



Non-monogamies and contemporary intimacies

edited by David En-Griffiths, Daniel Cardoso, Boka En, Meg-John Barker,
Sina Muscarina, and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

Graduate Journal of Social Science January 2018, Volume 14, Issue 1

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The Graduate Journal of Social Science (ISSN: 1572-3763) is an open-access online journal focusing on methodological and theoretical issues of interdisciplinary relevance. The journal publishes two issues per year, one of which is thematic and one of which groups innovative and instructive papers from all disciplines. GJSS welcomes submissions from both senior and junior academics, thus providing a forum of publication and exchange among different generations engaged in interdisciplinary research. GJSS is published by EBSCO publishing.

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Editorial

David En-Griffiths, Daniel Cardoso,
Boka En, Meg-John Barker, Sina Muscarina,
and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli

It was 2014, the 10-year anniversary of the Hamburg 'International Conference on Polyamory and Mono-normativity', organised by Marianne Piper and Robin Bauer in November 2005, was coming up, and a group of activists, artists and academics came together to try to think about issues of contemporary intimacy, specifically non-monogamies and polyamory. We felt that it was high time for another conference to be held in Europe, and even though we were acutely aware of the importance of entering and making these topics visible in other spaces, be them academic, activist or artistic, we also wanted to create a space where we did not have to start each and every intervention with a justification of the importance of this topic or with constant and redundant disclaimers about different kinds of non-monogamy.

We wanted this conference to echo that first one – one where activists, artists and academics came together for three days, where LGBTIQ* people were very much represented, and where issues that are still relevant now (polyamory and neoliberalism, polyamory and responsibility, polyamory and the queer movement, etc.) were already being discussed.

Coordinating over the Internet, we set up an international organising committee and settled on a name: the *Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies* conference was meant to bring together not only people from academia, activism, psychotherapy/counselling, art, and more, but also to emphasise that there are transformations going on that go beyond various forms of consensual (or non-consensual) non-monogamy. Our purpose with organising the NMCI conference was not just to organise a conference but rather to kick-start community building and knowledge production as well as trying to create an event with a particular ethics of clearing a space in academia. We also felt that an excessive emphasis



on the global North and specifically on the anglosphere was alienating many researchers and overly simplifying our intellectual frameworks.

Our work is not the first of its kind, and it owes a debt of inspiration to previous work, and the spaces this work, and several past projects created, within academia. The aforementioned conference in Hamburg is one such case, as are the International Conferences in the USA, the Polyamory Day in the UK, the activism being done all over the world, the INTIMATE research project; a special issue of *Sexualities* (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006), the book *Understanding Non-Monogamies* (Barker and Langdridge, 2010), and many others – too many to mention here.

The name of this project is a two-part affair, and a complicated one at that. On the one hand we have ‘non-monogamies’ (in themselves a very diverse set of practices and identities), and on the other we have contemporary intimacies. Of course, it can be argued that any intimacy that exists today is, by definition, a contemporary intimacy. As a result, the use of this term was always bound create some confusion. We did not wish to dismiss all this confusion. In fact, we wished to work on it. Through such confusion, we hope to further demonstrate how intimacies are changed and are changing, as well as how different spaces and times construct contemporaneity. A clean dichotomous break between pre-modern or traditional intimacies on the one side, and contemporary intimacies on the other, misses out on the (dis)continuities and the co-constitution of all intimacies, on their negotiated and dialogical dimensions.

However, too wide or vague a definition of contemporaneity risks the notion of ‘contemporary intimacies’ losing its analytical value. Rather than take a strict prescriptivist position that distorts the complexity of the world we’re trying to look at into clarity (Law, 2004), or adopting so wide a definition that we lose the ability to analyse that world, a third option is found in collections such as this one.

Knowledge, of which our analytical categories are a component, can be seen as emerging out of sustained discussion and dialogue within and between communities concerned with the knowledge in question (Collins, 2009). The NMCI conference attempted to provide a space for such dialogue, a space to work out what one might mean by ‘non-monogamies and contemporary intimacies’. At a glance, the papers in this collection may appear to focus only on one specific form of non-monogamy: all of them are, on the surface, about polyamory. However, they all believe that discussions on this topic have wider implications for how we

talk about, study and analyse contemporary relationships as a whole, and they make these connections between the general and the specific in different ways.

Michel Raab's paper, for example, takes an empirical look at polyamorous relationships using data gained from interviews. The focus for Raab is on what the distribution of care in polyamorous relationships can tell us about their potential for encouraging a more equitable division of labour in relationships between men and women, and for wider liberatory changes to the way contemporary societies structure relationships.

Leehee Rothschild comes from a similarly feminist standpoint, but Rothschild's paper is more theoretical. Taking their lead from Adrienne Rich's 'lesbian continuum' (1980) Rothschild proposes analysing relationships through the concepts of 'polyamorous continuum' and 'polyamorous existence', in order to deconstruct the dominance of mononormative ideas even within the institution of monogamy itself. They argue for the usefulness of modelling monogamous relationships on the norms of polyamorous relationships.

Jingshu Zhu, on the other hand, comes from the opposite direction. Using data gathered from a project on marriages in China between non-heterosexual men and heterosexual women, they offer a critique of some key concepts that come up in discussions of what it means to be in a polyamorous relationship. They interrogate the usefulness of concepts such as 'radical honesty' and 'authenticity' to question whether their usefulness may be more limited than presumed by some activists in polyamorous communities.

Nataša Pivec's paper looks more closely at cultural products rather than taking a broad view of culture itself by presenting a comparative analysis of polyamory in film with a particular focus on Tom Tykwer's film *Three*. Pivec contrasts *Three* and its representation of a stale monogamous relationship revitalised by the introduction of a third partner with more common representations of non-monogamy that tend to represent non-monogamy as a temporary, and often punished, break in the continuous existence of a monogamous default.

Finally, **Joanna Iwanowska's** paper draws on the work of Aristotle (350 B.C.) to advance a new tool for the analysis of polyamorous relationships. Crucially, their model emphasises the importance of non-romantic connections between romantic partners of polyamorous people that are not romantic partners to each other (metamours). On the basis of this, Iwanowska argues that these 'metamours' and

one's willingness to enter into these relationships are the key to understanding polyamory, what it is and how it operates in practice.

This collection of papers offers a wide range of perspectives and approaches to the study of polyamory and non-monogamy. They are a snapshot of ongoing discussions in the study of non-monogamy – a place to start when trying to define what this field of study, and the relationships in question, might mean.

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Contributors

Meg-John Barker is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender, and relationships, including *Queer: A Graphic History*, *How To Understand Your Gender*, *Enjoy Sex (How, When, and IF You Want To)*, *Rewriting the Rules*, *The Psychology of Sex*, and *The Secrets of Enduring Love*. They have also written a number of books for scholars and counsellors on these topics, drawing on their own research and therapeutic practice. Websites: rewriting-the-rules.com, megjohnandjustin.com. Twitter: [@megjohnbarker](https://twitter.com/megjohnbarker).

Daniel Cardoso has a PhD in Communication Sciences, teaches as an Assistant Professor at the Lusophone University of Humanities and Sciences and as a Guest Assistant Professor at the FCSH NOVA University. He researches on consensual non-monogamies, BDSM, gender and sexualities, especially around new media and cybercultures. His work is available at www.danielscardoso.net.

Boka En is a university assistant at the University of Vienna, working at the intersections of Gender & Sexuality Studies and Science & Technology Studies. Their focus lies on marginalised sexualities and intimacies as well as the connections and tensions between activism, art, and academia. Twitter: [@bokaen](https://twitter.com/bokaen)

David En-Griffiths has recently finished an MA in Gender Studies (with research methods) and is preparing to begin a PhD next year on the subject of intersections between non-heterosexual sexual identities and class.

Joanna Iwanowska is an ethicist, doing her PhD at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw. Her current academic interests range from the ethics of closeness and intimacy to the ethics of contemporary advertising. For more information, you can visit Joanna's professional website: <https://joannaiwanowska.hcommons.org/>

Sina Muscarina is a social*entrepreneur who earned her Master's degree in Psychology at the University of Vienna. She has assembled a profound understanding of a variety of alternative lifestyles and alternative sexualities over more than a decade. sinamuscarina.wordpress.com

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, PhD, is a lecturer, researcher and activist through the School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her areas are sexual, gender, cultural, family diversity. Her publications include, "Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools" exploring bisexuality and polyamory in school communities; and "Women in Relationships with Bisexual Men".

Nataša Pivec, a Slovenian independent researcher, currently based in Berlin, has a Ph.D. in sociology of gender from University of Ljubljana. Her main research fields are gender, Othering and media representations. She has published in several academic publications, but also runs a feminist sociological website – the Other matters.

Michael Raab, activist and educator at the educational collective Biko, is certified cook, social worker and sociologist. His paper outlines intermediate results of his Ph.D. at the Research Group Work–Gender–Technology at Hamburg University of Technology. His interests are gender relations, social inequality and history of social movements.

Leehee Rothschild is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the Hebrew University. This article is based on her MA thesis in Gender Studies. Her current research explores polyamorous and queer familial structures. She is also a queer activist, one of the founders of the Israeli polyamorous community.

Jingshu Zhu, a PhD candidate in Law and Anthropology at Leiden University in The Netherlands. Her research interests include critical feminist legal theories, queer theories, post-colonialism and kinship studies. She has been active in queer and polyamory communities, while keeping a critical eye on the politics of inclusion.



Care in Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationship Networks: Aspirations and Practices in a Contradictory Field

Michael Raab

ABSTRACT: The paper discusses the question whether currently emerging, new forms of non-monogamous intimate relationships generate new class and gender relations. Parts of the polyamory movement propagate that breaking with hegemonic norms in relationships opens up the possibility for replacing internalized patriarchal and capitalistically structured norms and behaviour patterns with ones that are to a higher degree self-reflexive and self-determined. Parts of the research about polyamory agree that there is emancipatory potential and stress the possibility of these relationships to break with heteronormative and sexist power structures and to initiate social change in various domains. However, it is just as feasible that poly-amory is a relationship form that aids in managing the demands of a highly flexible, project-oriented capitalist system. The paper outlines my qualitative method of research – a triangulation of intersectional multi-level analysis and network analysis – as well as my ideas for a care-theoretical approach to understanding polyamorous practices. Based on preliminary results of my doctoral research the paper leads to the conclusion that emancipatory aspirations are especially likely to succeed when they are supported by structural measures like collective housekeeping or obligatory modes of communication.

KEYWORDS: Social inequality, non-monogamies, care, gendered division of work, qualitative research



In recent years consensual non-monogamy has been interpreted as a progressive action against sexist gender norms and commodified modes of exchange within both the academic literature (Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse, 2006) and in particular by polyamory activists (Noël, 2006). My research focuses on everyday practices of care and whether these practices meet the above mentioned standards. Do people in non-monogamous relationships arrange care-work in such a way that hegemonic gender norms and modes of exchange are transgressed?

From a feminist materialist (Hartmann, 2013; Madörin, 2010; Winker, 2011) and moral-philosophical (Conradi, 2001) standpoint, I see three possible answers to this question. Consensual non-monogamies could be:

1. A flexible response to neoliberal constraints by transferring the neoliberal appeal of individuality and flexibility to the domain of relationships.
2. Evidence of the persistence of existing patriarchal patterns; as it is nothing new – at least not for men – to rely on the care work of several women.
3. A progressive step of emancipation from gender norms and roles, transcending the capitalist logic of exchange.

Narrative interviews with 15 people who are permanently living with more than one partner and define themselves as consensually non-monogamous in various terms provided an answer about the accuracy of these three theses. The interviewees' accounts of mutual care in different areas of life were subjected to an intersectional multi-level analysis (Winker & Degele, 2011) supplemented by an ego-centered network analysis (Diaz-Bone, 1997).

In this article, I will demonstrate how I arrived at deducing certain conceptions of justice from the interviews, and how these conceptions correspond to the theses of the persistence of patriarchal patterns and of the search for emancipatory potentials in consensually non-monogamous relationship-networks. Afterwards, I will demonstrate the evidence that supports the thesis of neoliberal flexibilization and will discuss the circumstances under which emancipatory aspirations are most likely to succeed. I argue that institutionalizing certain modes in relationships (like creating obligatory modes of communication) helps in implementing such aspirations, which I will illustrate with a concrete example from a relationship-network whose members live in a communal living project.

Consensual Non-Monogamy between Emancipation, Flexibilization, and Persistence

Previous discussions about the emancipatory potential of polyamory range from structure-determinist pessimist to voluntarist optimist approaches. Polyamory activists are, of course, interested in emphasizing the transformative potential of non-monogamous relationships. Scientific analyses must take note of this articulated will in order to create a more self-determined alternative to prescriptive norms; but they must also point out that other powerful norms and social structures can lead to an involuntary reproduction of power relations (Barker & Langdrige, 2010). Stressing the transformative potentials of polyamory, Noël (2006) puts forward the thesis that polyamory has the potential to revolutionize how people think about relationships and family. Yet, in her content analysis of polyamory self-help guides, she arrives at the conclusion that the concept of polyamory mainly offers an identity for the white, well-educated, able-bodied middle class with a secured residency status¹. Instead of generally deconstructing relationship norms, new relationship norms are constructed for a privileged social milieu. Following Connell (2005), Sheff (2006) coins the term “poly-hegemonic masculinities” for economically privileged heterosexual men who take the conveniences of consensual non-monogamy for granted, while the women initiate the organizational agreements that are necessary in order to bring different social contacts into accordance time-wise. Barker and Langdrige (2010) also stress that within most types of non-monogamy, the heterosexual couple relationship remains the core of the relationship network, making an extensive change of the heteronormative social order unlikely. In their critical introduction to polyamory, Haritaworn et al., (2006) link the critical and the transformative perspective. They stress the potential of these new relationship types almost exuberantly: “These new narratives of emotional and sexual abundance and collective care may provide real alternatives to capitalist and patriarchal ideologies of personal ownership and scarcity” (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 518) – providing that it will succeed in transgressing the exclusive narrowness of a privileged social group and thereby in effecting an impact on the societal level. For Klesse (2013, p. 7), care is the key to understanding the social meaning of consensual non-monogamy: “Only on the basis of de-

tailed research into the organisation of care work in polyamorous relationships and households can we understand the position of polyamory”.

I consider three possible options for how care may be realised in consensually non-monogamous relationship networks with regard to gendered and capitalist/neoliberal aspects (though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive within the same relationship):

1. Flexibilization: In polyamory networks, economically speaking, the provision of care is less secure than in other modes of reproduction and/or is realised in a commodified way. Therefore, polyamory can be understood as an adjustment, a reaction to a crisis of reproduction (Winker, 2013), a technique of the self that supports a tendency to emotional self-optimization (Illouz, 2007) and possibly an expansion of potentially exhaustive demands of self-responsibility and personal initiative (Ehrenberg, 2008) to a person’s immediate and private social contexts. Hence, the emergence of polyamorous relationships could be an effect of economic flexibilization.
2. Persistence: The “illusion of emancipation” (Koppetsch & Burkard, 1999) that exists in monogamous couple relationships is simply repeated: men exploit the work capacity of several women, while all participants make an effort to reconcile their hierarchical practices with their egalitarian norm conceptions. The simultaneous occurrence of exploitation and an ethics of care implies an ideological and legitimate function. Therefore, patriarchal inequalities are rather enforced than transgressed.
3. Emancipation: In networks of collective care, a practical ethical approach is developed during the process of building the relationship. This approach neither reproduces heteronormative gender relations nor the neoliberal logic of individual self-responsibility. As “pioneers in the daily life” (Kruppa, 2013, p. 149), all participants of the relationship network improve their capacity for action (Holzkamp, 1985). Hence, a polyamorous relationship could be perceived as a transgression of traditional divisions of care.

The following discussion of my research outcomes will demonstrate empirical evidence for all three theses, but illustrates also the material conditions that enforce specific modes of care.

Doing Empirical Research Founded on Two Care-Theoretical Approaches

Which of the theses about the social meaning of consensual non-monogamy outlined above is correct (or if they all apply in different ways in different places) cannot be settled by theory. This is the main reason I investigated this question by employing qualitative research, based on interviews and drawing on two different care-theoretical approaches.

One premise of my research is the conviction that the social meaning of intimate polyamorous relationships is dependent more on who cares for whom rather than, as often assumed, on who sleeps with whom or how jealousy is dealt with. Following materialistically founded feminist discourses on care (Dück & Schütt, 2014; Fraser, 2009; Hartmann, 2013; Madörin, 2010; Winker, 2011) that underline the importance of economics for understanding social processes, I conceive care as those reproductive activities that in traditional families are usually undertaken by women for free: catering for food as well as for physical and emotional well-being, caring for children and the sick, being responsible for a pleasant mood, a clean home, appropriate clothing and so on. However, care is not just an issue of allocation of work and resources, but is also a question of the regard for the needs of others. In order to understand this aspect of care, I will discuss whether in the field of polyamorous relationships, conceptions of justice are articulated as abstract conceptions of justice or as attentive attitudes toward specific people, following a moral-philosophical discussion by Gilligan (1982). The results will show why this distinction is relevant.

Sampling and Recruiting

In order to find out how people in consensually non-monogamous relationship networks care for each other, I sought out people who consider themselves as living consensually non-monogamously via an online survey. From the 200 people who filled out the online survey, I chose fifteen people for one-on-one narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983; Lamnek, 2005). In order to be able to explore a wide field as well as deepen the knowledge about typical cases, I followed the principle of minimal and maximal contrasting (Schütze, 1983) in terms of continuous theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Interviews

The opening question² aimed at evoking a narrative about practices of care instead of retrieving idealised self-image or socially desirable answers. As a further source of information, I asked all participants to visualize the care relations in their relationship networks via differently coloured playing pieces and labels. At the end of the interview, I collected socioeconomic data (gender, age, residency status, health, several indicators for cultural and economic capital) and information about the living situation of participants of the relationship network.

Subject, Social Structure and Symbolic Representation in Intersectional Multi-Level Analysis

The intersectional multi-level analysis (Winker & Degele, 2011; Winker, 2012) came into being as a method of qualitative research in the 2000s in Germany. It aims at understanding the interrelation between subject and social structure as well as its mediation through discourses, norms and cultural representations by way of qualitative research. The approach analytically distinguishes three levels of society: identity constructions, symbolic representations and social structures and aims, to consider how people construct themselves within the frame of symbolic representations and social structures.

The level of identity constructions is important because the polyamory scene often defines itself through the rejection of a societal norm (e.g. monogamy) and through resulting new norms that arise in the context of their own networks or their surrounding subculture (Pieper & Bauer, 2005). The construction of identity often does not appear to be an 'I-Identity', but a 'We-Identity' shared by the network. Some interview partners continuously spoke of themselves as 'we' and thereby constructed their identity as 'We, in our network'.

To conduct my analysis on a level of social structures does not only mean looking at large societal structures like class, heteronormativity or racism, but also incorporating the relationship structures of my interview partners into the analysis. As a sociologist, I assume that social practices create social structures. Thereby, when a construction like 'our relationship network' appears in an interview, I conceive this construction as an institutionalisation of a relationship that has more weight than, for example, just 'we' or 'us' on the identity level. Lease contracts,

shared economies and implicit or explicit rejections of hegemonic institutions like marriage and family lead to a solidification of the social and form a structural framework on a meso level. As part of my analysis, I am not only focusing on the above-mentioned levels as well as their interrelations, contradictions and consistencies. During the course of analysis, the case analyses are also contextualized in power structures as well as societal values, norms and patterns of interpretation (Winker, 2012).

Triangulating this approach with a network analysis makes it possible to better include the allocation of care practices in relationship networks.

Network Analysis of Care Relationships

These interviews show a wide range of aspirations of non-monogamists to care for the others in their networks. One problem that arises from the interview data is that while interview partners speak about their lives and their ideas, the actual practices and the perspectives of other network participants are not taken into account. In order to get closer to the reality of the relationships, I supplemented my interview-based research with an ego-centered network analysis (Diaz-Bone, 1997). I will subsequently demonstrate how I used some of its basic operations for taking a second look at the division of care-labour in the networks in question.

I asked my interview partners to visually recreate their relationship networks with playing pieces and to indicate care relations between individual participants with coloured pencils and various labels for different types of care. Some relations like 'cooks for', 'does laundry for', 'massages', 'consoles' or 'speaks about important matters with' were already laid out, but further unlabelled coloured arrows encouraged the addition of further dimensions of care.

The interview partners were given the following guidelines: on the one hand, the way they painted a line – spotted, dashed, solid or bold – should determine the strength of each care-relation. Further, they were asked to show the direction of each care relationship by adding an arrow to each line. Speaking in terms of the network analysis, I collected a group of nodes (persons) and directional and weighted ties (more or less strong and directional care relations) between the nodes.

The indicated direction of each relation allows for a distinction between caregiver and care receiver (Brückner, 2010) in each relationship. Weighting each rela-

tion makes it possible to take differently strong care relations into account. The collected data was entered in the free network-analysis software *Gephi*. Figure 1 shows the resultant visualisation of Bob's³ network.

The evaluated data makes it possible to deduct statements about the social integration⁴ of each network. In a fully integrated network, relations exist between all participants. In this example, the integration is at 0.643, meaning that 64.3% of the potentially possible care-relations exist. This is an example of a relatively strongly integrated network.

The different thicknesses of the arrows indicate the intensity of each care relation. Their comparison shows how symmetrical or asymmetrical care work is distributed in a network. The respective thickness of the

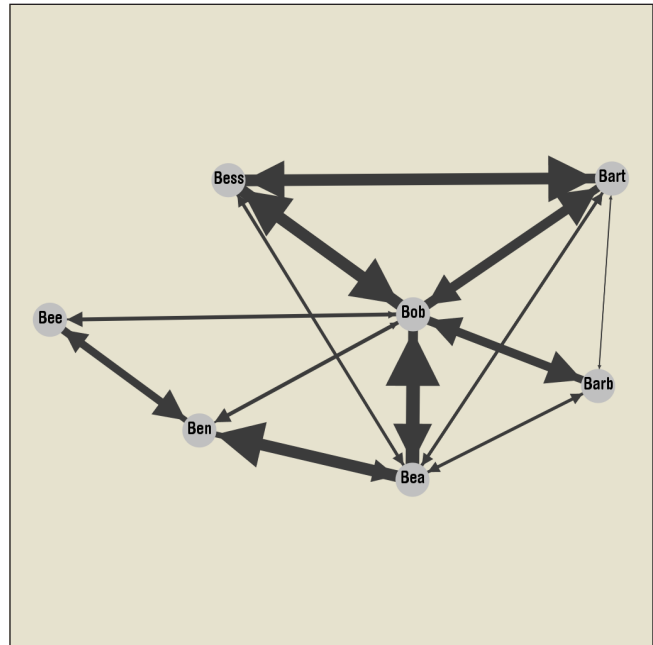


Figure 1: Diagram of Care Relations in a Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationship Network. The respective thickness of the arrow indicates the strength of each directional care relation.

arrow matches the weighted degree of each care relation. The weighted degree of a care relation is the sum of all individual weightings. To clarify: the double-ended arrow between Bob and Bart equates five different types of care that Bob marked during our interview. Four of these care activities are undertaken mutually, one of them by Bob alone for Bart. Matching the performed weighting⁵, the result is a weighted degree of both directional relations of 20 or 16. The thickness of the lines between the arrows show the weighted degrees of the undirected relations.

Even though the weighted degree of each care relation is only a blunt measure compared to elaborate network-theoretical concepts (Opsahl et al., 2010) – because, for example, the specifics of each activity are lost – this method still paints a different picture of the allocation of care in relationship networks than the interviews.

What the diagram does not show, however, is how much care each participant gives or receives all together. Table 1 shows the added values of the giving and receiving care relations for each node, or rather, person.

Node	Weighted Sum of the Received Care-Relations (In-Degree)	Weighted Sum of the Given Care-Relations (Out-Degree)
Barb	25	23
Bart	58	44
Bea	49	75
Bee	20	20
Ben	48	28
Bess	50	54
Bob	92	98

Table 1: Name of the Node and Weighted In- or Out-Degree (Sum of each received or given Care) of Each Node

Even though it is true that abstracting from the concrete activity relativizes the validity of the sum, it can still be noted that the data supports the thesis formulated during the analysis of the interviews that there is a gender-typical division of work from which the male participants benefit. The data shows much more precisely than the interviews that a woman, Bea, gives more care than she receives and that two men, Bart and Ben, receive more care than they give. This finding supports the thesis of the interview-analysis, that members of the network practice a traditional division of care-labour without being aware of it. In comparison to other networks it can be noted, however, that the asymmetries in this network are not very significant.

The triangulation of network analysis and interview data have made it possible not only to draw more parallels but also to make contradictions visible, which allows us to discuss them further⁶.

Normative Foundations of Practices of Care between Abstract Justice and Attentiveness

Interview partners talked about care in two ways: firstly, they brought up concrete practices of care and their allocation within their respective relationship networks. Secondly, they highlighted the ambition to care for each other and the areas to which this ambition applied. Thereby, normative ideas about mutual care often came up. In this section, I will briefly describe these and show that they correspond with the previously mentioned ethical concepts. I discuss my research question with three cases representative for the narratives found in my cases: Bob, Alice and Chloe.

Normative Foundations of Practices of Care between Abstract Justice and Attentiveness

In all conducted interviews, ideas of fairness and justice were expressed on the topic of care. In doing so, my interview partners implicitly and explicitly related to various theoretical concepts of justice. For Bob, for example, autonomy is of central value. It is important for him that none of the relationships exist just to provide for one another. All participants should act financially independently, and his relationship ideal is to be in charge of one's own life. In fact, he states that

In a relationship network, it is very important to get to a point where you are as much independent from others as possible.

In our interview, his typically strong emphasis of autonomy ends when it comes to social support and household work. Other than on financial issues, where he emphasizes the importance of fairness and transparency, he describes himself as “a laissez-faire kind of guy when it comes to household chores”. The way he sees it, in a relationship, temporarily unequal distributions of household chores can be easily accepted out of feelings like gratefulness and joy. When he speaks of household chores and care work, his words imply that they are relatively easy tasks.

Regarding the relation between autonomy and neediness, Bob advocates the ideal of the autonomous subject and trivializes existing care needs. It is therefore conceivable that the members of the network practice a traditional division of care-labour without being aware of it. Bob favours a model of negotiation that assumes two autonomous subjects – individuals who know what they want – who come together in a free and equal discussion about what they want from each other. Ideally, they each give the other something of equal value.

This conception of justice corresponds to the capitalist idea of fair trade. Following a ‘value critical’ approach to the analysis of capitalism, which is based on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, I understand the exchange of equivalents as the basis of capitalist dynamics (Marx, 1974) and capitalism as a society based on exchange (Adorno, 2003a; regarding the relationship between the commodity form and form of thought in love relationships, see Adorno, 2003b, p. 89). Therefore, I interpret this notion of justice as structured by capitalist relations. At

the same time, the idea of the autonomous subject chimes with a specific gender regime. Before you are even able to express what you want, your nappies have been changed and you've been consoled, fed, dressed and in other ways been cared for countless times. The autonomous subject is thus dependent on someone in the background, who has already produced him as able to negotiate as free and equal. In the real world as well as in philosophical treatises on this specific subjectivity, women traditionally took and still take this role (Benhabib 1995). The intellectual figure of the autonomous subject ignores corporeity and dependency and confuses the outcome of a specific gender regime – the rational, independent and implicitly male subject – for its base, implicitly conceptualizing a particular point of view as a universal one. Therefore, I describe this position as androcentric universalism. In this context, the notion of justice found in Bob's statements supports the thesis of the persistence of patriarchally and capitalistically structured representations and practices in the field of consensual non-monogamy.

It would not be fair to Bob and the other members of his network to stop at this conclusion. In addition to the focus on autonomy and an abstractly defined notion of justice, his network shares the emancipatory goal that all participants should be need-oriented and approachable towards one another when it comes to caring. This goal is articulated even more explicitly and manifestly by Alice who belongs to another relationship network. Alice's idea of how care work should be allocated is based on the idea of attentiveness as the foundation for social relationships. To Alice, attentiveness means to always be aware of herself and others and to always bear everyone in mind. Attentiveness means to negotiate everyone's needs reflexively:

I must be aware of my need and I must be aware of your need. [...] I must put both needs in relation to each other [...] and then come to a decision.

Alice's statements correspond with a feminist ethic of attentiveness. This view does not justify the necessity for being attentive to others in reference to abstract reason, but instead, refers to the basic human condition of being dependent on one another. The contradictions that arise in asymmetrical care relations are thus not a failure of an abstractly defined justice, but an integral part of care-ethical negotiation processes (Conradi, 2001). Autonomy in this sense is not a precondition

tion for human interaction, but its product and goal (Benhabib, 1995). Alice not only mentions the concept of attentiveness, she also distances herself from two rival notions of justice. She does not want her relationship to be determined by an abstract set of rules, as would be the case in an androcentric moral philosophy that follows Kant and Rawls (Conradi, 2001). On the other hand, she has issues with traditional concepts of womanhood and femininity because, according to her, she was socialized to put others' needs above her own. This is an implicit reference to the originally religiously-based norm of the typically female morale of servitude and goodness, in which it is the duty of women to recognize and meet care needs. In that sense, Alice is looking for "real alternatives to capitalist and patriarchal ideologies" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 518) in her relationship network. These aspirations should not be dismissed, instead it should be asked how they can best be put into practice. However, I would first like to show how in the interviews, aspects of neoliberal flexibilization – unsurprisingly – were also seen as part of non-monogamous relationships

Self-Optimisation and Flexibilization

In addition to these findings – which in Bob's case support the thesis about the persistence of hegemonic norms and in Alice's case support the thesis about a focus on emancipation – both interview partners also expressed their ideals of personal development and optimization.

According to Bob, his polyamorous lifestyle helped him solve a lot of his personal problems and has made him freer in his relationship choices. More so than Alice, he emphasizes that his polyamorous network helps him to identify personal weaknesses and to work on them. Alice, unlike Bob, rather sees her network as a means of developing a collective practice of attentiveness.

Even though my interview partners often talk about collectivity and alternative lifestyles in a positive light, they are also influenced by ideals of self-responsibility and self-optimization. To different degrees, they conceive life as a project in which they can make progress with the help of their relationship network. It seems that neoliberal tenets like activation, flexibilization and deregulation have not only reached the field of relationships, but specifically also become part of consensually non-monogamous relationships. Along with the already discussed

strong normative focus on emancipation and the persistence of patriarchal and commodified ideologies, most investigated relationship networks also support the thesis that polyamory can offer “custom-fit solutions for the requirements of the postfordist capitalist regimes” (Mayer, 2011, p. 35). It would have been surprising, had these aspects not been found in consensually non-monogamous relationship-networks. The previously mentioned emancipatory ambitions however, are more interesting and will be further discussed in the following section.

Relationship Structures and Care Practices

Almost all interview partners mention the difficulty of realizing one’s own ambitions. Chloe, for example, who belongs to yet another relationship network, states that incorporated gender norms often contribute to the reproduction of traditional gender-specific divisions of household chores for the female participants of a relationship network:

We divide our household chores in order to avoid that those who find it the dirtiest are always the ones cleaning and the others aren’t. Because that’s very gender-dependent. If we don’t do that, it’s always the women who are cleaning.

In accordance with the ambitions of justice and fairness between the different genders involved, Chloe’s network acts on the conviction that subjective perceptions of tidiness are the result of gender-specific socialization. If the network didn’t take active countermeasures, it would be the women who end up cleaning. The network’s active implementation of a division of labour contrary to gender-specific skills and needs also has the effect that all participants learn new skills that they did not get taught in their socialization processes. In order to fix this mute force of internalized societal relations, Chloe’s network meets regularly to divide up the chores of the following weeks. This is just one example of how normative ideas – convictions about how things *should* be – can have an impact when people take active measures to create structures, in this case an obligatory mode of communication.

The relations of convictions and framework conditions also play a role in other relationship networks. One of the analysed relationship networks is geographically spread across a small apartment in a large city and a large communal living pro-

ject in the countryside. In the city, the material side of care is handled on a very low level and without elaborate arrangements: there are no elaborate care-activities like ironing or window-cleaning nor are there complex arrangements to decide what is done by whom. This alternative (a low level of planning and elaboration around care, which I could also find in other relationship networks) mainly tries to forego care by minimising the care needs of the people involved – something that is only possible when no one has special care needs. It is an entirely different matter in the communal living project in the countryside. Here, the household work and the division of chores is organized and decided upon collectively. Chloe states that various social processes like assemblies and individual talks are organized to approach the shared goal of attentiveness and entail daily care. Further, the living project consists partly of children and there is at least the willingness to accept others who are in need of care as part of the living project. The communal living project as a collective social structure provides a framework for getting closer to fulfilling the ideal of a less capitalistically and heteronormatively structured way of living relationships – closer than it would be possible without this structural support. In fact, my comparison with other networks (the specifics of which would exceed the scope of this article) even suggests that established collective social structures without clearly formulated aims end up bringing about more material care than care-related aspirations without structural components as backup.

Conclusion

The central question I posed in this article was whether consensual non-monogamy means emancipation, a neoliberal flexibilization of relationships, or the reproduction of existing sexist norms and practices. It is not very surprising that I found proof for all three theses on the social meaning of non-monogamy: polyamorous relationships can be a response to neoliberal demands on the individual, as traditional gender-specific division of labour can be found in such relationships. However, my interview partners also followed aspirations that went against these objectives and were especially likely to succeed when specific modes of organizing care-work were institutionalized.

All my interview partners expressed a range of ambitions to care for each other that implicitly or explicitly contradicted patriarchal or commodified ideologies.

Some directly mentioned that these ambitions could be only partly fulfilled. With others, the interviews showed that reality often lagged behind the expressed ambitions.

It became clear that these considerations have given important impulses for empirical research based on a care-theoretical approach. Especially the triangulation of intersectional multi-level analysis and network analysis made it possible to understand the implicit and explicit contradictions between ambition and reality as expressed by the interview partners.

However, as could be suspected, there is no easy and clear answer to the question. All interview partners spoke of care in terms of an attentive attitude, but the importance of its meaning for their respective relationships varied greatly. In addition, rivaling ideas about the morality of care exist, whereby especially the concept of androcentric universalism with its strong focus on individual autonomy can serve as a normative base for the traditional gender division of work in the field of care work.

The results of the interview-analyses suggest that common neoliberal conceptions like flexibility, self-optimization and a project-like approach to life are also very common in consensual non-monogamous relationships.

The analyses of the interviews as well as the comparison between more and less institutionalized networks suggest that emancipatory ambitions can be realized especially in situations where they are supported by structural measures like collective housekeeping or obligatory modes of communication.

It appears that the polyamory movement loses sight of an important sociological insight due to partly individualistic approaches and the often economically well-secured status of its members: namely, that social structures are potentially more powerful than attitudes. This is one reason why I argue for care-theoretical approaches and reflections when analysing non-monogamy.

The considerations presented here lead me to the following temporary conclusions: When discussing political strategies, the focus of relationship-activists (of any kind whatsoever) should in the future be on redistribution instead of recognition. For example, relationship-activists could get involved in existing struggles for social infrastructure and basic welfare services. Also, polyamorous communities could consider founding solidary collectives, that not only share love and sex but also income and collective resources like living space. When non-monogamous

networks have the aspiration to act neither traditionally-patriarchally nor neoliberally-individualistically on matters of care, they should focus on creating and implementing social structures that enable self-organised collective care instead of mainly working on formulating ethical approaches and goals.

Endnotes

- ¹ My research corresponds to this insofar as the vast majority of participants – even those who are formally not well-educated – are culturally oriented towards a post-conventional middle-class culture, even if most participants live under precarious economic conditions.
- ² ‘The interview is about care in consensually non-monogamous relationships. I’m interested to know who cares for whom in your relationship – and that in the farthest sense possible, eve-rything to do with care. I would like you to tell me about it in detail. Maybe you can start with a specific situation, where somebody cared for you or you cared for someone.’
- ³ all names are pseudonyms
- ⁴ Integration is the quotient of real and potentially possible social relations (Diekmann 2005)
- ⁵ Weighting: spotted: 1; dashed: 2; solid: 4; bold: 8
- ⁶ In order to deal with uncertainties regarding the interpretation, I will, in the further course of my research, discuss these interim results with my interview partners and, if they will allow it, with the other members of their relationship networks, thereby following the principle of ‘co-research’ of Critical Psychology (Markard 2010).

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Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence

Leehee Rothschild

ABSTRACT: This article examines the construction of monogamy as a social institution through various discursive fields. It shows how religion, sexology, psychology, law and popular science all play a part in the normalisation and naturalisation of monogamy as the only normal, healthy and moral way to maintain a romantic relationship. It goes to further show how a traditional gender binary and a sexual double standard are constructed as a part of this mononormativity in each and every one of those discursive fields. Following that, the article looks into polyamory through a queer and feminist lens, and explores its theoretical potential in subverting these patriarchal conceptions. It then suggests the idea of the ‘polyamorous continuum’ and the ‘polyamorous existence’ as an alternative paradigm to the institution of monogamy. It is a paradigm that allows for a broader spectrum of relationship formations, including ones that feature elements of sexual and/or romantic exclusivity, which are bereft of the patriarchal elements of mononormativity.

*Want you to make me feel
Like I'm the only girl in the world
Like I'm the only one that you'll ever love
Like I'm the only one who knows your heart
Only girl in the world
Like I'm the only one that's in command
'Cause I'm the only one who understands
Like I'm the only one who knows your heart
Only one*

– Only Girl (In The World) / Rihanna (Eriksen & Hermansen, 2010, track 5)



Amazon Households enables two adults within a family to collectively manage content and share access to membership benefits.

– www.amazon.com

These two opening quotes reflect on some of the very common manifestations of mononormativity – the conception of monogamy as the only moral, normal, natural and healthy form of romantic relationship (Pieper & Bauer, 2006). In recent years, alternatives to monogamy have been more frequently discussed in both academic and public discourse¹ (Barker & Langdrige, 2010a). Nevertheless, a thorough discussion and analysis of the social function of monogamy has not been explored in the literature. In this article, I will review the construction of monogamy as a social institution, and show how a binary gender system and a gendered double standard are established within it. I will argue that much like heteronormativity, the foundations of mononormativity are also spread over a wide range of fields and discourses; that the construction of mononormativity is mostly invisible; and that its scattered and mostly invisible construction provides it with a strong hold on society. Later, I will explore contemporary alternatives to monogamy, highlight their feminist potential in subverting the sexual double standard and other gendered norms, and suggest the ideas of “polyamorous existence” and a “polyamorous continuum” as an alternative paradigm to the institution of monogamy. The analysis I present here is mostly theoretic in its nature. However, I do occasionally refer to some of its practical implications and manifestations.

The literal meaning of “monogamy” is having only one marital relationship. Contemporarily, however, it has been used to denote a couple’s relationship in which romantic and sexual exclusivity are practiced (Brewster et al., 2017). The monogamous form most commonly practiced in the western world is “serial monogamy” – which means that people are not limited to a single life partner, but they would not have multiple relationships at once (Rambukkana, 2015). At the same time, monogamy also functions as a powerful social institution, constructed through various discourses, including but not limited to biology, law, religion, sexology, popular culture and capitalist economy (Emmens, 2004; Deri, 2015). These discourses all set the foundations to mononormativity (Farvid, Braun & Roney, 2016).

The fact that monogamy is a social construct is usually unspoken, transparent and invisible, camouflaged by mononormativity (Rosa, 1994). Performances

of monogamy are glorified and celebrated as the romantic ideal, while representations of alternative forms of relationships in mainstream media tend to be rare and usually focus on revealing their inevitable failure. The social constructionist approach to sexuality, which guides my analysis, was well defined by Ritchie and Barker (2006, p. 585):

The social constructionist approach to sexuality is grounded in the belief that our identity, desires, relationships and emotions are shaped by the culture in which we live (Weeks, 2003). We come to understand ourselves in terms of the concepts that are available to us in the time and place we live in.

Thus, the fact that monogamy is assumed as the default of any romantic relationship, makes any alternatives difficult to conceive of or imagine, and situates non-monogamous relationships in a state of social “otherness”.

Mononormativity is a sex-negative paradigm. Rubin (1984) explains that sex-negativity creates a hierarchy, under which some sexual activities are deemed productive, positive and proper, while others are perverted and negative. Heterosexual sex within a marital relationship for procreational purposes is found on top of this pyramid of respectability; whereas BDSM and different types of fetishism, are often considered to have a negative value, even when practiced consensually. Within this hierarchy, monogamy is one of the factors that allows certain practices (such as gay and lesbian sex) to earn social acceptability (Rubin, 1984; Warner, 2000).

Rubin notes that there are gradual shifts in the borders between “moral” and “perverted” sex, yet argues the dichotomy between the two remains. She notes, for example, the growing acceptability of gay and lesbian sex, but points to the fact that its legitimacy is limited to sexual acts performed within a monogamous marriage-like setting (Rubin, 1984). A more timely example could be the increasing acceptability of casual sex, even though, this too fails to shake the mononormative foundations. Casual sex is socially legitimate when performed by people who are relatively young, usually in their 20s, who either happen to be between relationships or in a temporary situation in which they cannot commit to a long-term partner, whose ultimate goal is to find a committing monogamous relationship. It is legitimate as a phase of sexual experimentation, but not as a way of life (Farvid & Braun, 2017; Farless, 2017; Schippers, 2016).

Thus, while framed in the 1980s this pyramid of respectability and the sexual hierarchies it reflects is still relevant to contemporary discussions of monogamies and non-monogamies (See for example, Navarro, 2017 for a discussion on its legal effects; and Brandon-Fridman, 2017 for a discussion of its effects on sociology and social work). This mononormative sex negativity is expressed in many ways: in the discussion of virginity loss as a unique experience that must happen with a chosen person; in the slut-shaming of women who have multiple partners; in the framing of all sex that takes place outside the boundaries of a romantic relationship as “casual”.

Part of the mononormative sex-negativity (and of sex-negativity in general) has been a gendered sexual double standard that reflects positively on a multiplicity of sexual partners on the side of men, referring to them as “Studs”; while condoning women who have multiple sexual partners as “Sluts”. As Farvid, Braun & Rowney (2016, p. 2) pointed out:

The sexual double standard invokes traditional discourses of heterosexuality, such as the Madonna/whore binary (virtuous versus promiscuous), to negatively construct women’s desire for, and participation in what is socially, culturally or morally defined as ‘too much’ sex.

This double standard has characterised the institution of monogamy throughout a major part of history. In many allegedly monogamous cultures, various social structures allowed men to pursue more than one romantic and/or sexual relationship – concubines, whores, salt-wives, courtesans and mistresses are just some examples of the non-monogamous options that were afforded to men. Meanwhile, monogamy was strictly demanded from women, who paid heavily for straying from its path (Mint, 2007b; Sheff & Tesense, 2015).

Currently, many of the discourses involved in the construction of mononormativity address men, as well. Nevertheless, I argue that a double standard is still present, even if it manifests more subtly. Thus, while social narratives compel men to the ideal of one true love in theory and to serial monogamy in practice, other social powers still work to encourage them to sexual and romantic multiplicity. Meanwhile, the social narratives working to reinforce the romantic ideal are even more enhanced when targeting women, whereas those narratives that

allow and encourage men to pursue and discover non-monogamous options are rarely available to them; and when they do it is in a more limited manner (Mint, 2007b). This sexual double standard is still rooted in a patriarchal conception of men's ownership over women's bodies. It increases the social polarity between men and women, supplementing their heteronormative construction as two opposing genders. It minimises women's libidos on the theocratic level, and reproves women for "hyper-sexuality" on a practical level, limiting their sexual agency and subjectivity. At the same time, it paints men's sexuality as dominant, bestial and uncontrollable (Serano, 2008).

Inspired by Rich's (1980) analysis of compulsory heterosexuality and its social implications on women, the first part of this article explores the construction of monogamy as a social institution through various discursive fields. In each one of these fields, I discuss the patriarchal elements in its construction, and show their disempowering effects on women and on their sexual agency. I highlight the double standard that demands commitment to monogamy from women, while allowing men more sexual freedom, thus sustaining conventional gender roles, and social conceptions of female sexuality.

Despite the dominance of mononormative mechanisms, alternatives to monogamy do exist. There are various forms of consensual non-monogamies (CNM) that take place with the full knowledge and consent of all participants. Under the umbrella term "Consensual Non-Monogamies" one can find many non-exclusive relationship types ranging all the way from swinging to relationship anarchy (Taormino, 2008; Sheff & Tesene, 2015). The second part of this article delves into polyamorous relationships and explores their potential to empower women, in providing an escape route from the monogamous double standard and an opportunity to achieve greater sexual agency. The third and final section suggests the "polyamorous continuum" as an alternative paradigm for discussing relationships that dispense of the monogamous "rule book", without negating the possibility of emotional and/or sexual exclusivity.

Compulsory Monogamy – The Discursive Construction of a Patriarchal Institution

The institution of monogamy has changed and developed over the years. For

many centuries, it was equated with the marital contract, and the demand for exclusivity was sexual in its nature. In the modern era, monogamy has become part of the romantic ideal, and thus emotional exclusivity is also required. The social demand for one life-long relationship was replaced by serial monogamy, even though the romantic ideal of one true love is still prevalent (Sheff, 2013). In this section I discuss the institutional construction of monogamy in various discursive fields. I begin with a brief overview of different justifications that have been used to legitimise and standardise monogamy. In each case I also show how a gender binary was embedded into it. Then, I expand on the specific function of law and popular culture that serve as broader examples both to the social construction of monogamy, and to its patriarchal aspects.

Religious axiology was used to justify monogamy throughout much of recorded history, with marriage being one of the most important religious ceremonies. In most Christian traditions, monogamy has been required of both women and men, as part of the marriage sacrament. Augustine of Hippo, one of the founding fathers of the Christian church, declared that the monogamous marital bond was the most basic human relationship (Augustine, 401). He claimed that the good of marriage derives from the fact that it limits and confines the sexual desire. He highlighted the importance of sexual exclusivity as overriding that of marriage, as it is the commitment of one's whole life to a single person which stands at the root of marriage, and not the marital ceremony. Nevertheless, while monogamy is required of both men and women, their relationship is not egalitarian. In fact, one of the benefits of monogamous marriage, according to Augustine, is the preservation of a gender hierarchy. He believes that in the ideal marriage the wife should view the husband as her lord, and while a lord may have several servants, no servant can have more than a single lord (Augustine, 401).

Meanwhile, Islam, Judaism² and some specific Christian traditions have demanded monogamy of women, but not of men, who could practice polygamy and marry several women. Moreover, in polygynous societies, marriage to several women has been considered to be a status symbol, a manifestation of virility and economic prosperity. Polygyny is still commonly practiced in many societies around the world (Sheff & Tesene, 2015).

Even as the world turned to a scientific axiology for social norms, sex negativity remained a leading component of social thought. Many of the early works of

sexology, psychology and sociology highlight the importance of the containment of sexuality within the marital relationship. These conceptions are still reflected in these sciences to this very day (Barker & Langdrige, 2010a). In Sexology, for example, the gendered perception of monogamy remains very similar to the paradigm that had been drawn by Krafft Ebbing in “Psychopatia Sexualis” (1892). In this guidebook of sexual perversions, sexual activities which are not performed by a married couple for procreational purposes are all diagnosed as excessive and perverted; even more so when the sexual agent is a woman. Krafft Ebing claims that monogamy is the only way to lead healthy and stable relationships. But he goes beyond that to argue that monogamy is the root of human civilisation, and that it is crucial to the proper functioning of both family and society. Moreover, he states that monogamy grants the white Christian man his moral superiority over the non-European Muslim (Klesse, 2016). At the same time, Krafft Ebbing argues that monogamy comes naturally to women whose sexual desire is limited and contained, whereas men must struggle against their polygamous nature, in order to contain their abundant sexual desires within the monogamous setting (Willey, 2006). This assumed inherent discrepancy between men and women’s sexual drives has continued to be the sexologist axiom for many years.

A similar process occurred in psychology; although here it was more gradual, it reached similar conclusions. In his early writing Freud considers monogamy as an oppressive sexual norm, a source of neurosis for both men and women (Freud, 1915). Later on, however, he succumbs to the monogamous hegemony and argues that monogamy is a necessary evil, on which human social function and culture relies. Modernity, he says, could not exist without monogamy (Freud, 1930). Despite Freud’s belief that monogamy causes anxiety to women as well, in his writing he also enhances the double standard that surrounds it. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud describes the original human state as a polygynous society, and in “Modern Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” (Freud, 1915) he argues that women have weaker libidos than men; in both cases supplementing the dominant assumption of women’s lower sexual drives.

While modern psychologists may not accept the “historical” Freudian narrative regarding monogamy, they do conceive of monogamy as inherent to romantic relationships. This view is present in measures used to determine people’s satisfaction from their love life, in which monogamy is the assumed default. In “The Pas-

sionate Love Scale”, for example, people are asked to grade sentences like “I would rather spend time with X than with any other person”, that negate the possibility of having more than one love interest at the same time (Zeigler et al., 2014). Non-monogamy is rarely taught as an option in psychological training. Thus, it is often pathologised by therapists, especially when practiced by women (Zeigler et al., 2014; Barker, 2007). Zeigler et al. (2014) note that women are pressured by therapists to measure themselves by their success in maintaining a monogamous romantic relationship. One example they provide for a monogamous double standard in psychology is the common diagnosis of hypo-sexuality for women who stopped feeling sexual attraction towards their partner in long-term monogamy. The opposite case, in which men’s desire towards his partner has dwindled, is simply considered to be a result of men’s non-monogamous nature (Zeigler et al., 2014).

A more concrete manifestation of the social construction of monogamy is present in the legal system. Law plays a crucial function in creating and setting the borders of social institutions that define human relations. It specifically plays a major part in the construction of monogamy, as law books and courts define and interpret the term “relationship”, choosing who shall be included and excluded within it, granting rights, benefits and social protections accordingly (Navarro, 2017).

The monogamous couple sharing a household is the only romantic relationship formation acknowledged by the state (Klesse, 2016). It is considered by the legal system as a single unit with certain rights and obligations: housing rights, pensions, residential rights following a partner’s citizenship, taxation benefits, and visitation rights in hospitals, to name but a few (Navarro, 2017). Aviram & Leachman (2014) note that in the US there are 1,138 federal laws dealing with taxation and economic benefits that derive from the marital relationship between a couple, who are, by proxy, assumed to be monogamous³.

Over the years, many western countries – including USA, Australia, Israel, and the UK – have expanded their definition of “Relationships”, “Families” and “Couples” (Shifman, 2005). Many have broadened them to include common-law marriage, bringing in those couples who follow all the practices of mononormativity without the ritual formality. More recently, a growing number of countries have granted legal status, and the rights resulting from it, to same-sex couples. In order to win this legal recognition, however, same sex couples were forced to emphasise and enhance the mononormativity of their relationships (Polikoff, 1993). In

the struggle for same-sex marriage in the United States, for example, participants worked hard to distinguish themselves from polyamorous people, who were used by the opposition (along with practitioners of bestiality and pedophiles), as the slippery slope to which same-sex marriage approval would lead (Aviram & Leachman, 2014; See also, Navarro, 2017 for a discussion of a similar process in Spain).

At the same time, the monogamous structure that the legal system constructs is not an egalitarian one either. In some cases, the double standard manifests itself in divorce laws that judge women more harshly in cases of adultery, or in court verdicts that do the same. But the monogamous double standard that treats men as free agents and women as their possession is most visible in criminal law: its treatment of domestic violence as a family matter and not a gendered phenomenon (Hassan, 1999); or the “provocation” defence in murder cases, used to minimise the accountability of men who murder their adulterous wives, or even ex-wives who moved on (Kamir, 1997; Fitz-Gibbon, 2012) are all examples of this. It is also very evident in rape law and in rape cases, where conceptions of sexual ownership within a romantic relationship still prevail on one hand, and on the other women who enact independent sexual agency are said to be seducing men and bringing the predatory act upon themselves.

The prohibition on rape was originally meant to defend the man’s property – his wife. As a result of this, for many years, there was no legal sanction on marital rape, which was considered to be the husband’s marital right. Its criminalisation process in the USA, as well as in many European countries had only occurred during the 1990s and early 2000s, and even then it was not always complete. In many American states and in some European countries the law still distinguishes between marital rape (or rape within a romantic relationship) and other rape cases. This distinction is expressed in the severity of the punishments; in the fact that violence is required in order to define the act as rape; or in more meticulous limitation laws (Bennice & Resick, 2003). In other countries, like Canada or Israel, despite the amendment of the law conservative conception regarding marital rape is still reflected in the treatment of survivors by both the police and the courts, leading to many unfounded cases and lighter punishments (Randall, 2010; Negbi, 2009).

While the state grants women limited protection from their partner reflecting, as previously noted, patriarchal conceptions of ownership within relationships, women are also punished for having an independent sexual existence. Manifes-

tations of sexual agency by single women, that range from having several sexual partners or simply being sexually active, to acts which are connected with sexuality like dancing in clubs, drinking, or flirting with men are all interpreted as sexual promiscuity, or risky sexual behaviour. Kelsse (2016), while rephrasing Laura Tenenbaum notes that:

Promiscuity allegations function as a means of regulating women's sexual agency, stigmatize women and legitimize men's sexual violence and abuse (Klesse, 2016, p. 330).

Thus, "promiscuous" women, deemed by social discourse to be legitimate sexual prey, have to contend with victim blaming by the police and in courts (See O'Hara, 2012 for a discussion on media representation in the UK; Raphaell, 2013 for similar discussion as well as an analysis of political discourse in the US). In many Western countries, this victim blaming is translated into the unfounding of rape cases where the victim does not fit the ideal victim narrative constructed by the police, or to lighter punishments in courts (see Sphon & Tellis, 2012 for the USA; Randall, 2010 for Canada; Jordan, 2004 for New Zealand as well as for a reflection on various other countries; and Negbi, 2009 for Israel). Negbi further argues that in addition to using promiscuity and seductiveness in victim blaming, Israeli courts also tend to portray the masculine sexuality of rapists as an animalistic sensation of uncontrollable desire, which at times simply cannot be contained. The sexual violence of men is legitimised as part of their natural instincts, their internal urges to possess and exploit multiple female bodies (Negbi, 2009), thus constructing a predator-prey dichotomy within the legal treatment of rape. These conceptions of risky feminine promiscuity and masculine bestiality are not limited to courts and interrogation rooms. This sexual double standard is also manifested in cultural portrayals of sexual violence, and embedded into the popular discourse on these matters (O'Hara, 2012; Serano, 2007). Yet, within the legal system specifically it is often translated into lack of legal protection or limited legal protection to survivors of sexual violence, who by choice or by proxy are located outside (the limited, as previously noted) defence of the monogamous bond.

As I move from the discussion of mononormativity in law to a discussion of mononormativity in popular culture, I would like to return to the growing legal ac-

ceptance of gay and lesbian sex, when it happens in a mononormative framework. This limited and confined acceptance is also present in popular culture, often framed as support for gay marriage or marriage for all; but also in the prevalence of mononormative gay and lesbian couples in TV shows and movies, which replaced previously common imageries of the prevented gay. This is one further arena in which same-sex relationships managed to earn social legitimacy through mononormative performance that made them less threatening to socially accepted function and familial structure (Seidman, 2005; Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

Popular culture is, indeed, another medium through which monogamy is shaped as the social default. It is also another site in which gender binary and sexual double standards are embedded into the monogamous narrative. Media representations are a code, charged with meanings that reflect the dominant ideology of a certain period (Richardson & Wearing, 2014). The cultural representations of monogamy conserve its hegemonic status, as they are the images shaping romantic imagery. Kim et al. (2007) argue that sexuality is learnt from the social scripts available in popular culture. Those scripts define for their audience what is a sexual encounter and what role one should play in it. The same argument can be made about mononormativity.

Monogamy is performed in almost every popular text. It is present in song lyrics, movies, books, TV shows, commercials, magazines and computer games. The vast majority of cultural texts deal with the search for romantic relationships, romantic gestures, broken hearts, unrequited love, longing and loss. All of this popular romance is monogamous romance, in which the search for love is a search for “the one” (Kean, 2015). Mononormativity is constructed in popular culture on two levels – firstly, monogamy is idealised and naturalised simultaneously, as sexual and romantic exclusivity are presented as an inherent part of romantic relationships (Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Barker et al., 2013). Secondly, alternatives to monogamy are both passively and actively erased. Passively by scarce representations of CNM alternatives, and actively by negative portrayal of characters who breach the monogamous order, who are either punished or brought back into it⁴.

Monogamy in popular culture is a gendered structure that works within the patriarchal order (Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Galician, 2004). Monogamy is presented as more natural for women, who seek commitment and whose sexuality is mostly limited to the confines of romantic relationships. Men are presented as inherently

sexual beings, who might eventually search for true love, but do well with “casual” sexual relationships in the meantime. This is while women’s search for love is usually portrayed as urgent, desperate and total (Kim et al., 2007). The popular genres catering to women, whether dramas or romantic comedies, focus on this search for true love (Power, 2009). Men are also exposed to monogamous love since a romantic narrative tends to accompany non-romantic movies, and the reunited or reformed couple represents the happy ending of most movies. Even action and apocalyptic films where the world, or merely the hero, were just saved from a terrible end, usually conclude with a happy couple. Men have other goals in movies, other forms of achievements, other aspects they are measured by, aside from finding romantic bliss, whereas in many occasions female characters will be mostly, if not only, focused on finding true love (Smith & Cook, 2008). Lauzen, Dozier & Horen (2008) note that a similar phenomenon can be detected in the function and dialogues of female and male characters on TV shows. Female characters tend to be much more focused on tasks and dialogues related to family and romance, while male characters are likely to perform work related roles. The overall message that women receive from popular culture is that their social value is measured mostly by their success in finding a long lasting monogamous relationship (Kim et al., 2007; Smith & Cook, 2008; Behera, 2015)⁵.

Moreover, the mononormative sexual double standard is also largely present in popular culture. Singlehood for women is temporary, permitted for a limited time, at a certain age, as long as their end goal is still finding true love – take “Sex and The City” (both the TV show and the movies), for example (Di Mattia, 2004; Behera, 2015). For men, bachelorhood is something to be cherished and celebrated, a heroic space, reserved for characters like James Bond or Indiana Jones. The hero may find a love interest by the end of the movie. This genre of movies also have a reserved spot for a “Bond Girl”. Paraphrasing Neundorf et al. (2010, p. 758) she will be young, attractive, slender and somewhat disposable, replaced by another girl on the next film. She will not in any way get in the way of his adventurous life. Furthermore, the sexual freedom of a single woman is limited, or else she will be termed a slut; but a single man is expected to enjoy all that life has to offer him, including sexual pleasures (Haskell, 1974). Spinster vs. bachelor, slut vs. stud or ‘ladies’ man’: the terms reflect these representations and the representations reflect the terms (Valenti, 2008). The double standard is also expressed in the fact

that cheating on the part of women will almost always mark the end of a relationship, while cheating on the part of men will be treated as an inevitable result of their sexually abundant nature, justified with the saying “boys will be boys” and forgiven on these grounds (Polowy, 2014). Through such statements, and through other manifestations of masculine sexuality as bestial and uncontrollable, as opposed to contained sexual femininity, mononormativity also works to enhance the predator-prey paradigm. It portrays various scenarios in which sex is something that women give and men take. This encourages disrespect to women’s consent and more importantly, lack thereof, in sexual encounters, as the predator is not meant to mind the desires of its prey (Filipovic, 2008).

At this point it is important to note again, that the gendered construction of mononormativity in popular culture does not just begin or end with representation, it has consequences and effects in real life. Popular culture shapes people’s worldview, their emotional language, and their mindset (Galician, 2004). Girls base their romantic conception on the monogamous model of one true love (Steele & Brown, 1995), and older women judge their peers by their ability to find a boyfriend and by his attractiveness (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). They also accept the notion that women should make great sacrifices for their relationships, and lead their lives in accordance with their partner’s needs. Meanwhile, men find it hard to say no to sexual interactions in a culture that measures them by the number of women they manage to bed (Kim et al., 2007), and are short of role models for emotional management, as managing the relationship is portrayed as “women’s work” (Ingraham, 2009).

Additionally, the fact that every character that has sexual interactions in non-romantic settings is named a “slut” intimidates teenage girls and women and limits their sexual agency (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990; Farvid, Brown & Rowney, 2016). A woman who chooses to be sexual with many partners is excluded from the “good girl” myth, and presented as a legitimate target for sexual violence, as her choice to be sexual with some people, is portrayed as a choice to be sexual with everyone (Kim et al., 2007). Women internalise these conceptions, and project them on other women, blaming them for the violence they encounter (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Filipovic (2008) notes that the “boys will be boys” myth established by popular culture has concrete manifestations in rape culture, as it is used to justify sexual violence on the part of men. The double standard also af-

fects women's sexual autonomy outside the monogamous bond. Therefore, the fear of social stigmatisation, sustained by media representations allows women fewer opportunities to experiment and investigate their sexuality.

As we have seen so far, many fields and discourses play a part in the construction of monogamy as a social institution. They all establish its gendered nature as something that is inherent to it, and idealise the gender binary that accompanies it. In most cases this binary is accompanied by a double standard that strictly requires sexual and romantic exclusivity from women, while allowing men more freedom. This double standard later manifests itself in social conceptions regarding sexuality that deprive women of a great deal of their sexual agency, and marks some women as legitimate victims of sexual violence, as they refuse to adhere to its moral codes.

Beyond Monogamy – From Theory to Practice

The institution of monogamy has been subjected to various forms of social critique since the middle of the 19th century (Sheff, 2012). Until the 1990s, though, these social critiques had usually developed under revolutionary circumstances, in which monogamy had been described as part of the old order that needed to be overthrown. Communists, like Engels and Kollontai spoke of monogamy in terms of class, the ownership over the means of production and the distribution of wealth (Engels, 1884; Kollontai, 1909, 1921). Anarchists like Emma Goldman (1917) saw it as an authoritative structure. Activists of the sexual revolution referred to it as another way in which society limits sexual freedom. In the feminist discourse of the 1970s, and also in the Gay Liberation Front that worked over the same years, it was considered to be a part of the patriarchal, heterosexual, oppressive order (Greer, 1970; Millet, 1970; Gay Liberation Front Manifesto, 1971). These critical analyses have mostly failed to construct alternative institutions of sustainable relationships⁶. This, together with the fact that many of these critiques were merely a byproduct of a more general social critique, meant that once the flames of rebellion had subsided, replaced by a commitment to social reforms, opposition to monogamy was cast aside, along with other matters that were deemed personal or “women's issues”.

Some non-monogamous formations have developed and survived over the

course of time like swinging, sex parties and gay cruising culture, yet all these formations have only subverted, to a limited extent, aspects of sexual exclusivity. They have not shaken the emotional foundations of monogamy as it is socially structured. Moreover, Mint (2007a) notes that these non-monogamous structures have rarely been egalitarian in their nature, and often focused on the sexual satisfaction of men, thus failing to subvert the double standard.

It was only during the 1990s that a social movement which combined a critical discussion of monogamy with the structuring of sustainable alternatives to it, carrying these two as its main banners, was established. Polyamory is a type of CNM in which people are allowed to engage in more than one sexual and/or romantic and or/intimate relationship at the same time, with the informed consent of all parties (Klesse, 2011; Sheff & Tesene, 2015). Polyamory assumes that one person cannot and need not satisfy the entirety of another person's needs and that people may desire a multiplicity of simultaneous romantic and/or sexual relationships (Klesse, 2011). There is a great variety of polyamorous practices, ranging from the number of people involved, the types of relationships they share and the levels of hierarchy or lack thereof (Sheff & Tesene, 2015).

The polyamorous discourse developed simultaneously with the development of polyamorous communities, with practice and theory supplementing one another. From its initial phases it was a discourse led by women who were often also identified as queers, lesbians or bisexuals. They pointed out the sexual double standard in mononormativity and its gendered nature, saw the feminist value in creating alternatives to it, and tried to approach other women in their writing. Amongst the pioneers one could note Easton and Liszt who wrote *The Ethical Slut* (1997), which is considered to be "the polyamorous bible" and Deborah Anapol with *Polyamory – The New Love Without Limits* (1997). Anapol was also the founder of *Loving More* magazine, which developed into a website and global social network for the polyamorous community (Mint, 2007a). More recent writing about polyamory is also dominated by women and non-binary people, with Elizabeth Sheff, Meg John Barker, Tristan Toramino and Eve Rickert, to name but a few of the leading voices; all of whom place a high emphasis on the feminist aspects of the polyamorous discussion.

On a very basic level, polyamory subverts the double standard by providing both men and women with an equal opportunity to have multiple sexual and

romantic partners. A right, which, as we have seen, was historically reserved for men only. By doing so, it undermines the “Slut” vs. “Stud” dichotomy (Cascais & Cardoso, 2012). Mint (2007a, para 9) summarises this by simply saying that: “Polyamory’s most radical contribution is that it gives women full access to nonmonogamy.” Another aspect that contributes to the feminist potential of polyamory is the negation of jealousy and possessiveness as manifestations of true love. Under mononormative conception, Jealousy is usually perceived as a primeval emotion that cannot be controlled. Moreover, as previously noted, jealousy has been used to justify various forms of sexist and violent behaviours. In the polyamorous discourse, however, jealousy is turned into a personal feeling that needs to be dealt with through communication and self-reflection (Easton & Hardy, 2009; Easton, 2010; Mint, 2010).

By disengaging from the mononormative romantic script, polyamory has the potential to destabilise gender stereotypes and gender roles, which are embedded into it. This is reflected in the reflections of some of the polyamorous women interviewed by Elizabeth Sheff (2005) who described aspects of personal, social and sexual empowerment in their polyamorous experiences. Sheff (2005, p. 259) explains:

Departure from accepted forms of relationships required polyamorous women to form new roles or expand roles previously available to them as monogamists. The women in my sample expanded their familial, cultural, gendered, and sexual roles.

Those women related these empowering experiences to their polyamorous lifestyles and the new options it unfolded. Some of them also specifically spoke about how the release from the potential labelling as a “slut” has expanded their sexual freedom. It should be noted however, that some of the women interviewed also spoke of aspects of disempowerment, which in many cases relate not only to stigma, but also to lingering manifestation of more traditional gender roles, as well as to personal insecurities in their relationships. While the need to structure their own relationships without the pre-dictated rules of mononormativity allows women to transgress normatively in other forms, including gender, it does not simply erase the patriarchal society in which they have yet to live (Sheff, 2005).

Women are often brought up to devalue their needs and place themselves as secondary to others, limiting their space and their desires to fit in social and personal margins, especially in the context of romantic and familial relationships. As a result of the fact that polyamorous people are not working with a prescript relationship form, but constructing their own rules, the negotiation of boundaries and needs plays a major part in the establishment of many poly relationships (Taormino, 2008; Veaux & Riceart, 2014). This provides women with a setting in which they are encouraged to draw their boundaries and define their needs, a setting in which it may be easier for them to demand a space and an existence that is for themselves (Easton & Hardy, 2009). While this can happen in a monogamous setting as well, the fact that it is a common part of polyamorous practice makes it more likely to happen.

Also important, in this context, is the polyamorous focus on self-sufficiency and independent existence outside the couple's bond, which negates the social expectation that women, and to a lesser extent men, submerge themselves in their relationships, and become a single social (as well as legal) unit with their partners (Jackson & Scott, 2004). At the same time, polyamorous discourse does emphasise the construction of relationship networks, as well as the significance of various types of relationships and intimacies, in many cases giving names and value to relationships between women that have previously been devalued and unnamed (Sheff, 2005, 2014; Jackson & Scott, 2004). Sheff's (2005) interviewees also pointed out the improvement of their relationships with other women, and the positive and reassuring effects of this. All of these combined may provide women with better support nets to lean on, as they seek an easier escape route from abusive situations.

This does not mean that there is never co-dependency or abuse in polyamorous relationships, and that all these relationships are feminist in and of themselves. It also does not mean that polyamorous communities are free from patriarchal gendered conceptions, or a sexual double standard. Various manifestations of these still remain within those communities, from the division of house labour to the pursuit of the "Hot Bi Babe" (for an extensive discussion of these, see for example Sheff, 2014). This only means that some of the polyamorous values have the potential, which is to some extent reflected in practice, to subvert some of the patriarchal aspects of mononormativity.

Moreover, not everyone is interested in having multiple sexual and/or romantic partners. For some, partial or full exclusivity is more befitting. Polyamorous writers are well aware of this. Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (2004), while reflecting on polyamorous writings as journey books, says that some people will end their journey by choosing to be monogamous; adding, though, that now they will approach monogamy with self-awareness and approach it out of freedom and choice, not treating it as a default. In *'The Ethical Slut'* (2009), Easton and Hardy also noted that even in light of polyamory, monogamy will continue to thrive, as it always has, as a legitimate choice for those who really desire it. Yet, they stress that a choice is possible only when there are several options to choose from.

Robinson (1997) argues that heterosexuality as an institution should be separated from heterosexuality as a lived experience. Jackson (2006, p. 105) adds that compulsory institutionalised heterosexuality: "... regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalising and sanctioning those outside them ...". Accordingly, I argue that the deconstruction of mononormativity is relevant not only to the non-monogamous, but also to those who would have actively chosen an exclusive relationship form, since they too are being limited and disciplined by its institutional nature.

Mononormativity, like heteronormativity, functions as a meaning structure, through which we read and analyse social interactions and situations. Many assumptions about the form and nature of relationships derive from this meaning structure that go far beyond sexual and romantic exclusivity. There are assumptions regarding the participants in the relationship: such as the assumption that at some point in time they will formalise their relationship, share their economic means and have children together, and that unless they do so, their relationship is bound to fail. There are assumptions regarding certain characteristics of the relationship, like the assumption that sexuality must play a part in it, or the assumed romantic performance demanded by cultural portrayals (Rosa, 1994). There are also assumptions regarding the role it plays in the lives of the people involved: it is assumed to be the most important relationship in their lives and the one to which they are most committed. Finally, there are assumptions regarding gender roles and division of labour: such as who was in charge of the invitation and planning in the dating phase, and who on the other hand pushed towards exclusivity and formalisation of the relationship. This process of interpretation and

attribution of meaning goes unnoticed, because we are so used to performing this that it is invisible to us. Upon making all these assumptions we do not feel like we are adding any new facts, we are merely acknowledging the natural order (Jackson, 2006).

The Polyamorous Existence

I would like to suggest and consider the notions of “the polyamorous continuum” and “the polyamorous existence” as alternative paradigms, within which we can read, discuss, and understand relationships. The polyamorous continuum” acknowledges the fact that every person’s life is made up of a spectrum of relationships – long and short, romantic and platonic, sexual, flirtatious, a-sexual, and some which fit none of these definitions. It asks to subvert the dichotomy and hierarchy between romantic and sexual relationships to platonic and non-sexual ones. It should be noted that this continuum is mostly a theoretical category that exceeds the practical borders of day-to-day lives of both polyamorous and monogamous people. I suggest this in order to provide a categorical reflection on those practices through a theocratic framework in which mononormativity is not assumed as the default; a framework that could allow monogamous people, monogamish people, and other people located somewhere in between to examine their lives through the radical conceptions of polyamory.

The polyamorous existence assumes that relationships are structured and shaped by those who are leading them, out of communication, expressed needs, negotiated boundaries and consent, and not as an attempt to perform a pre-dictated script. The polyamorous existence uses polyamorous language to speak about all forms of relationships, enhancing the values of negotiation, communication and consent in their formation. It acknowledges the fact that some people may be interested in exclusive relationships, but also that there are varying levels of exclusivity, and that desires are fluid, and change over time. Exclusivity under this framework is viewed as a pole in a spectrum, with complete sexual and emotional freedom as the opposite. Neither should be assumed as the default. Instead, the placement of the relationship on this spectrum should be negotiated and agreed upon, and open for renegotiation as time goes by. It frees relationships from the mononormative paradigm that is charged with gendered, sexual

and practical meanings, while allowing people to pick and choose those aspects of the monogamous script that they find worthy, and incorporate them into their own lives. The release from the mononormative meaning of monogamy can allow it to be placed in other relationship dynamics that encourage more equal and independent relationships.

Jamie Heckhert (2010) made a similar suggestion in his article “Love Without Borders, Intimacy Identity and the State of Compulsory Monogamy”. Heckhert speaks of monogamy from an anarchist perspective, as an authoritative mechanism that narrows personal freedom. He suggests “the nomadic existence” as an alternative to compulsory monogamy, arguing that it allows the replacing of the strict borders of monogamy with fluid and temporary boundaries, which are individually drawn. I agree with Heckhert’s assertion that an alternative paradigm is required in order to deconstruct mononormativity. I also agree that it should be a paradigm that leaves enough room for relationships which feature some aspects of chosen, consensual exclusivity, for those who desire it, when they do. Nonetheless, since Heckhert is led by anarchist thoughts, his alternative paradigm focuses on the individual and individualism. I, on the other hand, approach this through a feminist and queer perspective. Thus, I do not only wish to challenge compulsory monogamy, but also its patriarchal characteristics, and therefore, suggest the notion of the polyamorous existence.

Rosa (1994) notes that the binary between platonic and romantic relationships is crucial to the monogamous existence. This dichotomy is accompanied by a hierarchy between the two that grants a higher and unique status to romantic relationships, which are glorified above all other forms of human bonds. By speaking about spectrums of relationship types, and noting the options of fluidity and liminality within existing relationships, the polyamorous existence” subverts this dichotomy and the hierarchy alongside it., thus, providing more room for various types of connections and commitments.

With the lesbian continuum, Rich (1980) tried to acknowledge and recognise various types of relationships between women – intimate, friendly, familial, social, playful, personal and political – that often go unnoticed under heteronormativity. Similarly, the polyamorous continuum seeks to acknowledge all those relationships that people in general, and women specifically, lead that digress from the setting of the monogamous couple. The subversion of the hierarchy between dif-

ferent forms of relationships could grant more space and value to relationships between women. Through the establishment of the conception of intimacy, which is not necessarily sexual, it enables the creation of a broader network of social relations, support systems, and new familial roles even for those who do choose romantic and/or sexual exclusivity.

In addition to this, looking at relationships through the conception of the polyamorous existence can contribute to the deconstruction of the mononormative double standard, and encourage the creation of a more egalitarian sexual and relational atmosphere. Given this, as a paradigm the polyamorous existence assumes that a multiplicity of sexual and romantic partners is a valid choice for everyone including women, and also that sexuality is one practice out of many through which people can express their affection. Women who prefer sexual and romantic exclusivity could still benefit from such a paradigmatic shift, since it would expand their sexual agency at times in which they are not partaking in a committed relationship. As such, as previously noted, most people in Western society lean towards serial monogamy, and many of them engage in casual sex. Given that women still fear the labelling as a slut, this change is relevant to many.

Thinking of the “polyamorous continuum” and the polyamorous existence gives us the opportunity to imagine the deconstruction of monogamy as a social institution. A realistic manifestation of this could potentially be coopted into the monogamous order, as social orders need practical changes to accompany theoretical ideas. As a thought experiment, even though it encourages a discursive frame that makes some of the radical notions of polyamory accessible and available to people who would not embrace a polyamorous relationship, it allows us to bring forth the legitimacy of sexual and romantic multiplicity; to question the prioritisation of romantic relationships over platonic ones; to make room for various forms of intimacies and to fluidity and changes within existing relationships; and to disengage from the mononormative rulebook in a way that allows people to consider what relationships they would like to have, instead of trying to fit relationships into pre-dictated boxes.

Conclusion

In this article I examined some of the discursive foundations of mononormativity, and demonstrated how they all enforce a sexual double standard and a traditional

gender binary. A broader analysis of some of these discursive fields is still required, as well as an expansion of this discussion to other discourses that have not been covered here, like linguistics and socio-biology. When it comes to popular culture specifically, there is also room for deeper analysis of various instances of mononormativity, similar to those which have been done with heteronormativity, as well as research that would exceed the scope of American culture.

It is also crucial to look into the daily manifestations of mononormativity and how they come manifest, both in the lives of those who follow in its footsteps, and of those who choose to disengage from it. I do believe, however, that this article lays the groundwork on which such future examinations could build.

I have also looked into the feminist potential of polyamory in subverting some of the gendered aspects of mononormativity, and have tried to explore how these radical aspects of the polyamorous discourse could exceed the borders of the polyamorous community. While the polyamorous continuum” may remain a theoretical thought experiment, it is one that could give polyamorous people better vocabulary to explain their life choices to monogamous folk, and it could give monogamous people who do not want to adopt mononormativity the first steps of an alternative path. In order to conclude on a more practical note, I would point to Barker (2013), who claims that a paradigmatic shift is already taking place. More people are occupying the liminal space between monogamy and polyamory, asking themselves questions about relationships, or looking for the right questions to ask; thus making it a great time to consider what alternative relational paradigms we can construct, and how to make them more egalitarian. This article is one small step in that direction.

Endnotes

- ¹ There is a growing number of articles, books and other publications dealing with various forms of consensual non-monogamies (CNM), like, Sheff (2014, 2015), Barker & Langdrige (2010b), Klesse (2011, 2016), Deri (2015), to name but a few. See Brewster et al. (2017) for a thorough review of recent scholarship. Quite a few conferences dedicated to CNM have also taken place in recent years, amongst them “The 1st Conference on Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies” that took place in Lisbon in September 2015 from which this issue has resulted.

- ² The practice of polygamy amongst Ashkenazi Jews ended around the 11th Century following a prohibition by Rabbi Gerhom. Jews of Sephardic origins continued to practice polygamy until the establishment of the state of Israel, into which most of them migrated, where polygamy is mostly prohibited by law. Even in contemporary Israeli law, though, that in matters of marriage and divorce is subject to Jewish religious law, there are various exceptions that allow polygamy on the side of men (Schotman, 1995).
- ³ Another important legal privilege enjoyed by monogamous couples relates to immigration rights. Since at the moment, this legal discussion is more relevant to the cases of polygamous families, and less relevant to the discussion of polyamory, I have not addressed this in this paper. However, it should be noted that in these cases too it is often the women who are mostly harmed by the lack of legal recognition to their marital status, as they find themselves disconnected from their family or faced with an ongoing threat of deportation. For a thorough discussion of the legal hurdles experienced by non-monogamous people see Navarro (2017), Rambakkana (2015) and Daaif (2007).
- ⁴ Klesse (2016) notes a growing wave of media representations of polyamory, as part of an attempt by poly people to gain greater visibility. Yet, she points out that mainstream media still clings mostly to the problems and hurdles and thus, relationships and positive representations are mostly marginal.
- ⁵ Due to the attempt to present a broader analysis, not focused only on media, most of the texts analysed by the article references in this section focus on American popular culture. As American media is broadcasted globally, and regularly reflected in creations across the globe, I do believe that its effects range beyond the lives of American women. Nevertheless, there is certainly room for a comparative examination of mononormative messages in popular culture produced in other countries.
- ⁶ Although some of them have succeeded within specific sub-cultures to maintain common forms of sexual variants like the gay cruising culture and the prevalence of sexually open relationships within these communities. These, though are very much focused on the sexual aspect of CNM. Moreover most of them are mostly, if not only, practiced by gays and not by lesbian, manifesting again the sexual double standard.

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“We’re Not Cheaters”: Polyamory, Mixed-Orientation Marriage and the Construction of Radical Honesty

Jingshu Zhu

ABSTRACT: Through self-reflexive ethnography, this paper discusses the notion of radical honesty and an assembly of issues around it, including gay closet, bisexual erasure, marital fidelity, polyamory and the research ethics. Three phenomena in different contexts converge in the author’s academic and intimate life: polyamorists’ dissociation with ‘cheating’ by valuing ‘responsible/ethical non-monogamy’, the denunciation of Chinese same-sex-attracted men for ‘deceiving’ their straight wives (tongqis), and the pressure on the researcher to disclose certain privacies in order to obtain “informed consent” in her fieldwork. This paper shows how ‘cheating’ is Othered in hetero-monogamous marriage, Chinese gay communities, tongqi groups, polyamorists and the academia in different yet interconnected ways. It contextualizes and problematizes the individualistic tendencies and the exclusionary effects in the rising discourse of radical honesty. It also questions the universality of the values of authenticity, transparency and verbal communication in these situations. In the conclusion, this paper suggests several possibilities to rethink radical honesty.

KEYWORDS: Mixed-orientation Marriage, Polyamory, Radical Honesty, Research Ethics, Informed Consent

In the last two decades, the term ‘radical honesty’ has gained great popularity in Anglophone societies. Brad Blanton (1994) first elaborated this term in a best-selling self-help book, encouraging his readers to dig into the “core of truth, not



just the outward trappings”, and to be open about their “true” identities, histories and desires. This idea is especially worshiped among polyamorists in contemporary Western¹ societies. Polyamory, literally ‘many loves’, is often defined as consensual, responsible and ethical non-monogamy, as opposed to ‘cheating’ (Anapol, 2010; Emens, 2009). For polyamorists, radical honesty is counterpoint to the dissemblance attendant to monogamous fidelity; it is also an everyday practice that subverts the structural “compulsory monogamy” (Emens, 2009, p. 38; Fiscel, 2016, p. 188).

While celebrating the emancipatory and transformative effects of this new form of intimacy, few polyamory texts have framed honesty and cheating beyond individual choices; the economic-cultural-legal conditions that make disclosure preferable are less discussed (Haritaworn, Klesse, & Lin, 2006; Noël, 2006). This paper intends to address this gap through self-reflexive ethnography (Plummer, 1995; Stacey, 1988). It unfolds along three interwoven themes: polyamory, mixed-orientation marriage and the fieldwork.

An Engaged Researcher in the Polyamory and Queer Fields

Auto-ethnographers have rightly pointed out that self-exposure has to be “essential to the argument ... not a decorative flourish” (Behar, 1996, p. 14); and the autobiographic accounts should not be uncritically confessional but excite and provoke an engaged questioning in the reader (Jackson, 1990, p. 4). Bearing these caveats in mind, I will explain my personal encounters with radical honesty in different scenarios; specific enough to acknowledge my partial knowledge (Haraway, 1988), while brief enough to avoid navel-gazing.

After two monogamous relationships with a woman and a man serially, I started to practice polyamory and since 2015 have actively participated in related events in Europe. While finding polyamory well accommodating to my bisexuality² without having to cheat, I also think the insistence on radical honesty can sometimes cause as many problems as it solves. I recall in a polyamorists’ meetup a woman was talking with tearful eyes about her struggles: her husband accepted her coming out as polyamorous, but he himself chose to be monogamous, and did not want to know much about her other lovers. However, she wished her husband

would not only recognize her relationship status, but also listen to her sharing and feel whole-hearted “compersion” – the antonym of jealousy, a neologism among polyamorists (Ritchie & Barker, 2006, p. 595). Her full disclosure was overwhelming for her husband, whose refusal to know the details frustrated her in return. Instances like this have made me wonder how the supposedly ethical practice of truth-telling can turn hurtful.

My mixed feelings towards the polyamory community’s disparagement of dishonesty also derive from my sensitivity to the term ‘marriage fraud’ (*pianhun*) in Chinese society, which was one of the main topics of my doctoral research project from 2013 to 2017 (Zhu, 2017a). ‘Marriage Fraud’ is commonly represented in Chinese media as a ‘gay’³ man marrying an uninformed woman (*tongqi*), who later finds out the ‘truth’ and feels deceived. Numerous *tongqis* have come out publicly to condemn the ‘gay frauds’. When I talked about my research at polyamorists’ meetups, my peers often commented, “have any mixed-orientation couples in China thought of consensual non-monogamy? That would be a relief for both of them!”

Indeed, literature has shown that an open marriage is not uncommon for mixed-orientation spouses in Western societies who choose not to divorce (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016; Wolkomir, 2009). In China, however, openly negotiating a consensual non-monogamous mixed-orientation marriage seems neither appealing nor practical. I have discussed elsewhere why mixed-orientation marriage is problematized as ‘tragedy’ and ‘fraud’ rather than a negotiable relationship in China, and how the two seemingly antagonistic identities *tongqi* and ‘gay’ are in fact symbiotic (Zhu, 2017b). What is yet to be discussed is certain normativity implied in those polyamorists’ reactions and in mixed-orientation-marriage literature, where disclosure and candid communication seem to be the indispensable preconditions of doing mixed-orientation marriage ethically. Negotiation, based on liberal individualism and contractualism, seems to have become a self-evident, universal virtue, which nevertheless contradicts the lived experiences of some of my respondents in a different socio-cultural milieu.

The very research process on ‘marriage fraud’ is closely related to truth-telling, too. I carried out my 8-month fieldwork on same-sex-attracted people in and outside of different-sex marriages in China in 2014. I did participant observation in three online groups of *tongqis* and in some LGBT communities’ online and offline

activities. I also interviewed 12 self-identified *tongqis* and 7 married same-sex-attracted men. While asking them about their stories and opinions on sexuality and marital fidelity, I, an intimate spectator, was also inevitably subject to the inquisition from them about my own sexuality, relationship status and attitudes. Both the researcher and the researched were thus weighing and balancing whether and how much to disclose to each other. As I will show later, such reverse gaze has trapped a bisexual researcher in methodological and ethical complexities.

Overall, polyamory, mixed-orientation marriage and the ethnographic fieldwork are experientially intertwined in my academic-intimate life, all surrounding the theme of non/disclosure⁴. I will quilt them into a patchwork, where one piece is connected and furthered by the other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 477). The quilting starts with the atypical “coming-out” experience of a Chinese same-sex-attracted man to his wife, which illustrates the grey area between fully passing and being openly gay. Meanwhile, I stitch into the discussion of ‘marriage fraud’ my own struggles with the research ethics of ‘informed consent’ when doing fieldwork as a bisexual researcher among *tongqis* and gay activists. Then I come back to Yao’s non/consensual non/monogamous practices and its implications to polyamory. Read diffractively (Barad, 2007), these three patches will together depict how monogamists, polyamorists, *tongqis*, ‘gay’ men, bisexuals and anthropologists construct themselves as ethical subject via confession and the Othering of ‘cheating’ in different yet interconnected ways. In the end, I will rethink cheating and truth-telling beyond an individualistic and universalized understanding of radical honesty.

Non/Disclosure of Same-Sex Desire in a Different-Sex Marriage

Yao is a civil servant in his forties. He lives with his wife and seven-year-old son in a metropolis in Southern China, while occasionally having secret casual sex via same-sex dating websites. He told me that he had “that kind of feeling” towards men for as long as he can remember, but he did not know the word ‘homosexuality’ until graduate school. Soon after graduation, he got married to a classmate, because they were the only two unmarried, and their teachers and classmates were warm-heartedly matchmaking for them.

Like many other 'gay' and *tongqi* respondents, he took marriage as something "you should do when it's time". Although he had already been in an underground relationship with a married middle-aged man then, he firmly believed in the necessity of a normative marriage for his social status, for continuing his family line and for old-age security. A marriage is believed to be much more stable than a legally unprotected and socially stigmatic same-sex relationship.

"What if I Were Gay?"

I asked if his wife knew about his sexual orientation. He said she did suspect it: "I might have left some traces when I surfed the Internet. She confronted me once, asking if I was gay (*tongxinglian*). I said, 'certainly not!' Of course, I'd never admit it."

Yao acknowledged that his "certainly not!" was probably not convincing at all. He even speculated that his wife had long known about his same-sex attraction, but was just "very smart not to 'poke the paper window'". This is a Chinese saying for unveiling something that all parties have known tacitly. Indeed, there is a subtle but significant difference between knowing and revealing, and between acquiescence and announcement. Naming someone, as Butler eloquently discusses in her works on speech act and interpellation, has a subject-making effect (Butler, 1993, pp. 7–8). If Yao said yes, I'm gay, he would then be burdened with the stigma of a 'marriage fraud', and his wife would also be encapsulated into the dominant rhetoric of victimized *tongqi*, regardless of their own identification. In this sense, Yao's denial is not necessarily a lying about his 'gay truth', but can be a rejection of the gay/*tongqi* identity politics.

Despite denying being 'gay', Yao did not avoid his wife's question altogether. Instead, he tentatively asked her back,

"Let's just suppose, what if I were [gay]? What would you do?"

She said, 'I couldn't do anything with it.'

'But you could divorce me.' I suggested.

She replied, 'Well, even if I divorced you and married a straight man, he might still have affairs with other women. Yet, if I've already had a responsible husband, what's the difference?'"

Within a few words, they have exchanged more than what was spoken. Yao's reversion of the 'are-you-gay' question shifts the conversation from an inquisition into his 'truth self' to a discussion of a hypothetical scenario. As he said, his wife might have guessed right about his orientation. Therefore, this question is neither fully factual nor purely fictional. Like playing Tai Chi, the couple probed into each other's un/knowingness in a careful, roundabout fashion. Yao's 'what-if' question gave himself some leeway: if she turned out nonjudgmental or even supportive, this conversation could be a starting point of a successful coming-out; and if she reacted negatively, he could still go back to his earlier denial. Implicitly he was asking: which 'truth' would you rather live with?

The reluctance of Yao's wife to 'poke the paper window' can be interpreted in many ways: it may suggest her tacit acceptance for Yao's untold same-sex attraction; it may imply her fear of divorce, considering the social importance of a "complete" family for their son; maybe she thought it unnecessary to know in detail what her husband was doing (sexually or otherwise) outside their home; or perhaps in her perception, having a 'normal' husband browsing male-to-male erotic websites occasionally is as 'true' as, if not more than, having a 'gay' husband who conducted 'marriage fraud' from the very beginning. With limited second-hand information, I cannot know what she was really thinking. However, if I simply took the fraud/victim dichotomy, I would have to foreclose the aforesaid possibilities, and shelve a mixed-orientation couple's own understanding of what matters in marriage.

"A Responsible Husband"

In Yao's retelling, his wife used the term "responsible" to describe him. The younger generation may find it unacceptable to say that a closeted 'gay' husband with extra-marital same-sex affairs is responsible at all. Influenced by consumerism and hetero-mono-normative pop culture, many tend to believe that a responsible husband must be faithful, and has to provide romantic love and sexual satisfaction to his wife (Pan, 2006). However, it is only since Western modernity that marriage has begun to be bundled together with love, sex and exclusivity (Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012). This package was popularized in China even later, partly due to the 1980s one-child policy that separated sexual pleasure in and outside of marriage from reproduction (Pan, 2006; Yan, 2003).

In contrast, Yao’s wife’s understanding of responsibility demonstrates a more pragmatic idea about marriage that still has a strong influence on Chinese people’s marital decisions today: a husband is considered responsible as long as he has a stable job, provides for the family, does not beat his wife, does not cheat, and even if he does cheat, he ultimately returns to the family (Zhang, Parish, Huang & Pan, 2012). For the individuals who have been tightly bound by filial obligations in a country where eldercare is mainly provided by the offspring rather than the welfare state (Chou, 1997; Nie, 2016), responsibility in marriage is never just a matter of love, sex and fidelity between two autonomous subjects.

When comparing such an interpretation of responsibility with that of Western polyamory, we should be careful not to adopt an imperialist narrative of the latter as sexually and emotionally advanced (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 519). For polyamorists, a responsible partner should be first and foremost honest. He should also be good at non-violent communication, have safe sane consensual sex, negotiate continuously and, if things don’t work, break up peacefully (Easton & Hardy, 1997; Veaux & Rickert, 2014). Such an emotion-centered understanding of responsibility reflects the rising of the ‘pure relationship’, featuring equality, freewill and reciprocity (Giddens, 1992), a relationship form that is nonetheless not universally idealized.

To avoid the binary thinking of the West and the rest, however, we should notice that Yao and his wife are situated in a hybrid reality (Hall, 1992; Wong, 2010): China is now experiencing rapid individualization and the moralization of the marriage-love-sex-fidelity package, but such a process is mingled with the still burdensome duties towards family continuity and old-age security. The tension in such hybridity is complicating the marital decisions of many Chinese, gay and straight alike. Even for those Westerners whose socio-cultural environments allow them to choose polyamory relatively easily, they also live with many hybrid, conflicting values, which are often understated in the language of progressiveness.

“We Talk about Everything”

Besides responsibility, Yao’s marriage seems to have a different standard of transparency. He told me that he and his wife were very close friends in graduate school, and they would “talk about everything” (*wuhua bushuo*). For instance, he said, as

part of their course work on Marxist Theories, they had discussed the patriarchal nature of hetero-monogamous marriage, and agreed that cheating and prostitution are inseparable supplements of this institution, which was quite radical among their peers. However, besides talking about the theories, they never clearly expressed their personal attitudes towards infidelity, nor did they negotiate before or during marriage how to deal with cheating, if it ever happens.

Yao's alleged willingness to "talk about everything" with his wife may sound self-contradictory, because he did not disclose his same-sex attraction and his casual sex with men. However, no partner can literally share everything in life; and we tend to accept that spouses who do not disclose all the trivialities can still be considered candid. The question then becomes: is homosexuality a deep dark secret so critical to Yao's integrity that withholding it would spoil his sincerity of "talking about everything"? Trapped in the obsession with knowing more about our own and others' sexualities, are we still able to deem certain untold sexual behaviors and desires trivial?

This, I argue, is one of the major flaws of the popular discourse on 'radical honesty': it encourages people to reveal deep-rooted truths, without questioning why certain truths are so fundamental. Foucault has shown us how homosexuality, among other sexual "perversions", has been essentialized and stigmatized in Western modernity (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). Such a subject-making process is now imprinted on Chinese same-sex-attracted subjects, too, via (de)pathologization, (de)criminalization and the increasing gay rights discourse (Kang, 2012). Once the 'gay truth' is established, it is difficult to undo it, nor see a husband's occasional same-sex encounters as mere behaviors, as friendship (Foucault, 1997), or in some Chinese married men's words, as "a small hobby like playing mahjong" (Wei & Cai, 2012, p. 62). The construction of the 'gay truth' locks same-sex-attracted people perpetually in an epistemological closet, where they are not only required to stay silent, but also demanded to reveal more (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 70).

Polyamorists do not necessarily have a gay closet, but they are no less pressured to reveal their own 'truths'. Being radically honest about "everything" as a polyamorist often involves much more meticulous self-scrutiny and self-exposure of one's feelings, behaviors and thoughts; and the more difficult and shameful it is to tell certain "truths", the more relief they can get from the telling (Foucault, 1978). While giving them moral satisfaction, such high standard of transparency also puts

them on the treadmill of knowledge-pleasure. As shown below, the imperative to disclose also manifests in a researcher's very studies on disclosure.

Researching with Incomplete 'Informed Consent'

For anthropologists, 'informed consent' is a basic principle to establish ethical research relationships. The researched generally need to know at least the topic of the research, the intended results of it, the measures taken to ensure anonymity, and the right to withdraw their consent before the texts are published, so that they can consent to the research based on sufficient information (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Theoretically, a researcher does not have to reveal proactively her sexual orientation and relationship status, because these are her privacies that neither the academic institute nor the respondents should force her to share. This was nevertheless more complex during my fieldwork, because nondisclosure of one's sexual orientation was precisely an allergy of many *tongqi* respondents and gay activists, yet disclosing my bisexuality was difficult, too. Therefore, I had to constantly manage my image, to the extent that I seemed to be a dishonest researcher with several contradictory identities.

The Bisexual Eraser

The PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is one of the most influential activist groups in China that supports lesbian and gay children to come out to their parents. It mainly relies on the immutability of the being-true-self rhetoric to encourage gay people to come out for themselves and for the gay rights movements (Wang, 2015, pp. 102–104). Accordingly, it also discourages 'marriage fraud', thus becoming one of the few gay groups that have a close liaison with *tongqis*. Introduced by the PFLAG, I accessed an online *tongqi* peer-support group, and started snow-ball sampling for interviewees therefrom.

Before the interviews started, I would routinely inform them of my research project and ask for their written or verbal consent. At this stage, most *tongqis* would ask me if I was a *tongqi* as well, and if not, why I was interested in this topic. Understandably, like any interpersonal story-telling, my *tongqi* respondents needed to know something about the interviewer and the audience before they could

select their wording, engage proper emotions, assemble certain ‘facts’ and ultimately weave them into a coherent narrative (Plummer, 1995). Many *tongqis* had expressed upfront their distrust in gay male researchers, whom they were afraid would only defend ‘marriage frauds’ and misrepresent *tongqis*. Some even went so far as to say that they would not want to talk to a lesbian researcher for the same reason. As for bisexuality, most *tongqis* in this group tended to believe it is “just an excuse of the cheaters”, insisting on the innateness and immutability of homosexuality (Zhu, 2017b). Knowing these taboos, I tried to avoid talking about my own sexual orientation, and focused on my academic interests on this issue.

However, oftentimes I was asked abruptly, “are you gay or straight?” Neither wanting to lie nor to come out as gay or bisexual, I would simply talk about my then monogamous boyfriend. This helped me to get away from further inquisition, because a different-sex relationship seemed suffice to establish my heterosexuality. Scholars have correctly argued that monogamous bisexuals often have difficulty claiming both monogamy and bisexuality because they are taken as mono-sexual (Klesse, 2005; Mint, 2004). Ironically, however, I experienced such erasure as a convenience in my fieldwork as much as oppression. Such convenience appeared in my daily-life, too. My then boyfriend provided me a shield against my parents’ and acquaintances’ prying eyes. I did not have to falter about my ‘singleness’ as I did when I was actually being with a woman. The benefits of my “straight” appearance often reminded me of Yao and other married ‘gay’ respondents, whose ‘normal’ marriage may also have saved them from endless gossips and embarrassment.

When I participated in PFLAG events, however, my answer to the same question “are you gay or straight” was different. Knowing previously their disdain on bisexuals as “poorly-self-identified” (*rentong buhao*) homosexuals, I was hesitant to disclose my heterosexual relationship, but simply told them that I had a girlfriend, yet we had broken up. I tried to carefully probe into the attitudes of some PFLAG parents towards bisexuality, but what I most commonly received were statements like “that’s strange”, “I’m not sure if it really exists”, or “those so-called bisexuals are ruining the reputation of the real gay people like our sons”. At those moments I always wondered, if I came out as bisexual right in front of them, would they change their mind? However, I never dared to speak that *B* word, due to my fear of discrimination, and my worries about losing rapport with these respondents.

Put together, the two statements “I have a boyfriend now” and “I had a girl-

friend before" were both true and false. I was shifting between playing 'straight' and performing 'gay', neither of which was a pre-existing fact. These labels only became temporarily and partially true through the interaction between myself, my interlocutors, the instant environment and the wider discursive-material context. If I were to do the same fieldwork now, I might be much braver to talk about bi-/pansexuality in front of my respondents, but retrospectively, my hesitation and timidity are still valuable. They made me a vulnerable yet compassionate researcher, and they became embodied reminders of the hardship many (sexual) minorities are still enduring today.

The Inevitable "Betrayal"

Just like my maneuvering around my bisexual 'truths', I had to carefully navigate my opinions on 'marriage fraud' as well. I could not promise my *tongqi* respondents that I would help them to condemn 'gay frauds' in my papers, which many journalists did in their one-sided, melodramatic reports.⁵ When some *tongqi* respondents explicitly required me to write in certain ways, I could only express my understanding, without clearly promising or refusing. In my later writing, bearing their trust and wishes in mind, I tried to represent their narratives comprehensively, including some gay-hating expressions attendant to their hurt feelings (Zhu, 2017b). However, as an anthropologist, I could not simply repeat their voice. My *tongqi* respondents may be displeased when reading my analysis that seems to exonerate the evil cheaters in their eyes. They may even withdraw their consent, claiming that they were ill-informed about my research purposes and my political stance.

Similarly, the gay activists may also be unhappy about my airing of the community's 'dirty laundry' by presenting some unhappy mixed-orientation marriages (Taylor, 2011). 'Betrayal' is thus inevitable for a researcher in such a personal-political battlefield; whether picking side or not, she may end up in "double jeopardy" (Becker, 1967, p. 244; Chu, 1997).

Was I being unethical in the field? And am I finally being honest about my previous dishonesty now? By portraying my multiple 'fake selves' in the field, I am not seeking forgiveness or pleasure via confession. Rather, I find it imperative to interrogate what makes speaking up easier in some occasions than others, and to what extent the principle of 'informed consent' is demanding researchers to 'out' their

privacies in exchange for academic integrity. In fact, the surveillance does not only come from the academia. As researchers we are often warned not to be merely voyeuristic when soliciting (sexual) stories (Plummer, 1995, p. 145; Thomas & Williams, 2016), but here we see that, reversely, a bisexual researcher can fall into the hetero- and homonormative gaze from her respondents as well.

Moreover, even for a 'perfectly normal' anthropologist without bisexual or other social stigmas, the ambition to give the respondents all the crucial information is still unachievable. As the research questions and findings are constantly reshaped during and after the fieldwork, and as the consequences of the research are hardly predictable, the informed consent is always incomplete (Davidson, 2008, p. 64). A transparent researcher, just like a transparent respondent, simply does not exist.

Non/Consensual Non/Monogamy

So far, we have seen how homophobia, bisexual erasure and compulsory disclosure in marriage and in fieldwork have worked together to demand gay and bisexual subjects to both keep silent and confess aloud. Polyamorists, on the other hand, seem to be particularly optimistic that our frankness, serving mainly as a self-caring and reciprocal practice, is radically different from Foucauldian confession (Cardoso & Mint, 2011). However, their effects are overlapping, both creating an explosion of knowledge, discipline (in both meanings), guilt and pleasure, and both encouraging endless self-censorship, self-rectification and self-betterment. Moreover, as confession, swaddled in the benign language of radical honesty, becomes increasingly moralized in polyamory communities, we seem to become less tolerant to those who refuse to reveal, and less patient to understand how less transparent relationship forms work.

I argue that such a quick boundary-drawing would be a loss for the polyamory movement, which could have transformed contemporary intimacies in a more profound way than challenging monogamy and promoting an honest way of loving more. As the following story demonstrates, there are many lessons to learn from the highly ambiguous non/consensual non/monogamy, both technically and epistemologically.

As we got more acquainted, Yao started to tell his unconventional sexual stories: having threesomes with his wife and other single men. His words became

much more succinct, and he cautiously requested me not to use a recorder. Since Yao was less sexually aroused by his wife, and she had some childhood trauma that made her fearful of penetration, they never consummated penial-vaginal sex in the first six years of marriage. With increasing reproductive pressure, they started to look for solutions. Instead of resorting to marriage therapy (which was, and still is, unpopular in China) or to assisted reproduction technologies, Yao proposed that they ask another man for help. He boldly suggested that they find a good-looking, more sexually-skillful man to make her relaxed and ready for intercourse. His wife stoutly rejected this idea until one year later, when her own wish to become a mother grew together with the urges from both families.

Throughout this year, the couple rarely exchanged their opinions on non-monogamy. Rather, Yao simply dropped her some links to adult videos and swingers' blogs. They did not discuss the possibilities of simultaneously loving two or more people, either; probably because they both tacitly valued their marriage and prioritized the reproductive goal, to which sex, no matter how 'deviant', was more of a means rather than an end.

After dating twelve single men via a swingers' online forum and having protected sex with some of them, Yao's wife started to feel less nervous about penetration. She got pregnant soon after. Besides the reproductive purpose, Yao told me that he had a "private motive (*sixin*)" in having threesomes – he wanted to watch and touch straight men's bodies. Since he had previously denied his homosexuality, this motive had to be kept as a perpetual secret from his wife. Again, Yao was caught between a rock and a hard place: to disclose this desire in their negotiation of threesomes was likely to essentialize him as a 'gay' man and thus a 'marriage fraud' in contemporary Chinese context; to withhold it, however, may be judged as being insincere, selfish and still dishonest.

Soon after her pregnancy, they stopped seeking threesomes, and never brought this topic up again. Their marriage went on like any 'normal' one, and according to Yao, they are both now focusing on parenting and their own careers. When asked if they would like to have more group sex or other sexual exploration in the future, Yao shook his head. He did not see it necessary to adventure, since they did not have the reproductive pressure any more. "Plus", he said, "she is a very conservative woman".

Yao used the word "conservative" and "traditional" several times to describe

his wife during our conversations, referring to her shyness, her passive sexuality, her diligence in parenting and housework, as well as her dedication to their marriage and family. One may see their sexual activities as rather liberal and even debauched, yet such ‘promiscuity’ is not necessarily contradictory to her “conservativeness”. They both serve the same goals, to procreate, and more broadly, to play the normative social roles as ‘responsible’ spouses as discussed earlier. Moreover, her being shy and “conservative” instead of being openly sex-positive or poly-affirmative may well be an apt survival skill for a married white-collar woman in China, where sexual scandals can easily jeopardize one’s professional and social life.

Admittedly, the whole story is Yao’s one-sided narrative, and his wife remains mysterious to me. I have been struggling with my “epistemic anxiety” (Cabot, 2016) as a researcher: am I doing her justice by muting her voice? Should I interview her in person so that I can cross-examine Yao’s words with hers? However, my goodwill to be fair would be futile and even unethical: it is Yao’s selective disclosure and her ambiguous reactions that made their marriage and threesomes work in the first place, so how could a researcher ethically break the balance and ‘give voice’ to the deliberately unspoken?

Moreover, we should take the adverse legal environment into account. Being silent and cautious about his sex life helps Yao to survive as a civil servant in China – note that consensual group sex among adults in private is still a crime in China: the crime of group licentiousness.⁶ Even with me, a researcher who promised to anonymize him, he may still envisage the risk of being caught and penalized. Therefore, “speaking simply” (Villiers, 2012, p. 25) also functions as self-protection against the oppressive state law.

Yao’s non-disclosure and their monogamous appearance seem very un-poly, but polyamorists do not have to repudiate their tactics altogether. In all these years, Yao and his wife have been surfing the silence and ambiguity in a normal-looking marriage. Within such opaque space, together they tacitly trivialized his same-sex attraction and the licentious aspect of their threesomes. They did not talk and investigate too much in relationships, and they seemed more easily settled with words and behaviors at face value. Polyamorists tend to have a stronger preference to putting “deep-seated truths” on the table, because for many of them the untold is the cause of endless suspicion and jealousy (Wosick-Correa, 2010,

p. 45). However, what if for some people ambiguity is an effective, even pleasurable, antidote to the same insecurities?

Yao's vagueness also provides ethnographers with valuable methodological implications. Qualitative researchers tend to fetishize 'in-depth' interview and be dissatisfied with dubious stories told in too few words. We seem to follow an "ideology of depth" (Chow, 1995), hoping to dig out what is buried in the respondents' (sexual) life and make meanings from them. While the binaries of west/rest, man/woman, gay/straight, closet/coming out has been constantly challenged by feminist, queer and post-colonial theories, fewer efforts are made among intellectuals to complicate the binary between the depth and the surface, the profound and the shallow (cf. Villiers, 2012). In obscure cases like Yao's, we might resist the urge to find out our respondents' 'true' feelings or thoughts 'deep down', but instead take the scarce words literally, read them with and against some seemingly irrelevant stories in other space-time, and see how they grow together unexpectedly.

Conclusion: Rethinking Radical Honesty

In this paper, I have weaved my ethnographic encounters in polyamory, gay and *tongqi* communities into a patchwork. Together they point towards the problematics of the popular discourse on cheating and honesty that is enshrined simultaneously in polyamory best-sellers, in the epistemology of gay closet and in anthropologists' guidelines. First, such discourse assumes certain deep-rooted truth in one's sexual identities and desires, which reinforces the essentializing and problematizing of sexualities. Second, it prioritizes open, predominantly verbal, communication about these truths, demeaning other means of interaction in interpersonal relationships. And third, it universalizes honesty as a noble virtue, a neoliberal free choice made in a socio-cultural vacuum.

The above storylines have another common theme, namely, the construction of ethical subjects by delineating and abjecting its Others (Butler, 1993; Hall, 1996). Polyamory activists have correctly pointed out that mono-normativity sets up cheaters as its Other, creating a false duality of monogamy versus cheating (Mint, 2004). Unfortunately, polyamory tends to deploy the same Othering technique to establish its legitimacy, assertively distinguishing itself from cheating. As an ironic result, cheating becomes a common strawman for both monogamists and poly-

amorists to moralize their relationship forms. Both are also utilizing and consolidating the dichotomy of lying versus truth-telling. In this sense, polyamory is not radically different from monogamy as it claims to be.

We can also see the Othering technique in Chinese gay community. Facing the condemnation of ‘marriage fraud’, those out-and-proud tend to alienate themselves from the “frauds”. In a campaign in 2016, for instance, some lesbian and gay people came out publicly and vowed “I’m homosexual (*tongxinglian*), and I won’t marry someone of the opposite sex”.⁷ This vow is another example of the individualistic framing of dishonesty, which exonerates the social pressure and legal benefits that pushed/seduced both gay and straight people into hetero-mononormative marriage in the first place. Such a strategy further stratifies the Chinese gay community by labeling the respectable and the despicable, echoing the neo-liberal ethos that normalizes desires and privatizes responsibilities (Rofel, 2007).

Likewise, those anthropologists who disobey the academic imperative to obtain ‘informed consent’ are prone to arousing controversies (Babbie, 2011). However, researchers have questioned to what extent this demand is more about circumventing legal liabilities of the researchers and their institutes rather than building trustworthy research relationships (Detamore, 2010; Mitchell, 1993). It also inspects the researcher’s personal integrity too much, while sidelining the environments that pressure a researcher into nondisclosure. Howard Becker (1964) argues that it is misleading to ask under what circumstances a researcher’s ‘dishonesty’ and its consequential conflict can be excused. He sharply reversed the question: “Under what circumstances will the report of a study fail to provoke conflict? Can such a failure be justified?” (p. 276). Turning the spotlight from the controversial research(er) to those who happen to be safe, this reversion is insightful and powerful. It interrogates an anthropologist’s very caution and pride to be ethically unproblematic, and encourages us not to be afraid to make mistakes in dilemmatic situations.

In return, the line that monogamists, polyamorists, gay activists, *tongqis* and academics endeavor to draw between cheaters and truth-tellers is confining these subjects. It pushes us to conduct endless self-anatomy, to essentialize our preferences, to trim the incongruence, and then to reinforce the line – a Sisyphean task indeed. Unfortunately, the line is hardly stable, and the Others can never be fully erased, because they become the subjects’ “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993,

p. 4). In other words, the specter of the liar is always haunting every ethical subject.

Therefore, it is time that we re-conceptualized radical honesty. I would like to propose four possible directions. First, honesty can still be valued as an ethical principle, but instead of seeing it as a voluntary choice, we may take it as a luxurious privilege that is contingent on socio-cultural environments. In societies where ideas of individualization, democratization of intimacy and pure relationships are more accepted and where consensual sex between two or more adults is decriminalized, coming out as gay and being openly non-monogamous can be less a blasphemy and more mainstreamed. Therefore, if we are privileged enough to be honest in our gay and polyamory life, we may do that with less complacency.

The second and related idea is to decenter radical honesty, putting it in parallel with other seemingly less progressive values, such as family stability, spousal interdependency and intergenerational eldercare that are equally important for many. Such decentering punctures the neoliberal belief that one should pursue their own way of life without bowing to conventional family values. Moreover, it brings to light another insidious binary, that is, non-Western cultures are deemed more family-orientated and the West more individualistic, so truth-telling is more valuable for the latter and face-saving for the former (Chou, 1997). Actually, the flaunting of sexuality and the prioritizing of normativity can co-exist in every society, even in the same person. Telling more complicated stories where people weigh and balance different values in various localities can bridge the posited gaps created by sexual and cultural identities.

The third direction is to appreciate the opacity between darkness and transparency (Villiers, 2012; Zhu, 2017b). If we bear in mind the double-bind of silencing and confessing, then coming out, candid communication, raising hypothetical questions, speaking simply, disclosing selectively, trivializing, dodging and acquiescing can all be effective and justifiable queer-poly tactics. Such an array of tactics takes the potentials of the unknown, the untold and the ambivalent seriously, thus breaking the binary of the closet and coming out. Whether they are ethical is not predetermined, but should be carefully examined in every specific context.

Lastly, following the legacy of other movements, we may embrace the shameful others that are haunting us. Like the reverse discourses of 'slut', 'queer', 'negro' and 'crip' in the existing civil-rights groups, a radical polyamory politics might as well reclaim the term 'cheater' and redefine it. This is surely not an easy or pal-

atable strategy, but it is not groundless. In fact, many polyamorists have openly acknowledged that they used to cheat in monogamous relationships, and many are dating people who are currently in monogamy, which suggests that our relationships with cheaters are more intimate than we like to admit. It has also been argued that bisexuals and polyamorists are “cheating the system”, by intentionally breaking the mono-sexual and monogamous rules and trying to get away with it (Mint, 2004). The reserve discourse is also applicable in the stories told above, where those who lead a non-normative life in an opaque way can also be said to ‘cheat’ the regime that pushes them to confess. The same goes for anthropologists who camouflage or deceive for justifiable reasons against the academic guidelines.

Importantly, these strategies do not have to go against one another. It is with this realization that queer, polyamory and anthropological communities can further unlock the potentials in valuing clarity, opacity, articulate communication and the “not one but many silences” (Foucault, 1978, p. 27) all at once. Like Herman in her discussion of the paradoxes in lesbian families (1990, p. 815), can we also say that “we are not cheaters” and “we are cheaters” at the same time?

Endnotes

- ¹ In this paper, the West refers not to geography but “the type of society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (Hall, 1992, p. 186).
- ² My self-reference as “bisexual” is for the sake of expediency, rather than assuming a fixed identity or sustaining gender binaries.
- ³ The quotation marks in this article highlight the fact that not all of these same-sex-attracted men assume a gay identity.
- ⁴ The slash is used to indicate the blurry line between hiding and revealing. In this paper, “non/monogamy”, “non/consensual”, “un/knowing” and “dis/honesty” will be used in the same way.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Yan L, ‘Chinese *Tongqi*: My Husband Never Saw Me Naked’, *iFeng*, 11 April 2016, at http://news.ifeng.com/a/20160412/48425108_0.shtml; Juan F, ‘600 Thousands *Tongqis* among Tens of Millions Are Still Virgins’, *Souhu Women*, 15 February 2012, at <http://women.sohu.com/20120215/n334726906.shtml>.
- ⁶ Article 301 of the 1997 Chinese Criminal Law stipulates that those who takes a lead in assembling a crowd to engage in promiscuous activities or repeatedly participates in such activities are liable for up to five years of imprisonment. Article 69 of the Public Security Administrative Punishments Law holds anyone who joins in licentious activities or knowingly facilitates any other person to engage in such activities liable for detention and possibly a fine.

- ⁷ Qian J, "China's Gays and Lesbians Vow Not to Marry Heterosexuals", *Sixth Tone*, 8 April 2016, at <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/726/chinas-gays-and-lesbians-vow-not-marry-heterosexuals>.

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“Three (Is Not a Crowd)”: An Analysis of *Tom Tykwer’s* Polyamorous Film *Three*

Nataša Pivec

ABSTRACT: Many contemporary films about non-monogamies still depict them as adultery or side-notes of an ‘unconventional lifestyle’, but *Tom Tykwer’s Three* manages to be a trailblazer for a more realistic and mature portrayal of polyamorous relationships in cinema. Centred on an upper-middle class, childless, hetero couple in their early 40s who get romantically and sexually involved with the same man, the film narrative follows the transformation from a monogamous to a polyamorous relationship. This paper uses critical discursive analysis (CDA) for the analysis and finds that *Three*, besides dismantling monogamy as a futile intimate arrangement, also addresses social issues, such as mononormative adultery, male bisexuality, changes of emotional and sexual selfhood, ageism, childlessness, pregnancy and body image, and new familial forms.

KEYWORDS: polyamory, film, CDA, sociology

In Western societies where monogamy remains and continues to be promoted as the key principle – legally and societally – on how to organize intimate and family relationships, the negative or plainly ignorant portrayals of non-monogamies in cinema can further deepen misconceptions about polyamory for mainstream audiences. Representations of polyamory are therefore crucial for constructing polyamorous realities on- and off-screen, because popular media (e.g. film, television, social media) contribute to the public’s general understanding of what intimacy (love, sexuality, relationships, family) is. Popular narratives can serve as stand-in educational tools for a wider audience, the vast majority of whom might not be



reading or have the privilege to read the latest feminist or queer theory text.¹ In the absence of formal education, public understanding of polyamory can be framed by popular media.

Media, typically used for entertainment, becomes an important source for constructing messages and images, consumed by a mass audience. Numerous examples of what is 'normal', acceptable and desirable in Western societies are therefore perpetually produced, which also equips them with the discretionary right to withhold (or ignore) public recognition or visibility to people, groups or ideas that differ from the current conventional ways of social living (Carter & Steiner, 2004; Kosut, 2012; Ward & Caruthers, 2001). As Kosut explained, "the history of mass media has been a history of exclusion" (2012, p. xx) and by exclusion it is meant that those people or ideas that did not belong to the dominant group or standard of hegemonic masculinity (see below) were unable to participate and be visible/heard in the media.

Films – as one of the media forms – are stories, embedded into technical, aesthetical and financial wrappings, but they also disseminate cultural ideas of the world we live in. Or, as Kellner (1999) put it, "films take the raw material of social history and of social discourse and process them into products which are themselves historical events and social forces" (p. 3). As social texts, by exploring identity (i.e. the development of characters), interaction (i.e. isolation or togetherness), inequality (i.e. class, race, gender, sexual orientation) and institutions (i.e. marriage/family in this case, Sutherland & Feltey, 2010; Turner, 1988), they carry parts of the dominant ideological script, but film nevertheless 'chooses' its position towards ideology. Prince (1997) has discussed three possible stances for films to partake: (a) ideological support (i.e. promotion of the dominant culture), (b) ideological critique (i.e. critical view of established norms) and (c) ideological incoherence (e.g. film as an ambiguous product that attracts many but offends as few as possible, p. 359).

The majority of mainstream cinema falls into the first category (ideological support); they mediate hegemonic norms and values (i.e. norms of an elite or dominant socio-economic group that reflects the norms of a middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender and white male), positioned as "natural", "normal" or even "objective", and therefore unquestionable and desirable (Hayward, 2000, p. 185). Despite the fact that cinema is an ideological apparatus by nature,

and that it puts (hegemonic) ideology up to the screen (let us not forget that even in art-house films conventional gender ideologies can go unchallenged), film has the potential to dismantle or, as Prince defined it, to take a critical stance against the dominant ideology, to represent what is considered culturally Other/ed (a concept that will be discussed further) as a non-Othered discourse.

Polyamory in Films

Despite the fact that love is one of the most common themes in popular cinema, polyamory as the central premise of a storyline is rare and, if polyamorous depictions take place, they are anything but realistic or just. The discourse on love in Western contemporary society means one thing: heterosexual, monogamous and romantic love.²

What is polyamory? Polyamory, as several authors have stated, is a form of long-term relationship in which people openly and consensually court multiple romantic, sexual and/or emotional partners at the same time with a focus on honesty, communication and safe sex (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Aviram, 2009; Barker, 2005; Sheff, 2011; Weeks, 2003). Polyamorous partner constellations can include straight and/or LGBT+ folks having one or two primary partners (i.e. prioritized partner(s) in time and energy: sex, emotional support, long term commitments and plans) and other secondary ones (i.e. a partner that is secondary in terms of time and energy in a person's life in comparison to the primary relationship), or being in triad (where three people are involved with each other) or quad (two couples being involved with each other); some polyamorous people live together in families or tribes, some practice polyfidelity (i.e. fidelity within the polyamorous group), while others are open (Barker, 2005, p. 76). Polyamory still gets confused with polyandry, polygyny or swinging due to the fact that love plurality is not part of a mainstream social mind-set when it comes to non-monogamous intimacy.

The prevalent Western-culture-based standard of sexuality (identity, desires, relationships, emotions) is hetero-mononormative³ and it consists of three elements: (a) a monogamous relationship, (b) between a woman and a man and (c) where the man is active and the woman passive. Gayle Rubin (1984, 2007) stated that the marital, reproductive heterosexuality is at the top of the erotic pyramid, and anyone who is below it (e.g. unmarried, monogamous heterosexuals, long-

time same-gender couples, masturbators, promiscuous LGB+ folks, trans people, sex workers, BDSM persons, different-age couples, polyamorous folks, asexuals) is constructed as a sexual minority or is Othered, lacking in societal respectability, legality, institutional support and symbolic power (i.e. media representations).

That is why films mostly portray the popular or conventional notions about gender (e.g. men and women are opposites, gender roles are fixed), heterosexuality, intimacy (monogamy as a societal rule) and family (nuclear families with white, middle-class cis people) and leave out genders, relationships, intimacies and families that fall outside the lines of the hetero-monogamous paradigm. By ignoring them, they remain culturally unfamiliar and consequently Other.

Pickering has defined the Other as someone “who is different or uneven to us, a dichotomous opposite and therefore a bearer of negative traits because they represent the deviance from anything that is central, safe, normal and conventional” (2001, p. 204). Other is outside the social order and Lévi-Strauss has introduced us to two strategies for coping with the Otherness of others, one anthropoemic and one anthropophagic (as cited in Bauman, 2000, p. 101). The first strategy was referred to as “vomiting”. It manifests as prohibiting physical contact, dialogue, social intercourse, commercial trade, etc., which in its extreme version means annihilation of the Others (incarceration, deportation, murder). The second strategy is called “ingesting”. Here, the Other is no longer distinguishable from us (cannibalism, cultural assimilation), which means that their Otherness is annihilated.

When focusing on polyamorous representations in films, a tactic used to handle them is “vomiting” or the annihilation of the Other. Polyamorous people and relationships ‘disappear’ – either the relationship dissolves or polyamorists die/become insane/monogamous/straight (it is worth noticing that polyamory and bisexuality intertwine with each other in most of the films, explicitly or implicitly). Polyamory on the screen is therefore temporarily allowed as a ‘pleasurable unconventionality’, but is subsequently dismissed or disapproved. The message is clear: polyamorous relationships are not supposed to exist in monogamous societies because of their abjection (polyamory creates displeasure in others, but also stimulates curiosity) and potential disruption to the existing social, sexual, moral and emotional orders.

The homogeneity of classical cinema narrative of love is structured around an order-disorder-order nexus; in the case of non-monogamous films, ‘order’ is rep-

resented as a shaky façade of monogamous pairing, during 'disorder' the third character ('intruder' or Other) appears and 'order' usually means the restoration of the monogamous relationship. When love is the major plot in genres, such as melodrama, rom-com or comedy-drama, and the coupledness is under threat, the 'intruder' gets eliminated to re-establish the rule of mononormativity. Most of the cinematic incarnations of non-monogamous relationships were carelessly marked as adultery (more about adultery later on) where adulterers were shown as wicked and thus righteously punished (i.e. dead).

Here are some quick cinematic examples where 'intruders' or cheating wives were punished

- *Anna Karenina* (2012) – the adulteress (*Keira Knightley*) kills herself;
- *Chloe* (2009) – the intruder (*Amanda Seyfried*) is killed by the adulteress (*Julianne Moore*);
- *English Patient* (1996) – both adulterers (*Kirsten Thomas Scott* and *Ralph Fiennes*) die;
- *Fatal Attraction* (1987) – the intruder (*Glenn Close*) is shot by an adulterer's (*Michael Douglas*) wife (*Anne Archer*);
- *The Good Girl* (2002) – the intruder (*Jake Gyllenhaal*) commits suicide;
- *To Die For* (1995) – the adulteress (*Nicole Kidman*) is killed by her husband's family;
- *Unfaithful* (2002) – the intruder (*Olivier Martinez*) is killed by an adulteress' (*Diane Lane*) husband (*Richard Gere*).

There is also a body of contemporary non-monogamous films where polyamory or non-monogamy is not represented as adultery, but as another form of intimacy, less Othered and more favourable

- *Contracorriente* (eng. *Undertow* 2009) is a Peruvian ghost story where a polyamorous relationship is possible only with a gay ghost (*Manolo Cardona*) without the approval of the main character's wife or village at large that condemns homosexuality;
- *El Sexo de los Ángeles* (eng. *Sex of Angels*, 2012) is a Spanish drama where a young couple in their 20s (*Astrid Bergès-Frisbey* and *Álvaro Cervantes*) expand their relationship into a love triad with Bruno (*Llorenç González*). Their polyamorous love flourishes afterwards;
- *Head in the Clouds* (2004), a war tale where war as a symbol of chaos enables

less conventional intimacies (i.e. non-monogamies). The polyamorous relationship between *Charlize Theron*, *Stuart Townsend* and *Penélope Cruz* ends with both bisexual women killed (one by a landmine, the Other – polyamorous initiator *Charlize Theron* – by an angry post-war mob);

- *Henry & June* (1990), a film based upon Anaïs Nin's (*Maria de Medeiros*) diary, tells a story of her involvement with artistic couple Henry Miller (*Fred Ward*) and his wife June (*Uma Thurman*). Despite the fact that Nin was married at that time, the storyline does not condemn her polyamorous desires towards the Millers. However, the short-lived triad dissolves with Nin returning to her husband and the Millers divorcing;
- *Savages* (2012), a crime thriller where protagonists are primarily labelled as savages. Their "savageness" could emerge from their criminal activities (drug smugglers or undisciplined citizens) or polyamory (i.e. 'uncivilized' intimacy). However, nobody dies and a polyamorous relationship in a V-form (*Taylor Kitsch*, *Blake Lively* and *Aaron Tyler-Johnson*) stays in tact despite all the criminal hardship they encounter;
- *Summer Lovers* (1982), a story of a young couple (*Daryl Hannah* and *Peter Gallagher*) in their 20s on vacation in Greece who create a new triadic relationship with another young woman (*Valérie Quennessen*). It is one of the few films where the ending (after the quarrel they decide to spend the rest of the vacation together as threesome) undoubtedly raises hope for new, although short-lived, non-monogamous intimacy;
- *Threesome* (1994), a college story where the possibility for a polyamorous relationship between three college students (*Josh Charles*, *Lara Flynn Boyle* and *Stephen Baldwin*) only serves as a cautionary tale for its 'unnaturalness'. The emotional triad is dissolved after their awkward sexual rendezvous, so they part ways;
- *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), a film preoccupied with human relationships, also focuses on the newly formed, triadic, intimate relationship between artists *Scarlett Johansson*, *Javier Bardem* and *Penélope Cruz* that eventually dissolves due to the indecisiveness of the third party (*Johansson*). Bisexual women are here represented as confused or even mad (*Cruz*), which feeds the existing bi-stigma (e.g. inherent inability to choose, mental instability, etc.).

These non-monogamous films have one thing in common: although the relation-

ships are not Othered by default, the protagonists are. They are artists, students, criminals or members of the working class and do not belong to the societal class hegemony. Some of them still perpetuate the mononormative diction on polyamory ('death of polyamory'), but there are also exceptions (e.g. *Summer Lovers*, *Savages*, *Sex of Angels*).

Methodology

This article takes a qualitative approach to explore the representation of polyamory in a selected film – critical discursive analysis (CDA). As a research method, it highlights the role of discursive practices that maintain the construction of social reality as objective, and by deliberately advocating to focus on subtle or subversive meanings within the dominant discourse, it aligns with the oppressed social groups (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 64). The dominant societal and film discourse regarding love and marriage is – as already thematised – embedded into heteromononormativity, any 'detour' into the world of non-monogamies is portrayed as adultery. The body of (non-consensual) non-monogamous films (15 of them) was used as an evidence of past film production against the future polyamorous cinema, slowly beginning with *Three*. The reason only Western films were chosen to represent non-consensual non-monogamy is because both types of film-making share a similar cultural background (i.e. Western values, mores and conventions).

The material for analysis was obtained by simultaneously watching films and taking notes on what was shown and told, but mostly if and how the dominant ideological premise about non-monogamy was reinforced or challenged. By using CDA, language and other semiotic features of the data could also be analysed, and, therefore, was an appropriate research method for a study which uses media text as its source.

Three – The Beginning of Polyamorous Cinema

Together with the aforementioned *Sex of Angels*, *Three* paves the way to what can be regarded as the polyamory-oriented cinema that is more invested into representing polyamorous stories accurately and realistically.

The German film *Three* (3, 2010), directed by Tom Tykwer, is a story about a

couple's transformation from a monogamous relationship to a triadic polyamorous family. It is centred around a 40-something, upper-middle class, childless, hetero couple (Hanna, played by *Sophie Rois* and Simon/*Sebastian Schipper*), who – unaware of each other's actions – get romantically and sexually involved with the same man (Adam/*David Striesow*).

Films, as described before, are social texts and provide a web of intertwined social themes, and these dictate which ideology is (re)produced (conservative or progressive), how interactions between characters are executed (traditional or non-traditional takes on intimacy), which institutions are being challenged (monogamy in our case) and how identities are being transformed (do polyamorists prosper or die). *Three* – unlike other love stories and non-monogamous films – reverses the conventional narrative of film where monogamy is institutionalized as the only intimate option that will be restored after a 'disorder' (e.g. monogamous adultery) happens. *Three* has a clear message: it is the monogamous relationship that is headed to 'death' and not polyamory.

Besides *Three's* central premise – the transformation from dyadic to triadic relationship by abandoning monogamy and embracing polyamory – the film also addresses several social themes or issues that create a more realistic portrayal of a polyamorous love story: the lingering shame about mononormative adultery, presence of male bisexuality, changes of emotional and sexual selfhood, ageism, childlessness, pregnancy and body image, and new familial forms.

No Mononormative Adultery and Bi-invisibility

The futility (and film's subtle dismay) of Hanna and Simon's monogamous relationship is quickly recognized in the first film sequence – they are not having sex anymore and quarrel a lot. Lack of sex and quarrelling can be signs of an intimacy crisis where their relationship of 20 years will either dissolve or, if this was a monogamous narrative, they would engage in adultery – an 'acceptable' solution that would keep the relationship artificially alive. Both of them will later engage in 'a secret affair' with Adam, but this non-consensual both-side cheating situation eventually evolves into a consensual love triad.

As already mentioned, past representations of non-monogamy in films were depicted as infidelity due to the dominant mononormative language where any

deviation from coupledness was understood as cheating, because it was the only concept intelligible to the public (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). The language of love is saturated with representations, mores or expectations about hetero-coupledness, where monogamy, heterosexuality and fidelity create the 'Holy Trinity of Love'.

Cheating is morally condemned, but conceptually and emotionally easy (Mint, 2004, p. 57); it is morally 'bad' to be sexually/romantically involved with more than one person at the same time, unless if it is in secrecy. It is open polyamory that is societally unwelcoming. The cheater is the demonized Other soon to be eliminated so 'moral people' can measure their value upon not being like them. But this is not the narrative in *Three*. The third person (Adam) is not eliminated, the monogamous relationship is not restored, and no one is named a 'cheater'. Adam becomes a vital part of the existing coupledness (Hanna and Simon) and a new love triad is formed.

Three elegantly avoids the mononormative love language; however, it does not employ the polyamorous one either, as if there were no words for their situation. They are in transit, liminal, between the old territory of monogamy and new horizons of polyamory. The lack of explicit articulation of polyamory or bi words in *Three* does not rob its enunciation in practice; the film is filled with positive polyamorous and bi depictions or, as San Filippo (2013) put it, "the degree to which screen text contribute insight to the discourse on bisexuality [or polyamory, added by author] bears little relation to the number of the times they dare speak their name" (p. 11). *Three* combines polyamory (e.g. to love more than one at the same time) and bisexuality (e.g. to desire more than one gender) which creates an erotic triangle – a relationship structure that cannot align with the mainstream dual models of sexuality and intimacy. It is the men who are bisexual; Adam, a divorced singleton, has acknowledged his bisexuality, but Simon, one part of a hetero-coupledness, has to embrace it.

One of the most visible paradigmatic shifts about male bisexuality in *Three* is revealed in the matter-of-factness of Adam's bisexuality – it is neither glorified nor demonised (e.g. societal threat who disturbs heterosexual nuclear families, mentally unstable or silly characters that need to be killed or at least heterosexualized, Bryant, 2010; Russo, 1987). He is portrayed as a complex human being with an ex-wife and children, an academic career, with good social skills and a handful of hobbies. Simon, on the other hand, who is forced to rethink his sexual identity,

ignorantly falls into a cultural trap of sexual binarism when he wants to redefine himself; after his second sexual encounter with Adam, Simon nervously explains to Adam that he is not gay. This unfortunate cinematic bi-invisibility can be mirrored with the societal bi-erasure, especially when it comes to men (Bryant, 2010; Vicari, 2011).

Bisexual men have been unfairly represented in the cinema mostly due to the persistent cultural myth that they are closeted homosexuals. The reason why bisexual characters are still underrepresented in comparison to their gay counterparts in the cinema can be found in the still persistent sexual binarism (heterosexual or homosexual). Bisexuality invokes ambiguity, a state that most homo- and heterosexual people are not comfortable with, almost like how polyamory amplifies anxiety with mononormative persons. The alliance between bisexuality and polyamory is almost inevitable; both, bi and polyamorous ideologies advocate openness, limitlessness and possibilities and they defy the institutionalized system of exclusivity (one person/one gender/one relationship, Mint, 2004, p. 69). *Three* embraces this bi/polyamorous cross fertilisation despite the avoidance of those words, which in this particular film does not mean that there is avoidance of what these words signify.

The Changeability of (Mono) Emotional Selves

The “adulterous” behaviour of the monogamous coupledom and Simon’s newly discovered sexual fluidity also demand the re-evaluation of their emotional selves. Emotions are inherently connected with sexual selves, so the continuous usage of mononormative discourse (language, ideas, imagery) is impossible. *Three* is foremost an emotional journey – how to cope with polyamorous emotions in a mononormative society that allows and enables hidden adulteries but condemns open polyamory. Intimate encounters with Adam leave both (Hanna and Simon) pleasantly reinvigorated and questioning – Hanna’s old love for Simon did not fade away despite her new lust for Adam and the same can be said for Simon. As their sexual desire changes, so does their emotional mind-set.

Emotional enculturation in Western society is also planted in hetero-mononormative grounds: how to act, behave and think in heterosexual couplings where

certain emotions are allowed and cherished (e.g. possessiveness, exclusion) and others are banned (e.g. lust and love outside the existing dyad, sexual fluidity). Alongside the traditional notion of sexual orientation as fixed is the same belief about emotional selves as unchangeable. Averill (1986) has written that the acquisition of a new emotional framework can also be achieved during adulthood, or, to put it differently, emotional readjustment does occur in order to adapt to the new emotional reality, emerging later in a person's biography (p. 108). Polyamory also means a new emotional vocabulary and organisation (e.g. openness, communication, multiple desires, time sharing and scheduling in practice), so polyamorous people can become comfortable in theory and practice.

Three deliberately shows the characters' internal struggles; firstly, when Hanna and Simon are engaged in secret relationships with Adam outside their monogamous pairing and secondly, when the truth about their triad is finally out. The desire to relinquish the old mononormative emotional pattern and rewrite them according to their intimate state is conditioned with their move from one socio-cultural context (monogamy, singlehood) to another (polyamory). *Three* dives into the blind belief that emotional struggles and necessary readjustments, together with the complexity and high maintenance of polyamorous relationships, will happen by itself. This contradicts with the polyamorous ideology of openness and communication and is one of the film's weaknesses. However, *Three* is a film about new learnings about intimacy, so the protagonists still have to learn how to 'properly' react and solve their love situation.

(Monogamous) Childlessness → (Polyamorous) Family

At the beginning of *Three*, the narrator explains Hanna's and Simon's coupledness: they have been together for almost 20 years, both of them are in their early 40s and are involuntarily childless. The storyline here does not dwell much on Hanna's miscarriages and does not portray her as a misfortunate case. In a more mainstream film, Hanna, a woman in her 40s, could (or would) be portrayed as a desperate, futile old(er) woman, beyond her child-bearing (and rearing) years, but this is not the case in *Three*.

Monogamous Hanna and Simon are involuntarily childless (*cannot* have kids); they would embrace the role of parenting – an expected obligation from an aver-

age adult – but cannot due to the biological circumstances. This is a less stigmatised characteristic than being voluntarily childfree (do not *want* kids), something that still resonates with selfishness, coldness or materialism (Park, 2002). Their involuntary childlessness can be interpreted as a symbol of monogamous futility while Hanna's pregnancy in the polyamorous triad represents the new fertility. Monogamy is barren/dead, polyamory is fruitful/alive. Polyamorous pregnancy in *Three* adds a new dimension to the whole concept of polyamory on- and off-screen.

As is evident from the social history of families, families reshape themselves in response to shifting social conditions and change through their life-span (divorce, remarriage, widowhood, Coltrane & Collins, 2001; Giddens, 2000; Sieder, 1998; Švab, 2001). Nuclear families may be the idealized cultural standard, but that does not erase the existence of "Other" families (e.g. joint, foster, rainbow, one-parent or polyamorous families).

Polyamorous families are another step in forming family ties that do not necessarily involve bio-legal connections between the persons involved and, as LGBT+ families, they challenge heterocentric family forms, face similar challenges (i.e. discrimination, stigma, custodial issues, and relationships within family of origin) and create strategies to navigate family life (Sheff, 2011, p. 489). However, polyamorous families have not come under the same societal scrutiny as LGBT+ families because the mainstream public is still unaware of polyamorous people. But by gaining more visibility in society, polyamorous families can become the symbol of familial nonconformity (and scrutiny?) not only because they include same-sex partners, but because they include multiple partners.

Polyamorous pregnancy in *Three* merely hints at the potential struggles that await sexual minorities: a lack of familial role models, discourses and practices on which they could pattern their families (Sheff, 2011, p. 498), but also legal issues. Polyamorous people's desire for legal recognition of plural marriage is not as vital or important for their social existence as same-sex marriage is for LGBT+ community. This assumption is reaffirmed in *Three*, where Hanna and Simon have already entered into an ostensibly monogamous marriage, so Adam is – despite being an equal partner in their polyamorous triad – seen as a "close friend", which is one of the tactics for polyamorous people to make their relationship socially acceptable to other (monogamous) people. This ability to stay closeted as a polyamorous per-

son serves as a buffer against the stigma of sexual nonconformity, but the *Three* triad is also protected by their socioeconomic and cultural privileges.⁴

Pregnancy, Body Image and Age/ism

Hanna's pregnancy also introduces us to the transgressive representation of a pregnant body. In the dominant culture, pregnant women are not viewed as sexually desirable or having sexual desires. The reasoning behind this societal assumption lies in the dominant culture's definition that a sexually attractive woman is young, white, thin and non-pregnant (Bartky, 1998; Bordo, 2003; Wolf, 1992). The other aspect of desexualising pregnancy is to retain the traditional dichotomy of women as being either maternal (Virgin Mary archetype) or sexual (whore), but not both. A desiring pregnant woman is therefore liminal or Other within the patriarchal framework. As Young (2005) has stated: "she [a pregnant woman] may find herself being desexualized by others, but she may find herself with a heightened sense of her sexuality" (p. 53).

Three's last sequence contains the new representation of pregnant sexuality and bodies. All three of them – with Hanna visibly pregnant – are naked and headed to jointly share their bed as a triad. There are several visual transgressions that defy societal expectations about body image and the objectifying male gaze. Firstly, their naked bodies (especially Hanna's) are not sexualized, only sensualized when the eye of the camera slowly drifts over their intertwined limbs. Secondly, the idea of a desirable and desiring pregnant woman, who is preparing for sex with her two lovers, is delivered without any moralistic judgements. And thirdly, the last shot of them lying on the white bed in the white empty room, naked, is almost clinical. The camera slowly pulls away as they are getting smaller and smaller while the microscopic lens is put on top of them. This is the film's final confirmation of its message: polyamorous relationships are a new step in the social evolution of intimate relationships. An image of a pregnant woman (Hanna) as sexually charged and her male partners (Simon and Adam) as lusting for her is also groundbreaking in current cinema because not so long ago using the word "pregnant" or showing pregnant women on TV was unwelcome at least.⁵ Those images of their polyamorous love further push boundaries of a social acceptability about gender, sexuality and body.

Another dimension of *Three* is related to age or ageism (i.e. stereotyping of, and discrimination against, someone based on their age; Butler, as cited in Calasanti, 2007, p. 335). The past and current portrayals of non-monogamy have been more or less ageist; protagonists were beautiful young people in their 20s (i.e. in all of the films mentioned earlier), but the *Three* trio is not young⁶ – they are in their 40s – and not too pretty but still visually relatable. Age is also of no issue when it comes to Hanna’s pregnancy as the film’s narrative does not indulge in ageist assumptions about motherhood and ‘proper’ ages. However, Hanna as a first-time mother in her 40s can also be seen as transgressive if – as the traditional framework about motherhood claims – procreation is inevitably linked with youth or young female bodies.

The Polyamorous Semiotics of Three

On behalf of its visual nature, film communicates or generates language through several signifying practices – cinematography, editing, lighting, sound, mise-en-scène, costumes, dialogue and others. To additionally accentuate polyamory, there are three signifiers reoccurring during the film: the number three (3), death and water; where the former serves as an amplifier of polyamorous triad and the last two as metaphors of a personal transformation.

Not only does the *number 3* appear as the title of the film, but it is also discretely interwoven into the narrative itself. The first appearance of *number 3* happens at the beginning of the film, in a modern dance performance sequence where three dancers (one woman and two men) are passionately engaged with each other. This sequence is shot in a minimalistic setting – only three dancers, dressed in black, dancing in front of white canvases. The visual language of this mise-en-scène indicates their forthcoming struggle (e.g. the intense, interwoven dance) while the white background symbolises the absence of polyamorous social reality or as Turner (1988) claimed, “[t]he film’s construction of social world is authenticated through the details of the mise-en-scène” (p. 85). But it can be read also as an opportunity – a blank page – to write a new, polyamorous love story. The second display of *number 3* is almost too quick to miss; it is braided into a conversation between Hanna and Adam at their third (!) encounter when he says, “good things come in three” which sounds almost as an eerie prediction about their upcoming

polyamorous triad. Finally, there is a film sequence, intensifying the *number 3* with elements of a different film genre (i.e. magic realism) and specific editing. Editing is another element of a film's visual language, and in this particular sequence it differs from the rest of the film. While typically the editing maintains an illusion of seamless continuity of time and place (Turner, 1988), here, the editing technique uses jump cuts from different scenarios with faster pace and, together with the narrator's voice, explains the almost predestined importance of the *number 3*:

Simon's mother had only three months to live, but she died by taking 39 sleeping pills on September 3rd at 3:09, Simon's sister moved to Stuttgart in 1993 and was aged 39, came to see his dying mother by train at 9:30 at moonlight tariff 39 euros.

This jump-cut sequence resembles the popular French film *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) and can be read as a directorial bow from Tykwer to Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

The second signifier present in *Three* is *death* as a metaphor for a character's change or transformation, unlike in the aforementioned array of polyamory-hostile films where annihilation of cheaters and adulterous affairs had the sole purpose of re-establishing the hetero-mono-normative order. *Three* upends this by using the symbols of death (e.g. cancer, mother's death, dental decay, miscarriages) to signify the end of monogamy and Simon's heterosexuality. Simon has to rethink his sexuality, so the testicular cancer he overcomes can be interpreted as a wake-up call to live his life as authentic as possible (i.e. polyamorous bi man), while the narrative does not pry into Hanna's reproductive health to avoid the cultural denouncement when women cannot bear children. The death of Simon's mother who was suffering from pancreatic cancer and Simon's dreams about his teeth falling out are both shot in black and white, which according to Turner (1988) "serve as a guarantor of truth, an amplification of the real" (p. 28). The sequence with Simon's mother on her dying bed resembles South-Asian shadow play which can be read as an internal strife between real/hidden and unreal/public, while the dream sequence echoes the aesthetics of *Ingmar Bergman's* work with its visual bleakness and the feeling of existential inescapability. All those symbols of death represent an ending of Simon and Hanna's monogamous era, the rejection of the

unquestioned societal mores about hetero-mononormativity and the beginning of a new life.

Complementing the previous one, the last signifier is *water*. Water represents – especially for cancer-survivor and newly-bisexual Simon – cleansing and rebirth from being ‘dead’ (cancerous, monogamous, hetero) to be ‘alive’ (healthy, polyamorous, bi). The public swimming pool serves as a place for his sexual and symbolic rebirth where he meets his future lover, Adam. This facility and their encounter is reminiscent of gay bathhouses, culturally more recognizable places for gay hook-ups, however their sexual relationship quickly evolves into an emotional one. Being in a swimming pool can also be interpreted as a substitutional womb where he is – after his mother’s death – reborn as a human being. Water is an element that wipes away everything that holds them back and offers a clean slate for the future.

Conclusion

Films as social texts ‘speak’ to us; they can provide moral instruction (good-bad), social observation (normal-abnormal) or political judgement (powerful-powerless). Positive representations of non-monogamies are crucial in eliminating the aura of Otherness, pinned to them on behalf of the past film representations that were not depicting them in a polyamory-literate, polyamory-conscious or even polyamory-thoughtful way.

Three as an openly polyamorous film has its weaknesses, mostly related to the lack of intersectionality (race, class, disability, geo locale, culture, age, sexuality, gender) or acknowledgement of the privileges of the trio involved (whiteness, middle-class status, maleness, high social/economic capital, live in an urban area, and are cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical and citizens). There is also an absence of the words ‘bisexuality’ and ‘polyamory’ which in this particular case does not create an absent-minded film about those topics, but builds the new paradigm of bi/polyamorous love.

But not to be overcritical and dwell upon its weaknesses, what *Three* and future films about non-monogamies can do is what lesbian and gay cinema facilitated for LGBT+ folks: visibility, recognition, acceptance, familiarisation, normalisation and ‘de-Otherness’ in general. As have LGBT+ cinematic representations changed over time – from demonization to acceptance – so can polyamorous cinema, with films like *Three* changing the narrative about dyadic love to endorse

other types of intimacy. The slogan 'Love is Love', usually employed to advocate marriage equality, can finally broaden the idea of love to polyamorous love and to cross over into 'love' genres: big budget or independent dramas, melodramas, rom-coms and TV shows where the premise could be polyamorous love – normalized, accepted, respected, de-Othered. Let us not forget: we see society through film and film through the prism of society we live and create.

Endnotes

- ¹ This is where cultural education becomes essential. There are no poly communities in Slovenia nor is polyamory being academically thematised or even publicly recognized. There are a few works, found in the national data base for undergraduate diplomas and postgraduate theses (less than 10), but these academic papers are lost in the plethora of other more popular topics. Positive and non-judgemental representations of polyamory via film narratives are crucial for those who may lack a nuanced understanding of the topic because these narratives provide (albeit discursive) possibility to reconceptualise and revalue intimate relationships.
- ² The adjective "romantic" is used in a modern, Giddens-esque manner; a type of heteromonogamous love where women are positioned as passive objects and men as active subjects.
- ³ Mononormativity, a term coined by Pieper & Bauer, means "the presumption of coupledom and the unfair discrimination against those whose relationships do not fit into the conventional couple form" (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 345) and heteronormativity – a complex social, economic and cultural system – positions heterosexuality as normal and dominant (Warner, 1991).
- ⁴ Privilege is a social advantage, rooted in membership in the dominant social group (e.g. whiteness, middle-class status, maleness, high social/economic capital, living in an urban area, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical, citizens). As Kimmel and Ferber stated, "privilege is invisible to those who have it, and is understood as universal and generic, although it unintentionally hides the persistent system of social inequalities" (2010, p. 3).
- ⁵ More on how and when pregnancy became public can be found in Renée Ann Kramer's book *Pregnant with the Stars: Watching and Wanting the Celebrity Baby Bump* (2015).
- ⁶ As it is stated in the European Social Survey research, youth ends at the age of 35 (Abrams & Swift, 2012).

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Metamour Connections as the Underpinning of the Fabric of Polyamory

Joanna Iwanowska

ABSTRACT: This paper has a double purpose. Firstly, it is meant to present an intellectual tool for analyzing the possibilities in the way relationships evolve; I call this tool *the tree model of proximity*. (The name comes from the fact that the development of this tool has been inspired by an Aristotelian idea, which has come to be referred to as *the tree model of reality*.) The tree model of proximity is a tool for modeling interpersonal closeness and understanding how closeness arises via consensual decisions. Secondly, this paper is an attempt to apply the tool to analyze a specific kind of relationship within the polyamorous conceptual framework: a metamour relationship, meaning a non-romantic bond between persons x and z, who are both romantic partners of person y. By focusing my analysis on metamour relationships, I wish to draw attention to them. I claim that although romantic bonds typically rouse more interest when discussing and defining polyamory, we should not underestimate the importance of non-romantic connections within the polyamorous network. Despite being less visible, these bonds are significant and constitutive of polyamory.

KEYWORDS: polyamory, metamour relationships, consensuality, modeling interpersonal closeness, tree model of proximity, proximity possibilities

This paper has a double purpose. Firstly, it is meant to present an intellectual tool for analyzing the possibilities in the way relationships evolve; I call this tool *the tree model of proximity*, or *the tree of proximity* in short. If I were to define the tree of proximity in two words, I would say it is a tool for modeling interpersonal closeness and



understanding how closeness arises *via* consensual decisions. Secondly, this paper is an attempt to apply the tool to analyze a specific kind of relationship within the polyamorous conceptual framework: a metamour relationship, meaning a non-romantic bond between persons x and z , who are both romantic partners of person y .

Aristotle and His Tree Model of Reality

The construction of the tool for modeling interpersonal closeness that I describe in this paper is inspired by an Aristotelian idea; therefore, I shall start by describing the original idea of Aristotle.

In Book IV of the *Physics*, Aristotle envisions time as composed of the past which is fixed, the future which is open, and the so-called 'moving now' which makes certain events actual (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E., Book 4, Part 10). The picture of time which emerges from this vision has come to be referred to as *the tree model of reality* (Horwitch, 1987, pp. 25–26), in which the future are the branches that stretch in many possible directions, while the past, rendered actual by the moving now, is the trunk – one fixed route of events that can no longer be altered. As the now moves, it singles out a particular branch and turns it into the prolongation of the trunk; the other branches, which were the alternatives to the chosen branch, cease to exist.

The Tree Model of Proximity

The Tree Model of Proximity: Modus Operandi

In this paper, I propose to see relationships in a similar fashion to the one in which Aristotle sees time. What stretches out before any two living individuals is a multiplicity of possible interactions that those individuals may or may not choose to make actual between them. If the individuals never come in contact, no trunk is formed; they stay at the level of proximity possibilities, none of which becomes actual. If they do come into contact with one another, this first contact becomes the first constituent of the trunk of the tree of proximity between them.

I assume the basic principle of the growth of the trunk of the tree of proximity to be consensuality. Therefore, the trunk of the tree of proximity can evolve if and only if both individuals agree to some proximity between them, whether this

means more proximity, less proximity, or the same amount of proximity as before. The same or a smaller amount of proximity than before need not imply that the relationship ceases to exist, only that there is no further growth of proximity between the two individuals. The amount of proximity may stabilize at a certain level, or it may decrease, but the relationship may very well continue. Consequently, we may talk of the relationship development in other aspects than closeness: for example, the relationship may become more and more stable without becoming closer. We can also say that the proximity between the two individuals who choose the same or a smaller amount of proximity continues to evolve, not in the sense of growing, but in the sense of changing shape, being recalibrated.

In the most minimalist version of the tree of proximity, the trunk can be constituted only by the first, incidental contact, and a decision on one or both sides not to pursue any more interactions.

It should be noted that apart from the situations in which consent or the lack of it is voiced by the parties involved, there could also be grey-zone situations in which, even though there is communication, consent cannot be satisfactorily established as either given or not given. Since – as has been stated above – the growth of the tree of proximity between any two individuals depends on consent being given by both sides, the grey-zone situations count as a standstill, meaning that the tree of proximity ceases to evolve, and the amount of proximity becomes ‘stuck’ at a certain level (which has been consensually established prior to the standstill) until the question of consent becomes resolved.

The Tree Model of Proximity: Applications

The tree of proximity is a tool that can be useful in two ways. First, it can be employed for observing a concrete relationship (a token) develop; let us call this type of analysis *the token analysis*. In such an analysis, we would observe how, at each forking of the paths, two people pick one path over other possible alternatives, which then close, never to become actual again; the path which is chosen opens new options to choose from, but these will always be slightly different than the options from before. Let me elaborate on this, so that it becomes clear. As mentioned in the last section, at each new forking of paths one can decide to choose more proximity with another person, less proximity, or the same amount

of proximity as before. If, following a chance encounter, two strangers consensually decide in favor of more proximity, this ‘more proximity’, which I propose to call ‘more proximity¹’, will be different than ‘more proximity²’ that they might choose after five years of knowing each other. By the same token, if, after five years of proximity, they decide in favor of ‘less proximity²’, it will be a different ‘less proximity’ than the one they might have counterfactually chosen as ‘less proximity¹’. To recap, there is always a qualitative difference between any two options within the tree model, even if these two options are of the same type – ‘more proximity’, for example.

The second way in which the tool of the tree of proximity can be utilized is not for observing a concrete relationship *token*, but for analyzing possible meanings of a relationship *type* and probing the boundaries of this kind of relationship. For example, the tree of proximity can be used to analyze the type of relationship which exists within the conceptual framework of polyamory and which is called a metamour relationship. This kind of analysis shall be the research goal of this paper. Such analysis – let us call it *the type analysis* – might be of use not only for philosophers who take interest in the ontology of relationships, but also for other social studies researchers. It is conceivable that the tree model of proximity could be applied to the qualitative research of psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists as a tool that helps to establish order within the gathered material. The gathered material could 1) fit into an already established tree model, 2) be used to theorize a completely new tree model of a relationship type, or 3) it could indicate new ontological alternatives (that have not yet been taken into account) within an already established tree model. Let me stress that even when a tree model of proximity for a particular relationship type is established, it is not meant to be a structure which is forever fixed. Psychology, anthropology, sociology, but also cultural studies can all provide new research material that makes it possible to create new tree models and reshape the existing ones. Since this paper includes some examples of cultural representations that are used to support my analysis of the metamour type of a relationship, it will be easy to see how a cultural studies analysis could be linked to the tree model of proximity.

Importantly though, the tree of proximity might also have potential applications outside academia, especially in psychotherapy: therapists could use the tree model of proximity as a tool in relationship counseling to help the clients in the

process of checking whether and to what extent they are 'on the same page' in their relationship. This is an example of *the token analysis*, where one particular relationship (a token) would be analyzed. First of all, the tree of proximity tool could be used retrospectively: the therapist could help the clients track back the important proximity steps they took in their relationship with one another. It is possible, for example, that some relationship problems might be rooted in the situation where one party assumed the other's consent for more proximity, whilst the other person did not intend to give such consent or felt somewhat forced or rushed into giving it. Realizing that at a given point in the past the clients were not exactly 'on the same page' regarding some proximity choice and they were not aware of this discrepancy constitutes a valuable therapeutic discovery, both for the therapist and for the clients. Second of all, the tree of proximity could be recommended for people in therapy as a tool to keep track of their present and future proximity choices and to make these choices more consciously. Being more conscious would consist in double-checking each consent with oneself and others, as well as openly weighting the alternatives and realizing that each of the alternatives has different consequences and opens up a different bundle of future choices.

It is also imaginable that – for the benefit of her clients – the psychotherapist might fuse the type analysis with the token analysis. For example, the therapist could analyze the unique tree of proximity of their clients, compare it with the type analysis of many different relationship types, and share their findings with the clients. It could turn out that the clients claim that they identify with one relationship type, but their actual proximity choices fit a different relationship type (or a fusion of two relationship types), and the frustration that they feel stems from trying to fit in with the relationship type they identify with instead of embracing the reality of their actual proximity decisions.

Apart from the use of the tree of proximity tool in therapy, one can also imagine a very private use by individuals involved in a particular relationship or a relationship network, without any help from a therapist. Since a polyamorous constellation typically involves a multiplicity of proximities – romantic, sexual, metamour – the tool might be particularly useful for polyamorous individuals. For example, it could allow a polyamorous person to keep track of all the consents given and received in different relationships this person maintains within their polyamorous constellation.

The Metamour Tree of Proximity

Context, Relevant Definitions and Reservations

In this paper, the tool that I call the tree of proximity shall be used in the context of polyamory to perform a type analysis of the beginning of a metamour relationship. Before such an analysis can be performed, certain definitions and reservations should be fleshed out.

First of all, when I use the word 'proximity', I do not intend to refer to the phenomenon of being in a close relationship or even aiming to be in such a relationship. As noted elsewhere, "[t]wo consensually chosen doses of interpersonal proximity between strangers may draw them nearer to one another, but they do not amount to a close relationship between them yet" (Iwanowska, 2016, p. 12). I regard interpersonal proximity as extended on a spectrum: at one extreme end people are total strangers to one another, at the other extreme end people are in a close relationship with one another, and between these two limiting cases "a range of interaction and relationship kinds are possible, and all of them involve a certain amount of interpersonal proximity" (Iwanowska, 2016, p. 12). Since the research topic of this paper is how *strangers* can start to draw closer to one another as metamours, I shall be concerned with the proximity possibilities which are near to the former extreme end of the spectrum. Therefore, becoming closer to one another in the metamour context shall be understood as taking such steps as manifesting the mutual willingness a) to communicate to one another (whether directly and indirectly); b) to be receptive of any reservations or limitations connected with the potential 'sharing' of a partner; c) to voice consent to 'sharing' a partner; d) to meet and get to know one another a bit; e) to put some kind of trust in one another (e.g. that the other metamour does not want to harm the beloved); f) to share some personal information with one another. This list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather illustrative of the process of creating interpersonal proximity in the initial stages of a metamour interaction.

Secondly, by a metamour relationship I shall understand a bond between persons x and z which is non-romantic and non-sexual, where both x and z are romantic or aspiring romantic partners (and possibly sexual partners²) of person y. This is a definition within the context of polyamory; a slightly different definition would

be the case for some non-monogamous relationships other than polyamorous relationships. In this paper, I wish to focus on metamour relationships which are part of polyamorous constellations.

Thirdly, as polyamory³ I shall understand such an approach to forming relationships, according to which: 1) all the persons involved are open to the possibility of their partners having multiple romantic relationships, which may involve a sexual bond⁴; 2) the persons involved may⁵ but need not be open to having multiple romantic relationships, which may⁶ involve a sexual bond; 3) the simultaneity of romantic and sexual relationships is maintained with the full knowledge and consent of all the people involved (Aviram and Leachman, 2015, p. 297; Morrison, Beaulieu, Brockman, & Beaglaioich, 2013, p. 81; Strassberg, 2003, p. 439); 4) the minimum in the way metamours treat one another is acceptance.

As far as point 4 of the definition is concerned, I wish to stress that I am consciously using the word 'acceptance' in contrast with the word 'tolerance'. After van Quaquebeke, Henrich, & Eckloff (2007), I define tolerance as "a possible attitudinal reaction to the object's *presence* in the subject's environment" and acceptance as "a possible attitudinal reaction to the object's *membership* in the subject's group" (p. 188). Out of these two terms, tolerance implies more distance with the object: I can "*bear*" (Ibid., p. 189) this person's presence in my environment, but their *presence* is my limit in terms of interpersonal proximity; *a contrario*, I would not want this person to be a member of any group to which I belong. This is incompatible with what is meant by 'consent' in polyamorous situations, because consent in the context of polyamory entails agreeing to have direct romantic and possibly sexual connections with some individuals, as well as indirect, non-romantic and non-sexual, connections with other individuals. As far as the latter option is concerned, agreeing that one's beloved shall be romantically and possibly sexually involved with another person means agreeing to an indirect connection with this person and thus admitting this person into one's polyamorous constellation. This is equal to admitting a person to a group to which one belongs, and for this reason the term 'acceptance' is more appropriate in the context of polyamory.

Finally, I would like to make some reservations. In this paper, I have decided to focus on verbal communication and verbal expression of consent. This is justified by the fact that, as it has been observed by many authors, polyamorous individuals seem to place an emphasis on verbal communication as a means of ensuring

honesty and openness, checking in with others, undertaking the emotional work concerning the emotionality of oneself and others, maintaining an ongoing negotiation about the needs, desires, boundaries of oneself and others, etc. (Brunning, 2016; Gilmore and de Arcana, 2015; Barker, 2013; Barker, 2011; Easton and Hardy, 2011; Sheff, 2010; Anapol, 2010; Klesse, 2007). However, by choosing to focus on verbal communication, I do not wish to dismiss the possibility of non-verbal communication in polyamory, nor of this kind of communication being an interesting research topic (also in the context of polyamory). I only wish to say that based on the literature on polyamory, verbal communication seems to be more constitutive of the polyamorous practice and, thus, more relevant. This is the reason behind my focus on verbal expression and choosing to supplement the tree of proximity between metamours with a lot of verbal illustrations of metamour behavior.

Another reservation I would like to make is that even though all verbal illustrations of metamour behavior in this paper exemplify direct communication, in fact, they could easily be imagined as tokens of indirect communication, by which I mean that the potential metamours could ask the beloved (or another trusted person) to convey messages between them. By means of this reservation, I wish to say that although I have chosen to use the examples of direct communication, I recognize indirect communication as a legitimate way of exchanging messages between the members of polyamorous constellations.⁷ I hold that as long as there is communicative initiative and the message is conveyed truthfully, then it does not make a significant qualitative difference whether the communication is direct or indirect.

As my last reservation, I wish to say that I purposely leave out of my considerations such situations in which people become closer to one another in an unconscious way. Generally speaking, this is justified by the fact that I am interested in how proximity is *constructed* by individuals, not how it might *happen* to them. I do not deny that certain chance happenings, which people do not choose or have control over, might draw these individuals closer to one another in an unconscious way. But my point of focus is such proximity that is built on two-sided consent, and the notion of unconscious consent seems inconceivable. Realizing that I consent to something need not be an intellectual operation: I might *feel* consent rather than think it, or feel it before I think it, but – either way – such felt consent assumes some kind of conscious contact with oneself; it assumes self-awareness.

In addition to acknowledging felt consent, I also recognize that consent – whether felt or intellectually processed – may be given non-verbally; a good illustration of such non-verbal consent is described in *the Zhuangzi* (2009), where an invitation to friendship is met with consent expressed through eye contact and joyous laughter (6:39, 6:44, 6:45). However, as mentioned earlier, I find it inconceivable that consent can be given unconsciously. The argument for this may be formulated in the following way: 1) since giving consent results from choosing between options – “giving consent” *versus* “declining consent” – one needs to consider these options; 2) it is impossible to consider options and choose between them unconsciously (even though the actions of considering and choosing need not be intellectual); 3) *ergo*, consent cannot be given unconsciously.

The analysis of proximity which is consciously constructed by individuals through two-sided consent is particularly well-suited for discussing polyamory. First of all, polyamory is premised on consent and knowledge of everybody involved, and both of these require consciousness. But more importantly, in the contemporary reality where “most societies are hostile to polyamory” (Brunning, 2016, p. 7), it would be difficult to imagine that someone becomes close to others in an unconscious and yet polyamorous way. With polyamory going so much against the societal norms and getting stigmatized for it (Sheff, 2016; Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013), embracing a polyamorous identity and developing polyamorous bonds requires conscious non-conformity and affirmation of oneself, one’s beliefs, needs, desires. Even those who decide not to live a polyamorous lifestyle openly are aware of their relationship choices going against the norms. Therefore, polyamorous proximity cannot help but be constructed consciously.

Initial Conditions and the Stimulus to Start the Metamour Tree of Proximity

Having explained the definitions and reservations that underlie the analysis undertaken in this paper, I can now go on to discuss the initial conditions of the tree of proximity between metamours.

What is interesting about the metamour tree of proximity is that it can be preceded by an already existing tree of proximity between two persons. To put it sim-

ply, the two people, x and z, who start constructing the metamour tree of proximity, may already be friends or acquaintances. Alternatively, they may not know each other at all and then the metamour tree of proximity arises *ex nihilo*. These are the different initial conditions in which the metamour tree of proximity may have the chance to sprout. What stimulates the transformation of those conditions into the possible beginning of the metamour tree of proximity is the presence of a third person, y, who is attracted to both x and z, and to whom both x and z are reciprocally attracted.

My analysis in this paper shall focus on the *ex nihilo* situation, in which the potential metamours start their metamour contact as strangers. Such metamour proximity which develops between friends and acquaintances has been analyzed elsewhere (Iwanowska, 2015).

In this paper, I shall assume that y has a prior romantic bond with x and that z is, romantically speaking, the ‘new person’. However, with slight modifications, a similar tree of proximity could be developed for metamours who start their romantic involvement with y simultaneously.

The Figure of the Tree of Proximity and the Symbols

Before proceeding to the analysis proper, I wish to stress that this paper is accompanied by a Figure (see: Appendix A) which is meant to serve as a visualization of the tree of proximity between metamours who start their metamour contact as strangers. Therefore, it is important that the reader consults the Figure while consulting the textual part of the analysis.

As to the symbols used in the figure, x, y, and z are persons involved in the polyamorous constellation – a detailed description of the state of affairs between these three individuals is given in the next section. P indicates a polyamorous state of affairs, and $\neg P$ symbolizes a non-polyamorous state of affairs. M means that a metamour type of proximity is possible, and $\neg M$ means that it is impossible. In the case when no metamour proximity is possible, this does not mean that no interpersonal closeness can take place, but that a particular kind of closeness is blocked from occurring – the one that might happen only between persons who have the same romantic partner.

T stands for talking to one another. Thus, when the symbol T (x, z) appears, for

example, this means that x initiates a conversation with z ; respectively, $T(z, x)$ shall signify that it is z who initiates a conversation with x . In contrast, when the negation sign (\neg) appears in front of the symbols described above, this means the lack of communication – for example, $\neg T(x, z)$ stands for x refraining from initiating the conversation with z .

In addition, K stands for full knowledge concerning the state of affairs that obtains between the individuals involved, while \wedge and \vee are logical symbols signifying ‘and’ (conjunction) and ‘or’ respectively. When using \vee to signify ‘or’, I shall be using it to mean an exclusive disjunction – for example, $K(x \vee z)$ means that it is either x who has full knowledge about the state of affairs that obtains between everybody involved, or it is z who has such full knowledge; however, it is not the case that both have the full knowledge. When both have such full knowledge, this shall be indicated by $K(x \wedge z)$ in a more detailed version, or by K in a simplified version. When the symbol $\neg K$ is used, it shall signify that it is not the case that both x and z have the full knowledge concerning the state of affairs that obtains.

Furthermore, ‘yes’ stands for consent, ‘no’ stands for lack of consent, while ‘yes, but’ stands for consent with reservations. Whenever I shall mean such consent which has been issued by one person only, I shall make it clear – for example, $Y(x)$ shall signify that the consent has been issued by x only. Otherwise, ‘yes’ and ‘yes, but’ mean a two-sided consent, issued by both x and z . In contrast, for the sake of simplicity, I assume that a one-sided lack of consent amounts to an overall lack of consent. Therefore, ‘no’ means that at least one person said ‘no’. Finally, C signifies consensuality (between x and z), by which I mean that both x and z have had the opportunity to voice their consent or the lack of it, and they both did so.

The Beginning of the Tree of Proximity between Metamours (level 0)

Having established how to read the symbols in the Figure which depicts the tree of proximity, let us proceed to the analysis of the proximity possibilities between metamours that start their metamour interaction as strangers.

The initial set of proximity possibilities sprouts from the point which I have marked as level 0. The state of affairs at level 0 is that both x and z are attracted to one and the same person y , and y reciprocates the feeling of attraction to both

x and z. However, I assume that x and y are in an already established, stable romantic relationship, and therefore I shall refer to x as the stable romantic partner (of y) and to y as the beloved. In contrast, z and y do not have any romantic bond between them yet – they are strangers to one another. For that reason, I shall refer to z as the aspiring romantic partner (of y) or as the new person. As to the state of affairs between x and z, they are neither attracted to one another, nor do they have any preexisting bond between them – they are also strangers to one another. My analysis in this paper shall focus on the proximity possibilities between these two individuals, x and z, who do not know one another and are not attracted to one another, but who share attraction to one and the same individual (y). When talking collectively about these two people, I shall often refer to them as potential metamours.

The Initial Set of Six Alternative Options (level 1)

There are six proximity possibilities which I wish to single out as the basic options that might sprout from level 0. Starting from the left, one possible evolution from level 0 to level 1 is a situation (1.1) in which the two potential metamours (x and z) talk to one another directly, even before the aspiring romantic partner (z) signals their attraction to person y. This situation can take place at a poly meet-up or at a party, where all three above-mentioned individuals are present. The interaction between x and z can be initiated by the stable romantic partner (x) that notices the new person (z) who is attracted to the beloved (y). The stable romantic partner (x) could address the aspiring romantic partner (z) in the following way, for example: ‘Hey, I’ve noticed you are attracted to my beloved. My name is Alex, by the way.’ A good illustration of such communicative initiative of the stable romantic partner towards the aspiring romantic partner has been portrayed in the Czech film entitled *Svatá čtveřice* (Hřebejk, 2012), in which Vítek, the husband of Marie, asks Ondra openly: ‘Are you attracted to Marie?’, to which Ondra replies with honesty: ‘Sure, I find her attractive.’⁸ An alternative option to this one is that it is the aspiring romantic partner that makes the first communicative move towards the stable romantic partner; these are the words that the aspiring romantic partner could use to initiate the conversation: ‘Hey, I’m Marco. You have a stunning partner. Would it be ok if I flirted with her a bit?’ Notice that if either of these options are actualized,

in the end both potential metamours (x and z) have full knowledge of the state of affairs that obtains – this is marked as $K(x \wedge z)$, where \wedge is a conjunction symbol meaning ‘both x and z’.

An alternative possibility (1.02) that presents itself at level 1 is a situation where it is the beloved (y) who makes the first communicative move and addresses both her stable romantic partner (x) and the aspiring romantic partner (z) (the order in which the beloved addresses the two individuals may vary). When talking to her stable romantic partner (x), she (y) could phrase what she wants to express in the following way: ‘Sweetheart, I need to share something with you. There is this new guy at the university and I am so attracted to him. How would you feel if I asked him out on a date?’ Conversely, when talking to the new person (z), she (y) could address him along the following lines: ‘I feel so tempted to ask you out on a date, but you need to know I’m polyamorous, and I have a stable romantic partner. How do you feel about it?’ In this scenario, like in the previous one, both x and z end up having full knowledge of the state of affairs that obtains. A cinematic illustration of such communication is realized in the film *Splendor* (Araki, 1999), in which Veronica is attracted to both Zed and Able, and she informs both men about it⁹.

However, it might also be the case that the beloved (y) addresses only one of the two individuals she is attracted to and, for some reason, fails to talk to the other. This possibility is indicated on the tree of proximity as option 1.03. Notice that in this situation, the end result is that only one potential metamour (x or z) has knowledge of the state of affairs that obtains – this is marked as $K(x \vee z)$, where \vee signifies an exclusive disjunction, meaning ‘either x or z’.

Apart from the above-mentioned three possible options, there are two other alternative possibilities that can be grouped together as beforehand – *a priori* – arrangements (between x and y). One possible *a priori* arrangement can be an *in blanco* consent of the stable romantic partner (x) by means of which the stable romantic partner expresses their approval of the beloved (y) acting on the mutual attraction she might experience with other people (1.04), even before those people (such as person z) appear. This is what an *in blanco* consent issued to one’s romantic partner might sound like: ‘Feel free to hook up with whoever you want to. I’m good with that. You don’t have to check in with me every time you feel attracted to a new person.’ Similarly, an *in blanco* consent might also be expressed to people other than one’s partner. For example, one might talk to others about it

at a poly meet-up: 'As far as my needs and my comfort go, my partner doesn't have to check in with me each time she feels attracted to a new person. She can act on her attraction to others freely, without consulting me.' It is interesting to note that, in the case of an *a priori* arrangement of this type, depending on the agreement between the partners in the stable romantic relationship, the full knowledge condition need not be fulfilled in order for the state of affairs to be compatible with polyamory. If the stable romantic partner (x) issues a beforehand consent and underlines that they need not be informed about the new romantic contacts of the beloved (y), the beloved might act on the attraction she experiences with other people without informing her stable romantic partner about the new people she is attracted to, and this conduct shall still be compatible with polyamory. The reason for this is that this kind of unfulfillment of the full knowledge condition does not block the stable romantic partner (x) from voicing their consent – the consent is issued *a priori*. A good example of an *a priori* arrangement can be found in a documentary film *POLYAMORY - Journalism major project* (Anderson, 2012), where all three partners in a 'vee'¹⁰ relationship decide together that it is most convenient to them to tell one another about the new flirtatious connections only after something has already happened between them and the new people from outside the 'vee'. Similarly, a sort of an *a priori* arrangement seems to be the case between Françoise and Pierre in Simone de Beauvoir's *L'invitée* (1972). Although sometimes the new romantic and sexual connections with others are discussed by Françoise and Pierre before anything happens (this is the case with the connection between Pierre and Xavière), at other times these new connections are discussed only afterwards – like the connection between Françoise and Gerbert. The latter solution is portrayed as perfectly acceptable; in fact, it is expressly said in the first chapter of the novel that Pierre does not impose any constraints on Françoise's behavior, as a rule.

The second possible *a priori* arrangement (between x and y) is an *en bloc* lack of consent for dating others by means of which the stable romantic partner (x) expresses a prior lack of approval of the beloved (y) acting on the mutual attraction the beloved might experience with other people, no matter who they are (1.05). It is important to stress that such lack of consent does not automatically signify the absence of polyamory. The reasoning behind this statement goes as follows: 1) The two main pillars of polyamory are consensuality and the knowledge of all

persons involved about the state of affairs that obtains between them (Aviram and Leachman, 2015, p. 297; Morrison et al., 2013, p. 81; Strassberg, 2003, p. 439), 2) the lack of consent to date others on which all parties involved agree is a form of consensuality (however, this is consensuality which obtains between x and y , and not between x and z), and thus 3) if all parties (x and y) are aware of the state of affairs that obtains and all parties agree to it being so, then polyamory is not automatically excluded. There are polyamorous couples who might for various reasons (sickness, pregnancy, a need to solve an intra-relationship issue, etc.) temporarily agree to not date other people. There are also the so-called polyfidelitous relationships (Aviram and Leachman, 2015, p. 299; Labriola, 2003), where there are more than two people, for example a , b , c , and d , who all temporarily or permanently agree not to date any other people outside their polyamorous constellation.

The last possibility on level 1 is no communication between the parties involved (1.06), and thus the metamour proximity is blocked from evolving ($\neg M$). Moreover, where there is no communication, there is typically no realization of full knowledge of all parties involved ($\neg K$), but even more importantly there is no space for expressing consent or the lack of it. This amounts to a lack of consensuality ($\neg C$). For this reason, no matter if the beloved (y) and the aspiring romantic partner (z) decide to pursue the mutual attraction or not, the state of affairs that follows is not polyamorous ($\neg P$).

The above-mentioned options at level 1 are possible paths that might sprout from level 0. Each of the options at level 1 opens a new set of paths onto level 2. It is level 2 (and above) that shall now be the focal point of the analysis. In other words, let us explore what might happen next in each of the above-described variants.

What Happens after a Direct Conversation between the Potential Metamours

The first variant at level 1 was a direct conversation between the stable romantic partner (x) and the aspiring romantic partner (z). I wish to describe three possible options that might ensue; I shall refer to the phase in which these three options might take place as *the transmission of consent*. First of all, in the course of the conversation, two potential metamours might both voice their acceptance of the state of affairs in which they are attracted to one and the same person (y). The

variant that I have marked as 'yes' (2.01) obtains if and only if both of them say a straightforward 'yes' to the situation they find themselves in. If at least one person says 'no', this amounts to the overall lack of consent between the two potential metamours (2.03). The third option (2.02) that might follow is that, although both potential metamours voice their consent, at least one of these consents shall be a consent with reservations ('yes, but').

Let me provide plausible communicative examples of these three possible variants (2.01, 2.02, 2.03) in order to make them less abstract. A straightforward 'yes' coming from the stable romantic partner (x) might go as follows: 'Sure, you have my full acceptance and support in dating my beloved' or 'I want you to know you have my full blessing to follow your connection in whatever form it takes.'¹¹ A straightforward 'yes' coming from the aspiring romantic partner (z), on the other hand, might go along the following lines: 'I fully respect the fact that you are a very important person in y's life.' In contrast, a 'no' issued by the stable romantic partner might be formulated like this: 'My gut tells me that you don't really accept my presence as my beloved's stable partner; for that reason, I can't agree to you dating her.' Conversely, a 'no' stated by the aspiring romantic partner might go as follows: 'I feel that there is a lot of tension in your couple. I don't want to be a part of that.' As far as the consent with reservations is concerned, such a 'yes, but' voiced by the stable romantic partner (x) might be a message of this sort: 'Me and my partner have been through a really bad break-up with some folks recently. I am not sure how much we can handle right now. Would you be ok with starting things really, really slowly between you two?'¹² In contrast, a 'yes, but' issued by the aspiring romantic partner (z) might go as follows: 'I am really attracted to your beloved and you seem like a great guy. The problem is I live so far away, and I am afraid this may not work. Could we agree upon some trial period and see how it goes?'

Finally, let me comment by saying that the 'yes' and 'yes, but' variants both open up the possibility for x and z to become metamours (M), while the 'no' variant makes the metamour relationship between x and z impossible ($\neg M$). However, it is important to stress that all the options, including the 'no' variant, are compatible with the polyamorous conceptual framework (P), since in all variants both x and z have had full knowledge of the state of affairs that obtains, and both have had an opportunity to voice their consent or the lack of it (C).

What Happens after the Beloved's Conversation with Both Potential Metamours

I shall now move on to discussing what might happen on level 2, when we follow an alternative path – that in which there was no direct conversation between potential metamours, but instead, the beloved (y) has talked to both her stable romantic partner (x) and her aspiring romantic partner (z) in order to make them fully aware of the state of affairs that obtains. Once the two potential metamours have been informed by the beloved (y) that she is attracted to both of them simultaneously, there are two possibilities that might follow: they may either decide to talk to one another (2.04) or decide in favor of no communication (2.05). If they decide to talk to one another, the phase that I have referred to as *the transmission of consent* follows (3.01, 3.02, 3.03), and this turn of events is compatible with polyamory (P). If no communication takes place (2.05), not only is the metamour proximity blocked from developing ($\neg M$), but also such a situation is incompatible with polyamory ($\neg P$). This is because where no communication takes place, no transmission of consent is possible, and where no transmission of consent is possible, there is no consensuality ($\neg C$). Consequently, no consensuality amounts to the impossibility of polyamory to be the case.

What Happens after the Beloved's Conversation with Only One Potential Metamour

A similar palette of options is characteristic of another alternative – the one in which the beloved does not talk to both potential metamours, but only to one of them, while excluding the other (1.03). In this situation, the person with whom the beloved has had a conversation (either x or z) can now take the matters into their own hands and talk to the other potential metamour (2.06). If this happens, again the phase that I call *the transmission of consent* shall follow (3.04, 3.05, 3.06). However, the person (either x or z) who is able to initiate the first metamour contact can also decide in favor of no communication (2.07). When this is the case, the same is true as what has been explained in the previous paragraph: the metamour proximity is blocked from evolving ($\neg M$), and such a turn of events is incompatible with the polyamorous conceptual framework ($\neg P$) due to consensuality being blocked

from obtaining ($\neg C$) and the knowledge condition not obtaining for one of the potential metamours ($\neg K$).

What Happens after the A Priori In Blanco Consent

Another alternative path which has been described on level 1 is a situation in which there is consent *in blanco* issued beforehand by the stable romantic partner (x). Let us now discuss level 2 development of this particular variant in which the beloved (y) is given consent by her stable romantic partner (x) to act on the mutual attraction she might experience with other people, whoever they may be. Once such a consent has been voiced and the beloved has met a concrete individual with whom she experiences mutual attraction – person z – there are two possible options that might follow from that: 2.08) the beloved may either decide to talk to z about being in an already established relationship with her stable romantic partner (x) and also about the consent *in blanco* she has received from her partner; 2.09) the beloved may decide in favor of no communication regarding her current romantic situation. If the beloved chooses the no-communication option, her choice will have significant consequences. First of all, she is responsible for blocking any metamour proximity between x and z from growing ($\neg M$). Second of all, she is responsible for making the state of affairs incompatible with the polyamorous conceptual framework ($\neg P$), because although her stable romantic partner (x) has had an opportunity to voice his consent, the aspiring romantic partner (z) is denied the opportunity to do so. Denying a person the opportunity to voice their consent or the lack of it amounts to the lack of consensuality ($\neg C$). Furthermore, the aspiring romantic partner (z) is also denied the full knowledge concerning the state of affairs that obtains ($\neg K$).

However, if the beloved (y) decides to communicate with the new person (z) regarding her current romantic situation, the consequences just described are avoided: the new person (z) has full knowledge about the state of affairs that obtains (K), and it is possible for that person to voice their consent or the lack of it. The options that might follow from such a situation are the following: 3.07) the new person (z) might either choose to communicate with the stable romantic partner (x), 3.08) or the new person (z) may decide in favor of no communication. If the former option is chosen (3.07), then the *transmission of consent* phase follows

(4.01, 4.02, 4.03). If the latter option is chosen (3.08), then we are dealing with one of the grey-zone situations, in which consent cannot be satisfactorily established. Notice that this state of affairs does not involve blocking anybody from voicing their consent; however, one person (z) has refrained from voicing their consent or the lack of it. Therefore, we can neither say that the consensuality condition is fulfilled nor that it is not. The status of the consensuality condition is unclear (C?). Consequently, even though all persons involved have the full knowledge of the state of affairs that obtains (K), we cannot say that this situation is compatible with polyamory. Intriguingly though, we can neither claim that this situation is incompatible with polyamory. Rather, until the question of consent becomes resolved, we are left hanging, both in terms of the state of affairs being compatible with polyamory (P?) and in terms of the further evolution of metamour proximity (M?).

In fact, the further development of events may go in either direction. Whilst it may occur that the aspiring romantic partner (z) is fully accepting of the stable romantic partner (x), it may also transpire that the lack of communication on the part of the aspiring romantic partner (z) has been indicative of the lack of acceptance of the stable romantic partner (x) and that the aspiring romantic partner (z) has been exploiting the consent of the stable romantic partner (x) in a very instrumental way. For example, the aspiring romantic partner (z) might have been using the situation to make the beloved (y) fall in love with them, and once the stakes have gone up in terms of emotional commitment, z presents the beloved with the either-or monogamous choice: 'it's either me or him'. This is more or less what happens in the polyamorous web series entitled *Family: The web series*. Ben, who is in a stable relationship with Gemma starts a new relationship with Miley. In the very first conversation with Miley, Ben tells Miley he has a pre-existing romantic relationship with Gemma; he also informs Miley that Gemma has given him an *in blanco* consent for dating other girls (Greenan, 2008–2009, episode 7). Miley develops a romantic relationship with Ben, and although she never voices her consent in a verbal way, she lets Ben think that she does not mind Gemma's presence in Ben's romantic life. It seems that Miley accepts Gemma, since whenever she meets Gemma she acts in a friendly way and does not have a problem hanging out with Ben in the house where he lives with Gemma (Greenan, 2008–2009, episode 13). It is only later when Miley starts to fall in love with Ben that she reveals to him that she is in fact monogamous and wants Ben exclusively for herself. It becomes

clear that Miley lacks consent for the presence of Gemma in Ben's romantic life (Greenan, 2008–2009, episode 18).

The intriguingly unclear status resulting from the partial lack of communication (in which only the new person, z, withholds from communicating their consent) is definitely an area worth exploring, and therefore I wish to point it out as an area for future investigation, especially for the researchers interested in non-verbal communication in polyamory.

What Happens after the Lack of Consent En Bloc or after No Communication

Taking into account that the main topic of this paper is metamour relationships, the possible development of variants 1.05 and 1.06 does not invite any further analysis. The option of the lack of consent *en bloc* (1.05) is where the tree of metamour proximity touches a limit; the same is true for the option of no communication (1.06). Both paths, if chosen by the parties involved, result in the blockage of growth of metamour proximity ($\neg M$). However, it needs to be stressed once again that while the lack of consent *en bloc* may (under certain conditions discussed above) still be compatible with polyamory (P/ \neg P), the option of no communication is incompatible with the polyamorous conceptual framework (\neg P).

Further Development of Metamour Proximity

In the main body of this paper, I have presented the initial set of proximity possibilities between metamours who begin their relationships as strangers. I have also pointed to some further sets of possibilities that arise from this initial set. In my analysis, I have stopped at the phase I have called *the transmission of consent*, and I have not attempted to draw a complete and exhaustive tree of proximity between people who start their relationships as strangers. Such an analysis would take up too much space. However, I wish to stress that the analysis could continue, and many further sets of possibilities could be depicted in the Figure of the tree of proximity. The tree would grow and develop, more and more possibilities would arise, and the parties involved would be able to keep choosing between these possibilities as they progress in creating metamour proximity.

Nevertheless, even though I will not explore these further development possibilities in detail, I wish to point to certain general directions in which the metamour proximity depicted in the Figure could evolve. There are at least five such general directions: first, the metamours who started as strangers might end up as distant acquaintances; second, they might end up as friends or close friends – this scenario is portrayed in the film *Cesar et Rosalie* (Sautet, 1972); third, there might be a break up of one of the romantic bonds, which brings the metamour relationship to an end; fourth, the metamour relationship might end as a result of the death of the beloved – this is the case in the classic Truffaut picture *Jules et Jim* (1962), based on the novel under the same title (Roché, 1953); and finally, the metamours might fall in love with one another, thus transforming their metamour relationship into a romantic relationship. This last scenario is explored in the film *Splendor* (Araki, 1999), in which the main protagonist, Veronica, and the two men she is dating voyage through instantiating the polyamorous relationship model called ‘vee’¹³ into being the exemplification of the polyamorous relationship model called ‘triad’¹⁴. A similar sequence of events unfolds in the film *Dieta mediterránea* (Oristrell, 2009), although in Oristrell’s picture Toni and Frank who are both romantically involved with the main protagonist, Sofia, begin their polyamorous journey as friends, not strangers.

Conclusions

As it could be observed on the graph of the metamour tree of proximity, where there is no metamour communication¹⁵, the message about the consent cannot be transmitted, and this amounts to a lack of consensuality. Where there is no consensuality, there can be no polyamory either. For this reason, my definition of polyamory stresses not so much the openness to having multiple romantic relationships, but the openness to having metamour relationships with other people. It is this second kind of openness – the openness to metamour contact and communication – that singles out a polyamorous person among other people who might be open to a multiplicity of romantic and/or sexual relationships, e.g. from such a monogamist who leads a double life.

Since my 2015 presentation at the 1st NMCI conference, which constitutes the basis for this paper, there has been new research corroborating my thesis about

the significance of metamour connections. In a paper that appeared in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Luke Brunning (2016) writes that “the presence of a third party is a *constitutive* feature of polyamory” (p. 9), and the third party is typically one’s metamour or a potential metamour. Brunning argues that whilst in a monogamous relationship the presence of a third party – a secret lover, a child, a therapist – is contingent, a polyamorous relationship is distinct in that it involves “sustained and intimate confrontations with third parties” (p. 8). Even when one is single and only considers the possibility of entertaining a polyamorous attitude to relationships, one cannot ignore the prospect of an imaginary metamour, a person one’s next partner could be dating or could wish to be dating (p. 8). In short, being polyamorous means exposing oneself to regular confrontations with the figure of a metamour – whether real or imaginary – and thus to experiencing a whole range of emotions which are specific to, and some of them even unique to, relating to one’s metamour, e.g. compersion (p. 11).

In addition to that, I argue that accepting the prospect of one’s partner dating another person entails agreeing to be in a relationship with this person, even if this relationship might remain indirect: this could be the case, for example, when one partner issues an *a priori* consent, the two partners never meet in person, and the only thing that bonds them is that they are dating one and the same person. Why should such an indirect link between two people constitute a kind of a relationship and a non-negligible one? The answer could be given in the form of the following argument: 1) being in a relationship consists in “influencing each other’s behavior” (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 2004, p. 81), and closer relationships shall have more influence on one’s opinions, beliefs, moods, desires, actions etc. than the more distant ones (the closest relationships shall go as far as impacting one’s moral agency and narrative identity; see: Iwanowska, 2016); 2) relationships that involve intimacy (emotional and possibly sexual) are closer than the ones that do not involve intimacy; 3) through being intimately involved with y, x has quite a significant influence on the way y carries herself, and – due to being intimately involved with z – y has quite a significant influence on the behavior of z; 4) the same is true the other way round – in virtue of the intimacy of their bond, z quite significantly influences y’s behavior, and y quite significantly influences x’s behavior; 5) thus, even when x is not intimately involved with z, x has an indirect, but non-negligible influence on the behavior of z, and *vice versa*, since they are both intimately

involved with one and the same person, y . Having such impact on one another amounts to x and z being in a relationship even in the most minimalist version of the metamour contact between them (like the one that has been described in the example above), and – more importantly – the impact of such a relationship should not be underestimated.¹⁶

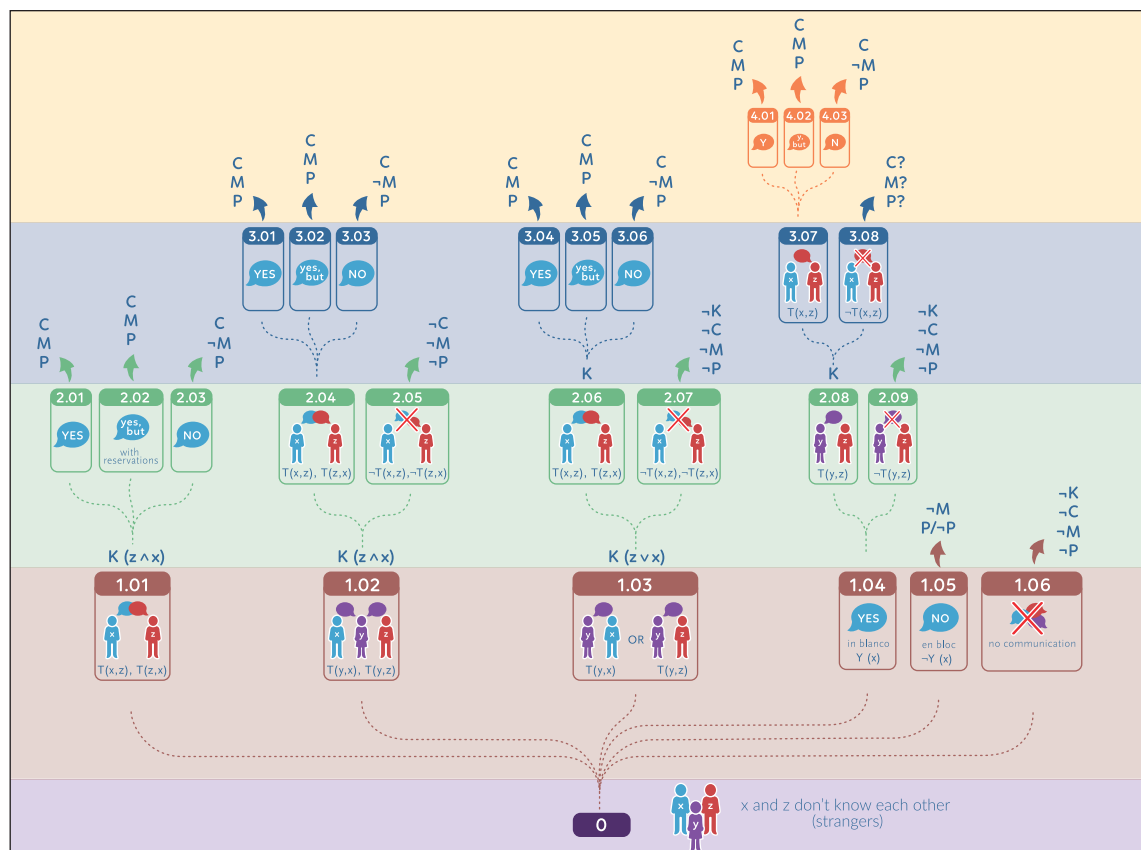
When Seneca wanted to warn Serenus about the connection between interpersonal proximity and the influence people have on one another in terms of character and behavior, he used a metaphor of being easily made sick by a person sitting close to us. By inviting a sick person to sit close – the philosopher said – one invites sickness into their own body (Seneca, 2007, p. 124). Even the healthiest person (like the Stoic sage with a self full of the inner calm and harmony) cannot resist sickness if the sick person sits sufficiently close and the exposure is sustained.¹⁷ A metamour is a person who is not our direct neighbor on the bench where we are sitting, but by agreeing to them dating our partner, we invite them to sit (in a continuous manner) on the same bench next to our partner. Non-metaphorically speaking, we invite them to join the interpersonal structure that we belong to, meaning our polyamorous constellation. Thus, keeping with Seneca's metaphor, if the metamour is "sick", with time this "sickness" shall affect our partner, and finally we ourselves shall also be affected. Even though this is a gloomy metaphor, what it says is important and compatible with Brunning's observations: choosing a polyamorous lifestyle entails opting for intense emotional work; but this emotional work shall never concern just ourselves, or just ourselves and the person closest to us. In Brunning's words: "[p]olyamory requires one to intimately engage with the emotional lives of more people than if one was monogamous, especially if one's partners themselves have multiple partners" (Brunning, 2016, p. 11). In other words, the emotional lives of our metamours and the problems they face shall always somewhat affect us, and they shall demand some emotional work on our side.

In conclusion, a polyamorous constellation consists of more than just the romantic (and possibly sexual) relationships; beneath this more obvious network of connections there is yet another network: a network of metamour connections with its respective consents, proximities, influences, perks and challenges, emotions and emotional work. The two networks are closely intertwined and co-dependent: for example, the consents given by metamours pave the way for the

aspiring romantic partners to start constructing an intimate relationship with one another, but it is the willingness of the aspiring romantic partners to build the intimate bond that provides a reason for the potential metamours to consider issuing their consents in the first place. Therefore, a full picture of one's polyamorous constellation should involve the fusion of these two networks.

As a final remark, I hope that my paper will make my fellow academics realize that although romantic bonds typically rouse more interest when discussing and defining polyamory, we should not underestimate the importance of non-romantic connections within the polyamorous network. The choices made in forming metamour relationships are crucial to creating successful polyamorous constellations and to the whole conceptual framework of polyamory¹⁸. Metamour connections are the underpinning of the fabric of polyamory, and they deserve as much academic attention and research as the polyamorous romantic connections.

Appendix A: The tree of proximity for metamours who start their relationship as strangers



(I wish to thank Maria Jagodzińska, a graphic designer and a close friend, who contributed her work to transform my pencil sketch into this figure.)

Endnotes

- ¹ Somebody can ask at this point how do we explain the functioning of individuals who are capable of equalizing ‘proximity52’ with ‘proximity1’, meaning such people who have been quite consistent in choosing ‘more proximity’ with you for five years, and then one day they are able to bring you down to a level of a complete stranger. To that I would reply that I do not deny that such people exist, but my understanding of this phenomenon is such that either they are lying to themselves and to you about what they feel (and then, in fact, they do not think that ‘less proximity52’ equals ‘less proximity1’), or they have never been genuinely implicated in the ‘more proximity’ choices that you thought you two were making together during those five years. In the latter case, there has never been any genuine proximity between that person and you, and the other person has in fact remained on the level of the first bunch of forking paths; I would call such a person a ‘proximity fraud’. The tree of proximity is a good tool to understand the phenomenon of the existence of ‘proximity frauds’.
- ² Sex need not be part of the equation between x and y or between z and y for those connections to count as romantic connections within the polyamorous network; one of the romantic partners of y (x or z) could be asexual. See: *infra* footnote 6.
- ³ To compare this definition of polyamory with a slightly different one, see for example: Anapol, 2010, pp. 1, 4, 14. Notice however that Deborah Anapol also stresses that the openness to having multiple romantic (and potentially sexual) partners is not a necessary condition for polyamory to be the case.
- ⁴ The consciousness of the importance of this condition in defining polyamory is something I owe to numerous discussions with Mirosław Sajewicz, attorney-at-law.
- ⁵ This use of the word ‘may’ makes the definition inclusive of individuals who may be a part of the polyamorous constellation, even if they themselves are unwilling to have multiple romantic relationships.
- ⁶ The word ‘may’ in reference to the sexual aspect of a relationship in conditions 1) and 2) is of high importance, as it stresses that a polyamorous relationship does not require a sexual bond – this makes my definition inclusive of asexual individuals living in polyamorous relationships. For a paper exploring this under-represented topic in the research on polyamory, see: Scherrer, 2010.
- ⁷ The indirect communication, however, has been commented on as less advisable by Wolf, for example. See: Wolf, T. (January 13, 2016). Have you ever been the go-between in a metamour conflict?. In T. Wolf, *Kimchi cuddles: A webcomic spreading awareness about poly, queer, and genderqueer issues in the most hilarious way possible*. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/137205048190/have-you-ever-been-the-go-between-in-a-metamour>; Wolf, T. (February 18 2014). See also: ASK KIMCHI. In T. Wolf, *op. cit.* Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/77065350633/ask-kimchi-if-you-want-your-question-featured>.
- ⁸ In the film, however, Vítek and Ondra are friends, not strangers. A further nuance which makes the situation in the film somewhat different from the one portrayed in this paper

is that immediately after this initial exchange about Ondra being attracted to Víték's wife, Ondra asks Víték whether Víték, in turn, is attracted to Ondra's wife, Dita.

- ⁹ In the cinematic example, like in my own example, both men are strangers to one another. However, in the film, it is not the case that one of them is already a stable romantic partner of Veronica. Veronica meets the two men on the same day and the two romantic relationships develop pretty much simultaneously.
- ¹⁰ "VEE: ... A polyamorous relationship involving three people, in which one person is romantically or sexually involved with two partners who are not romantically or sexually involved with each other." See: Veaux. Another name for this kind of relationship is a hinge relationship. See: Anderson, 2012.
- ¹¹ This is a direct quote from: Wolf, T. (February 16, 2014). The other woman. In T. Wolf, op. cit. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/76854731495/the-other-woman>.
- ¹² Another example, but in the situation where the potential metamours have a preexisting connection with one another, can be found in the already mentioned web comic Kimchi cuddles. In this example, Sherman, who is romantically connected to Kim, is talking to Lilly who wants to be dating Kim as well. Sherman says to Lilly: "I have some judgments of you after our break-up, and have some concerns about you dating Kim. I see you as impulsive and I'm worried you'll hurt her (...) I'd never tell Kim who she can/cannot date, but can this be an ongoing conversation between us, as things progress between you two?" See: Wolf, T. (August 2, 2013). Communication. In T. Wolf. op. cit. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/57156471344/communication>.
- ¹³ See: supra footnote 10.
- ¹⁴ "TRIAD [or TROUPLE] : ... generally, the word **triad** is most often applied to a relationship in which each of the three people is sexually and emotionally involved with all the other members of the **triad**, as may be the case in a **triad** consisting of one man and two **bisexual** women or one woman and two **bisexual** men ...". See: Veaux.
- ¹⁵ My original input consists in explicitly underscoring the importance of communication between metamours, and not only between romantic partners or the importance of communication in general, which is typically the case in academic literature and research on polyamory. A non-academic source which explicitly stresses the importance of metamour communication is a web comic by Tikva Wolf. See in particular: Wolf, T. (January 25, 2016). Communication is key!. In T. Wolf, op. cit. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/138021858840/communication-is-key-15-minute-check-ins-can>; Wolf, T. (November 3, 2014). Third wheel. In T. Wolf, op. cit.. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/101680264395/do-you-ever-feel-like-the-3rd-wheel>; Wolf, T (February 16, 2014). The other woman. In T. Wolf, op. cit. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/76854731495/the-other-woman>.
- ¹⁶ When a metamour relationship evolves beyond this most minimalist version in which the relationship is indirect and mediated by the intimacies with the beloved, there is a whole range of intimacies that are possible between the metamours themselves; for an exploration of polyamorous intimacy possibilities other than the romantic and the sexual kind, see: Gilmore and de Arcana, 2015.

- ¹⁷ This is a detail often overlooked in the Stoic teachings of Seneca. Whilst Seneca claims that the Stoic sage is invulnerable to the insults and injustice coming from strangers and that exposing himself to such treatment constitutes good spiritual practice (Seneca, 1928), the philosopher gives very different advice concerning the near and dear: since interpersonal proximity makes the tranquility of one's mind an easy prey, one should be wary when inviting another person into a closer bond (Seneca, 2007).
- ¹⁸ The importance of metamour connections in polyamory is stressed in the already cited non-academic resource. See in particular: Wolf, T. (October 28, 2014) Metamour love. In T. Wolf, op. cit. Retrieved from <http://kimchicuddles.com/post/101191438440/metamour-love>.

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