries regarding feelings (I am not responsible for your feelings but I am responsible for my actions)
 - **Work toward clear and direct communication**
 - Challenge taboo topic and allow for anything to be discussed
 - **Work on amends if need be**
 - Normalizing rupture and repair work within a relationship
 - Attachment work
- 

○ Attachment Work and Polyamory

- Jessica Fern is known for writing *Polysecure* and *Polywise*
- The thesis of *Polysecure* is the intersection of attachment theory and non-monogamy
 - The HEARTS recipe of ingredients
 - H: Here with me
 - E: Expressed Delight
 - A: Attunement
 - R: Ritual and Routine
 - T: Turning Toward After Conflict
 - S: Secure Attachment with Self



○ Attachment and Non-Monogamy

- Secure attachment is not mandatory for every relationship
- Different relationships may highlight different attachment styles
- Focus on self and expanding to others is key
 - This is ongoing work





CO-CREATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP



○ Co-creating a Relationship

- Some steps I like to engage clients with in opening up the relationship are the following:
- Discuss Values
 - Exploring personal values and values of the relationship
 - What informs these values?
- Explore Boundaries
 - Personal and relational boundaries
 - Soft v. Hard Boundaries
- Build agreed upon rules
- Explore how and when to check in



○ Values

- What are the values of each individual in the system?
 - In individual sessions, explore the narrative of each member of the system
 - Guide the system to identify the values of the individuals and align the individual values within the relationship
- What are guiding values of the relationship?
 - Where is there alignment between members of the relationship? Where are there differences?
 - What can be agreed on by all?
- How explicit are these values within the system?
- Fab 5 Values



○ Connection and Mindfulness

- Working with clients to establish mindfulness and process into their practice of ENM
- Check in before, during, and after doing something challenging
- Work to develop and aftercare system for self and/or the relationship
- Verbally process as necessary



○ Systemic Change Within Non-Monogamy

- A common trope is that opening up is functionally going to save, change, or end a relationship
 - Though dynamic changes can catalyze change, they are not solely responsible for long established patterns
- As with any system, there will always be a desire to return to homeostasis within a relationship
 - Unexamined problems tend to come back
- Interrupting homeostatic patterns is the avenue to sustained change



○ Case Example: The Honeydew House

- You have worked with been working with Liz and Scott for Three years in couples therapy. You helped them open their relationship
- Two years ago Liz and Scott started seeing Jam and Hank, another couple that they met on FEELD
- The two couples began a non-hierarchical relationship in which “everyone is equal” and now all live together
- Recently Liz has reported wanting to de-escalate within the relationship causing conflict amongst the household
- What are some questions, interventions, and treatment plan ideas for this system?



○ Honeydew Continued

- After a few sessions you note the following:
 - Liz and Hank have reported sleeping in the same bed together
 - Jam has reported a desire to begin dating and is using the label “Solo Poly”
 - Scott and Jam have been processing their feelings regarding Hank’s employment and financial literacy
 - Jam and Liz do not have a sexual relationship but use “queer platonic life partners” as labels for each other
- What intervention points would you explore?





Resources

- A Therapist's Guide to Consensual Nonmonogamy – Rhea Orion
- Building Open Relationships- Dr. Liz Powell
- Polysecure-Jessica Fern
- More Than Two – Frankiln Veaux and Eve Rickert
- Opening Up –Tristan Taormino
- The Ethical Slut- Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy
- Girl Sex 101 – Allison Moon
- Mating in Captivity –Esther Perel
- The State of Affairs – Esther Perel
- Partners in Passion- Mark Michaels and Patricia Johnson
- The Multiamory Podcast
- The Dildorks



○ References

- Davidson, E. (2020). *Thriving in non-monogamy: An ethical slut's guide: Overcome jealousy, enjoy sex, and honor yourself*. Rockridge Press.
- Easton, D. (2017). *The ethical slut dossier easton*. Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale.
- Fern, J. (2020). *Polysecure: Attachment, trauma and consensual nonmonogamy*. Thorntree Press.
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- Perel, E. (2017). *The state of affairs: Rethinking infidelity*. HarperCollins.
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