

MONOGAMY? IN THIS ECONOMY?

**COUNSELING COLLEGE STUDENTS IN
POLYAMOROUS AND ETHICALLY NON-
MONOGAMOUS RELATIONSHIPS**

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By the end of the presentation, attendees will be able to...

Describe ethical non-monogamy (ENM) as an identity and a relationship structure

Identify at least three unique challenges facing college students and emerging adults engaging in polyamory/ENM

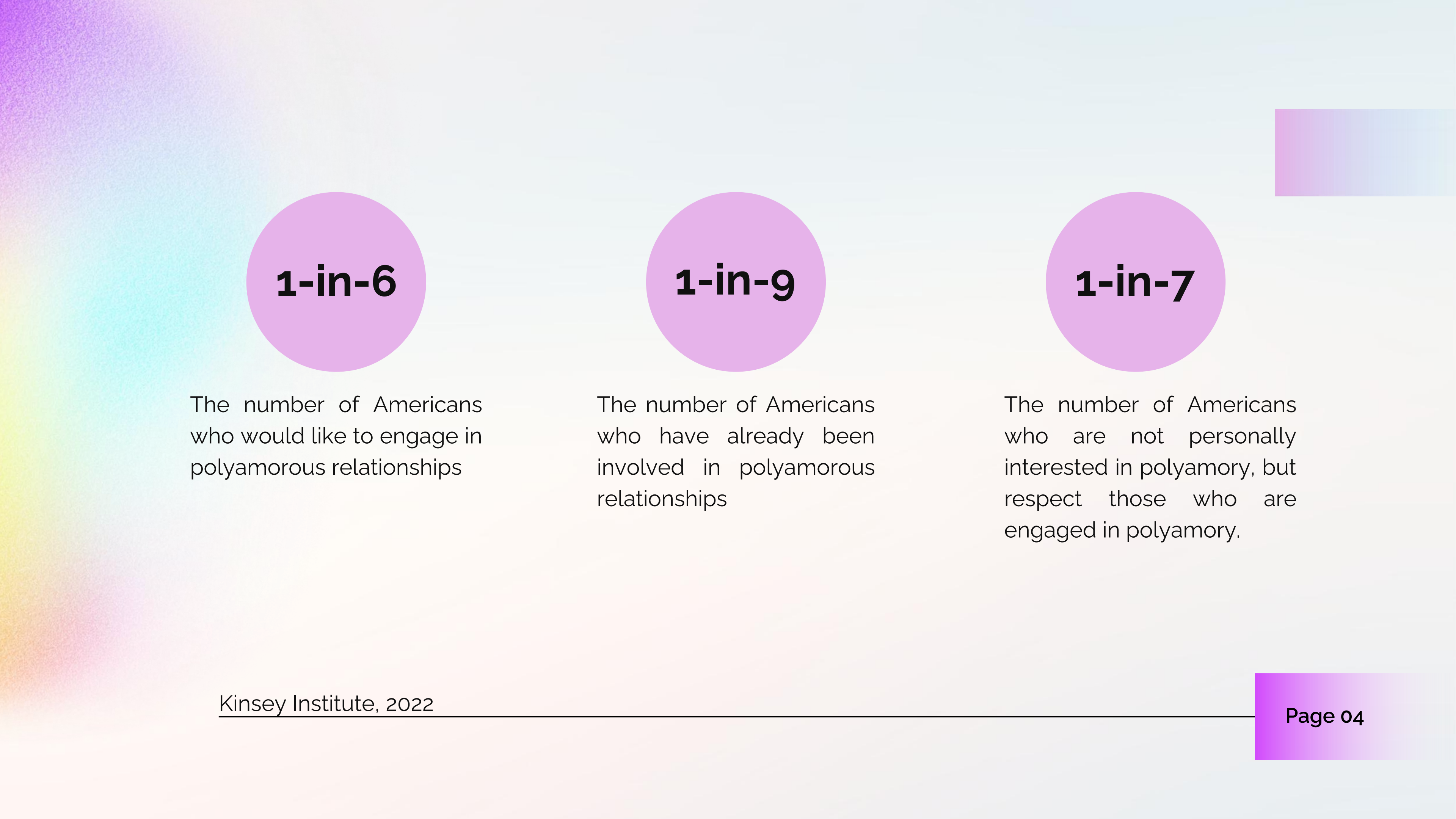
Identify at least two therapeutic interventions for working with polyamorous/ENM students

About me

Ollie is a transgender, neurodivergent, and polyamorous therapist working to empower these communities through counseling and education

All content for this presentation was created without the use of generative AI





1-in-6

The number of Americans who would like to engage in polyamorous relationships

1-in-9

The number of Americans who have already been involved in polyamorous relationships

1-in-7

The number of Americans who are not personally interested in polyamory, but respect those who are engaged in polyamory.

Ethical Non- Monogamy

Monogamy refers to a relationship dyad in which there is an agreement that there will be no extradyadic romantic or sexual relationships. This can be by explicit or implicit agreement.

Consensual Non-Monogamy is the umbrella term for relationship structures that include agreements that permit outside sexual or romantic relationships, including polyamory, open relationships, swinging, but not infidelity.

Ethical Non-Monogamy refers to the aspect of CNM where all partners are in agreement about the relationship structure

Polyamory

A relationship structure in which one or more partners engage in multiple romantic and often sexual relationships. Polyamorous relationships involve love and romance, though not all partners are necessarily romantically involved with each other.

"Polyamory is not just about having multiple partners; it's about challenging the cultural norms around love, relationships, and identity." - *Jessica Fern, polyamory researcher*

Other Terminology

Metamour

Refers to your partner's partner. Derived from 'paramour' and sometimes shorted to "meta"

Polycule

A group of people connected through interconnected sexual and romantic relationships. This does not imply that all individuals are in romantic relationships with each other, but can imply that these relationships are often intimate

Queer-Platonic

A relationship that has many of the hallmarks of other forms of intimate relationships, such as strong emotional connection or cohabitation, without romance or sexual intimacy

Compersion

Experiencing joy from your partner's pleasure in other sexual or romantic encounters/relationships. Some describe this as the opposite of jealousy

Relationship as a spectrum & the role of hierarchy

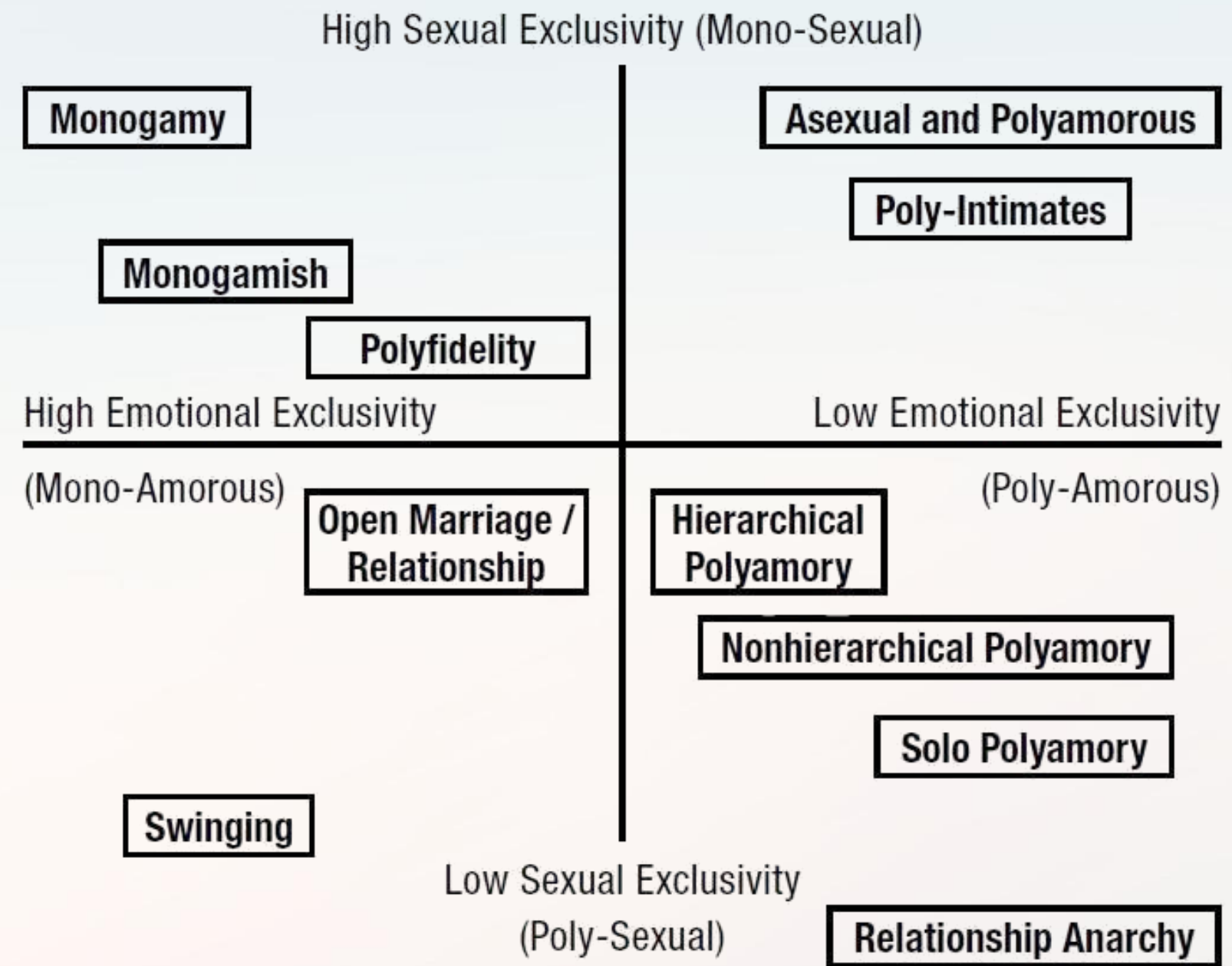
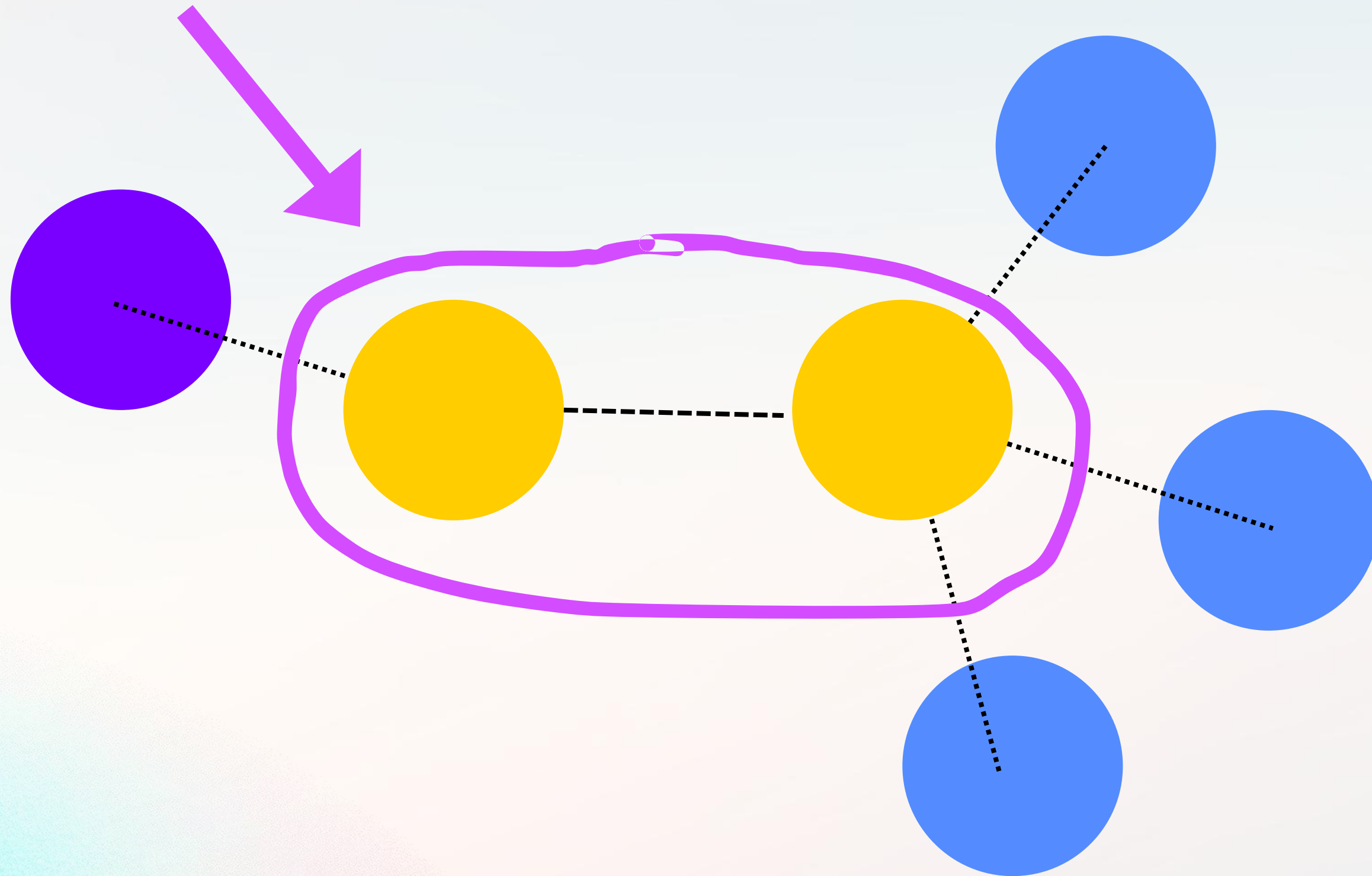
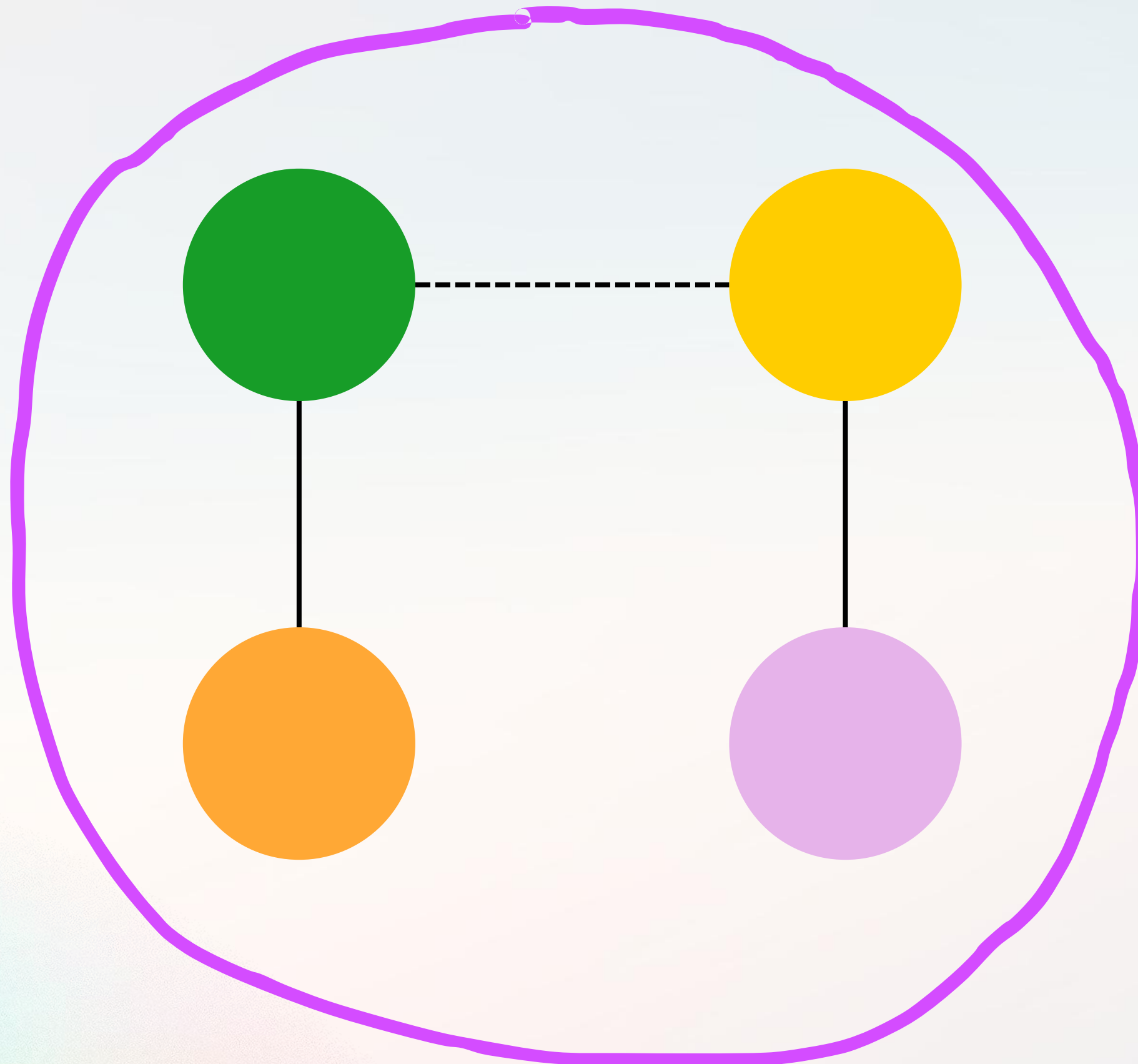


FIGURE 4.1: The different types of nonmonogamy.

from "Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma, and Consensual Non-monogamy" Fern (2020)

Decision-making body





Who is polyamorous?

LGBTQ+

Shared values of chosen family, challenging of relationship norms, consent, and individuality. Overlap in identify

Neurodivergent

In ADHD, may help meet needs for intense connections with many people and cravings for varied stimulation. In autism, highlights the value of different people meeting different social and emotional needs (Attia, 2025)

Kinky

There is a large overlap between ethical non-monogamy and kink/BDSM communities, typically attributed to the desire to explore many facets of sexual identity

Case Study

Ben is a 21 year old college junior seeking counseling for relationship support. He shares that while he has been in a loving relationship with his boyfriend Evan for the last two years, he has noticed a growing attraction to one of his other friends. Ben shares that this has happened a few times previously, he often forms crushes on others whether or not he is in a relationship, and discloses that he cheated on his partner in high school for this reason. Ben loves Evan and doesn't want to end their relationship, but he isn't sure what to do about his feelings for others and is worried that he will do something impulsive that will hurt Evan.

What are your initial reactions to this client?

Addressing Therapeutic Bias

Cultural and personal bias

- What does the dominant culture say about people engaging in ENM?
- What does your culture say about people engaging in ENM?
- How have your personal experiences impacted the way that you approach counseling different relationships?

How do we define therapeutic success?

Mononormativity

Refers to society's standard of monogamy, the practice of emotional and sexual commitment to one individual as the norm for engaging in romantic relationships

- The belief that only monogamous relationships are healthy and have the ability to be successful
- The belief that interest in non-monogamy is indicative of insecure attachment or otherwise in need of "fixing"
- Societal structure around the assumption that one will have one partner (also impacts those who are asexual/aromantic)

Kean's 11 Mononormative Biases (2018)

- The passionate/romantic ideal of “one true love”.
- The steady/companionate ideal of a “soul mate”.
- The idea that the measure of commitment is sexual “fidelity”.
- The idea that the measure of commitment is emotional “fidelity”.
- The fact that “fidelity” and “faithfulness” are understood as synonyms of “monogamy”.
- The belief that having one sexual-romantic partner at a time is mature/natural/best.

Kean's 11 Mononormative Biases (2018)

- The idea that there is a clear, coherent, and sustainable distinction between the categories of “friend” and “lover”.
- The belief that sex is healthy only in the company of romance and commitment.
- The way romance and commitment are understood as leading to or synonymous with monogamy.
- The belief that sex means you are serious about someone.
- The contradictory belief that sex with more than one person shows you are not serious about those people.

“Marriage Equality”

In the United States, synonymous with two monogamous individuals with the same sex designations on their government documents being able to get legally married

Many people who are multi-partnered have to make the choice whether to gain legal benefits and recognition with one partner, risking devaluing their other partners, or forgoing marriage to avoid discrimination in their relationships

Why polyamory?

- No one can be everything to anyone
- Discrepancies in sexual desires
 - One partner has a higher libido
 - One partner has sexual interests they would like to engage in that another partner is not comfortable with
- Desire for complex relationships with multiple partners
- Belief in non-monogamy or polyamory philosophically
- Pattern of serial monogamy or infidelity, feeling often drawn to other people

What's the difference?

- There is little difference in relationship functioning between monogamous and ENM relationships (Conley et al., 2017, Rubel & Bogaert, 2015)
- Non-monogamous relationships demonstrate unique mental benefits (Moors, Matsick, & Schechinger, 2017)

Overall, research demonstrates little difference in the wellbeing and mental health outcomes of polyamorous and ENM individuals

Key Elements of Polycule- centered practice (Ansara, 2023)

- Investigating and acknowledging coercive/compulsory monogamy.
- Not assuming polyamory is inherently less consensual.
- Recognising polyamory is not necessarily “open”.
- Being aware of the power and privilege dynamics when a relationship built as a “two-person tent” wants to “open up”.

Key Elements of Polycule- centered practice (Ansara, 2023)

- Investigating apparent “infidelity”, “affairs”, and “cheating” in terms of whether the monogamy was with informed consent, coerced, compulsory, or a relationship agreement breach.
- Respecting and valuing the needs of everyone in the relational system.

Key Elements of Polycule-centered practice (Ansara, 2023)

- Identifying and addressing couple privilege, hierarchical privilege, and other mononormative biases.
- Making sure relationship configurations and agreements are negotiated and consensual, not “mono by default”.
- Clarifying relational norms (i.e., autonomy vs. permission norm).

Key Elements of Polycule-centered practice (Ansara, 2023)

- Addressing relational ruptures that result from non-consensual hierarchies, compulsory and coerced monogamy, and changing awareness and needs.
- Engaging in psychoeducation so people are aware of diverse relational structures and norms.
- Helping people to identify and address privilege and bias in their relational system.

Key Elements of Polycule-centered practice (Ansara, 2023)

- Identifying non-consensual, mononormative relational dynamics such as:
 - Unicorns – People who join a dyad but are not consulted in relationship decisions.
 - Lassoers – “I’m your one true love! You know you only want me.”
 - Love Police – “Do what you want sexually, but you can’t love anyone else!” (In effect, the Love Police rule promotes the sexual objectification of other partners.)
 - Pyramids – “I have to matter the most!”
 - Islands – “I want nothing to do with your other partners!”

Common Challenges

- Jealousy
- Communication and Boundaries
- Hierarchy and Inequality between partners
- New Relationship Energy
- Coming out
- Social and Societal Discrimination
- Legal Considerations
- Ethical Dilemmas

Case Study

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- What additional information would you need in order to help support Ben with this challenge?
- What interventions or strategies would you use?

Therapeutic considerations around language

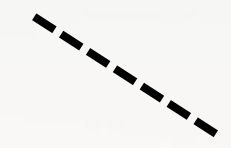
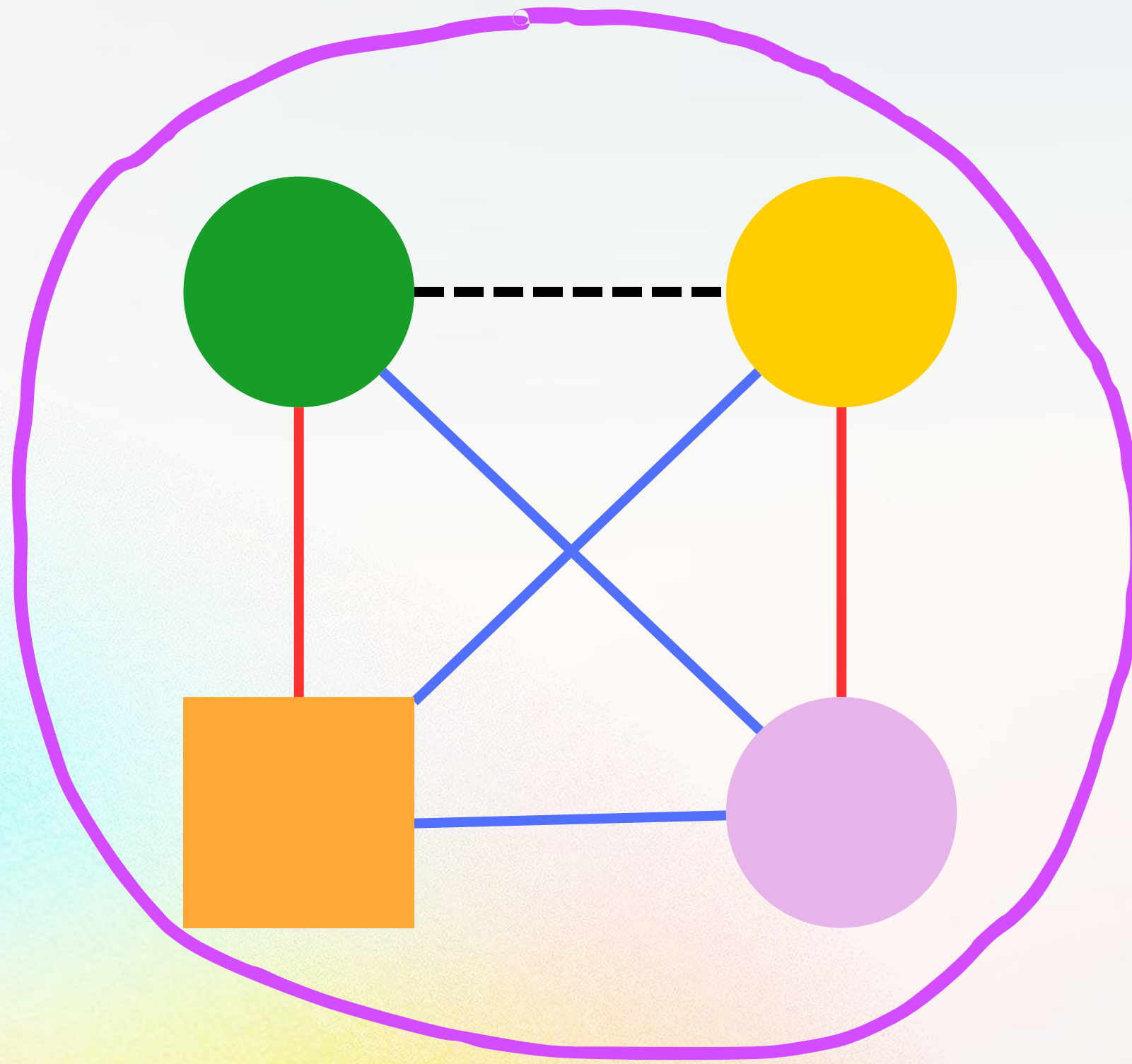
In assessment:

- “Do you have any romantic or sexual partners?”
- “Who are the most important people in your life, and what are those relationships like?”

“Alternative” or “non-traditional” to who?

- enforces the assumption that ENM or poly lifestyles are exclusively countercultural, when in reality they are practiced across political and cultural spectrums
- “Monogamy is not merely a neutral and universally normative social construct,

Genograms



Married



Romantic Partners



Platonic Partners

Relationship Smorgasbord

Uses

- Consider what you are looking for from a partner or in individual relationships
- Identify potential areas of unmet expectations (also helpful with friendships!)
- Build understanding of the complexity of relationships

Potential Questions

- Of what you've highlighted, which feel the most cohesive with your partner, and which (if any) is there tension around?
- What do you tend to expect from a romantic relationship/sexual relationship/friendship?

HEARTS for Polysecurity

H- Here (being here and present with me

- How do you show you are here with your partners?
- How do you your partners demonstrate that they are being present with you?
- Do you trust that your partners will be available and responsive if and when you need them?

HEARTS for Polysecurity

E- Expressed Delight

- How do you already show expressed delight for your partners?
- How do your partners let you know that you are unique, special, and precious to them?
- Are there additional or different ways that you would like to experience expressed delight from your partners?

A- Attunement

- In what ways do you already attune to your partners?
- Are there ways that you would like your partners to better or differently attune to you that would support you in feeling even more seen and understood?

HEARTS for Polysecurity

R- Rituals and Routines

- What are the routines my partners and I already have that are meaningful to me and support me in feeling safe and secure together?
- Are there any daily or regular routines that would support me in feeling more secure with my partners?
- What do you and your partners need to reconnect with each other after being apart?

HEARTS for Polysecurity

T- Turning Towards after Conflict

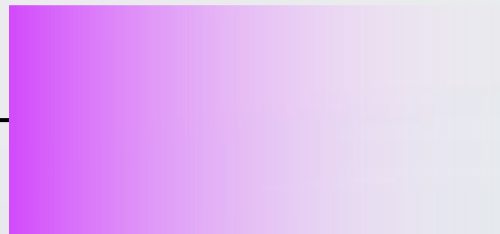
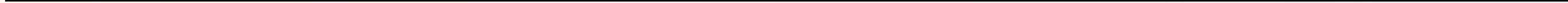
- Are there certain themes to the conflicts that you have with your partners?
- How are you at offering a repair? What comes easily to you and what feels difficult?
- How are you at receiving a repair from your partners?

S- Secure Attachment with Self

- Go HEART yourself



Thank you!



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