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I take a deep breath, feel like I'm going to faint. But the words that could follow, that I have scripted and rehearsed all morning, that I deliberately came here with my best friends to declare... just can't get said: 'My Dad knows they're more than friends. He loves her. So does Nathan. And my Mum loves them both' (Pina, in Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2008: p. 285).

Pina is a 16-year-old protagonist in my novel who discovers her Mum is in a polyamorous relationship with her Dad and 'family friend' Nathan. One of the many dilemmas that arises is what Pina is to tell her schoolfriends and teachers. Although fictional, Pina and many of the other characters in my novel are based on research participants in my work with polyfamilies. Although there is a growing body of work and research addressing gay and lesbian families, single parent families and other forms of 'family diversity' in relation to schools, multi-partnered families or polyamorous families such as Pina's are still being silenced in our schools as they fall between the polarities of normative heterosexual monogamous marriages and the increasing attention to same-sex families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; 2002; 2006; forthcoming a & b; Pallotta-Chiarolli & Lubowitz, 2003; Riggs, Chapter 19, this volume).

Children from polyfamilies have been written about in only a few pioneering texts (Anapol, 1992; Nearing, 1992; Arden, 1996; West, 1996; Easton and Lisz, 1997; Iantaffi, 2006; Newitz, 2006). Most of these writings illustrate the emotional, social and mental health positives these children experience growing up in such homes while being vulnerable to emotional, social and mental health negatives in external settings such as schools. A few recent studies also report on the pathologization and problematization of polyfamilies, multosexual parents and their children by therapists (Davidson, 2002; Weitzman, 2006). Thus, although children are found to generally benefit from having ‘multiple loving parents’ who can offer ‘more quality time’ and ‘a greater range of interests and energy levels’, polyparents are extremely reluctant to disclose their family structures to outsiders (Strassberg, 2003: 464; see also Sheff, Chapter 17, this volume). A major barrier to disclosure in schools and health settings is the fear of legal interventions, social stigmatization and harassment of themselves and their children (Sheff, Chapter 17, this volume).

Our children pass as kids from a monogamous family because even though the signs are there, the teachers, the school, the system doesn't know how to read them.

Naomi (heteropoly with 1 heteromono male partner, and 1 bipoly male partner)

For the sake of making it possible for their children to have a safer, easier and successful time at school, most polyfamilies in my research chose to pass as monogamous and heterosexual even if the schools their children attended constructed themselves as sites of diversity, safety and inclusivity. Polyparents expressed panopticonic fears and behaviors based on known and surmised external surveillance and punishment (Foucault, 1977) should their family structures become public knowledge in schools. In other words, they policed and regulated their own words and actions in order to avoid external policing and regulation. Interestingly, passing was actually seen as easy due to the similarities between their families and monogamous families, particularly in the realm of public imagery and activity of normative families, and whereby the only differences were in the private domain of sexual and intimate relationships. For example, families will give existing and publicly known normative labels to family members in order to pass in schools, such as 'step-dad', 'step-mum', 'uncle' and 'godmother'. Nevertheless, many polyparents worried about the effects of disclosing their polyrelationships to their children because the invisibility of their families in the outside world can create 'a sense of unreality' for children, 'as if one is seeing something that others cannot see'. This realization of 'invisibility and unacceptance' can 'plant the seed of fear in the child's heart' (Wright, 2001: p. 288). Thus, in order to protect children from this cognitive and emotional dissonance, many polyfamilies will pass as monogamous to their own children.
A few of the parents in this research were also teachers, thus bordering and negotiating their positions within the school as ‘insider/outsider’ (Trinh, 1990) or claiming an ‘outside belonging’ (Probyn, 1996). Most polyteachers passed off their own families as monogamous and verified how easy it is for a school to not question the performativity or surface image of a multi-partnered family. The school operates on shared knowledges and discourses rather than questioning what may lie beyond or in excess of the known and normative (Derrida, 1981; Kofuf, 1991). Indeed, many schools are so grateful to have family involvement that they do not problematize or interrogate the structures that families present themselves within. Thus, today’s increasingly diverse forms of heterosexual families, the outcomes of socially acceptable processes of serial monogamy, provide a cover or closet for polyanomy. However, as polyamorous teachers cautioned, the non-questioning approach by schools is only maintained if the family presents as functional and the child as healthy and happy. Any problem, even if it is not connected to family structure, would be seen as sufficient cause to problematize and pathologize the family.

‘WE'RE HANGING OVER THE FENCES OF WHAT FAMILIES ARE MEANT TO BE': POLYFAMILIES AS BORDERING

The kids' schools and some of the kids’ friends' families don’t know what to make of us... So they’re on the fence about us cos we’re hanging over the fence of what families are meant to be.

Gayle (heteromo in a relationship with a heteropolyman)

Many participants in my research spoke of feeling as if they and their children bordered two worlds (Moore & Norris, 2003), or were on a fence/borderzone between the private world of home wherein family was defined, constructed and experienced in positive and functional ways; and the public world of school and community wherein their family was defined, constructed and experienced problematically, whether they were out or passing (Trinh, 1990; see also Nearing, 1992; Morgan, 2001; T Evans, 2001). This necessitated the negotiation and construction of what that border-site would look like, and how it was to be straddled in ways that would be comfortable and supportive for all members of the family. These negotiations and border-boundary constructions entailed discussions with their children about what could be said, when, how, and with whom, about their polyhomes. ‘Ongoing tension’ may be experienced by these border-children between themselves within their families, ‘which feel ‘normal’ and safe and nurturing’, and their experiences outside their families, ‘in which they often feel invisible or vilified’ (Wright, 2001: p. 288). Some parents in my research believed that children could be taught to lie at school and be told why this was necessary. They advocated teaching their children the skills of ‘hacienda caras’ or ‘constructing faces’ (Anzaldua, 1990), and parody and mimicry (Bordo, 1992), in order to minimize external disruption and maximize internal familial function and happiness. Some adults in the research who had grown up in polyfamilies and who had learned to lie at school believed that the positives they had gained from being raised in such closeted families far outweighed any negatives such as lying (McDonald, 2001). Indeed, it provided the vantage point of being raised in the margins and able to interrogate the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of the center (see Hooks, 1990; Kroegeer, 2003).

Another very important border that polyfamilies may inhabit and which may create tension and dissonance is the temporal one, the pre-school and after-school border. Pre-school children may come from happy families and polycommunities where polyamory is accepted and ‘normal’. However, after starting school and becoming overwhelmingly aware of the imposition of hetero-monogamist family structure as the dominant discourse, these children may begin to redefine their families in negative ways or experience confusion.

‘WE MIGHT CONTAMINATE THE SCHOOL WITH SOME POLYVIRUS': POLYFAMILIES AS POLLUTING

It's really hard when the schools treat our kids as if we might contaminate the school with some polyvirus. Meanwhile, some kids at that school come from families where drug addictions, domestic violence and child abuse are rife but they’re treated as ‘normal'... We're not aliens from some other planet launching a major invasion and contamination of earth families! We're just part of the diversity of families on earth!

Catherine (bipolyMum with bipoly female and male partners)

Some polyfamilies decide that rather than pass as monogamous or negotiate border-dwelling positions between the two worlds of home and school, they will be pollutants (Douglas, 1966) in their children’s schools, participating in all school events as an ‘out’ polyfamily. These families resisted panoptic fears and policing, deliberately polluting the normative family discursive frameworks within which schools operate. By presenting their relationships as legitimate and worthy of official acknowledgment and respect, polyfamilies not only claim public space but compel institutions to adapt to new and expanding definitions of family. Some polyparents deliberately and confidently drew attention to themselves while simultaneously turning the discomfiting gaze back onto those who are questioning the polyfamilia (Schutz, 1944; Douglas, 1966), challenging them with why they are doing the questioning in the first place, and what kinds of dysfunctions are legitimated as part of a ‘normal’ hetero-monogamist family
such as hetero-patriarchal misogyny and emotional and/or physical violence. Indeed, unlike some parents who tried to pass as non-poly in order to avoid legal attention, some pollutant polyparents were prepared to take legal action themselves if their children were harassed at school.

A strategic form of pollution discussed by many polyparents was inserting oneself into the school community as a proactive parent undertaking what ‘good’ normative parents do, such as joining parent committees, school boards, and volunteering for classroom and school community events and activities. This gaining of validation and positive attention appeared to prevent or circumvent any legal action or investigation being undertaken by the school and child welfare systems. Indeed, any discrimination a polyfamily might experience for being a polluting deviant minority in the school’s range of family structures was compensated or balanced by what the rest of the school community upheld as ‘engaged’ and ‘committed, participatory’ parenting. This is itself considered a positive minority form of parenting in a society where parents have decreasing time and inclination to volunteer their services to schools. This increasing disengagement of parents from schools is occurring at a time when schools are being told by educational researchers that they need to become ‘communities of commitment’ if they wish to improve the learning and well-being of their students (Ancess, 2003). Of course, as polyparents stated, if we recall the way that many polyfamilies explain that having multiple adults to share in the raising, resourcing and education of children is extremely advantageous, it stands to reason that there would be more adults, resources and time available to participate in a school community (Sheff, Chapter 17, this volume).

The one concern and sadness that many polluting polyparents expressed was the fear that their being out would lead to the harassment and stress of their children. Many tried to prepare their children for the consequences of their pollution by providing them with verbal, mental and emotional strategies to counteract or deflect any negativity at school so that they are active agents rather than ‘social puppets’ in the hands of educational institutions (Boden, 1990; Buxton, 2007). Indeed, some young people who had grown up in polyfamilies polluting their schools were grateful for this experience of handling marginality with openness and confidence, being situated at a critical vantage point as a ‘stranger’ learning how to deconstruct and question the ‘unquestioned and unquestionable’ (Schutz, 1944); and having the skills and confidence to tackle other forms of conformity, ignorance and discrimination in their own acts of pollution (Douglas, 1966), such as participating in anti-racist and anti-homophobic school activities.

However, a problematic paradox for children from pollutant polyfamilies was their intersection with passing as, or parodying (Butler, 1990; 1991; Bordo, 1992), a ‘perfect family’. This strategy was utilized by many polyfamilies in order to prevent any perceived or real deficit or dysfunctionality in their family being used to justify, explain or exaggerate their child’s learning difficulties or any socio-emotional concerns at school.

Thus, even as they ‘came out’ as ‘not normal’, risking a great loss of control over how they would be constructed or related to (McDonald, 2001; Sedgwick, 1993a), they ensured that they appear not only ‘normal’ as that would entail the usual complexities/dysfunctionality of ‘normal’ families, but that they were beyond normal or beyond fault (see Sheff, 2008; and Chapter 17, this volume).

Indeed, their children may also feel the need to pass as ‘perfect well-adjusted kids’ in order to publicly signify the success and well-adjustment of their family. They may develop what Garner calls the ‘poster-child mentality’ (2004, p. 29). This is also found in same-sex families, a process which Garner describes as ‘straightening up for the public’ (2004, p. 179) and which could be termed ‘monogamizing for the public’ in relation to polyfamilies.

Thus, panoptic surveillance leads to self-regulation and assimilation in children from polluting families as well as children from passing families and indeed, passing and polluting become interwoven blurred constructs that meet, mesh and conflict on the borders (Trinh, 1991). Children from polyfamilies ‘have to make daily choices about if and how to come out’ to their schools about their families, and thereby risk having their families blamed for any harassment they receive; and if and how to come out to their families about what is happening to them at school (Garner, 2004; p. 105). Nevertheless, most offspring from ‘out’ polyfamilies and most ‘out’ polyfamilies concluded that despite these potential and present dilemmas, the positives generally outweighed the negatives.

SCHOOLFAMILIES INCLUDES POLYFAMILIES

This overview has shown that much work needs to be done in schools to bridge the chasm between the diversity of polyfamilies in communities and the way they are re-defined, undermined or erased in schools. As more and more polyamorous people find each other and establish intentional families, they will produce what White, a polyparent, explains, ‘a cohort of young people who are confident, ethical, self-actualizing, open-minded and secure. Two of them live at my house’ (White, 2007: p. 13).