Re-imagining Polyamorous Intimacies

an ethnography of polyamorists in the Netherlands

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Table of contents

1. Introducing polyamory

It has almost been four years since I got to know about polyamory for the first time. It was not by reading an article or watching a TV show, but by having an emotional conversation with my monogamous partner Hector. To be honest, I was not prepared for what he was going to tell me and I was not as open-minded as we anthropologists claim to be in our working lives. Hector explained that he had something to tell me and that he did not want to hurt me. He said that he had noticed he felt attracted to and had developed feelings for other women, but that this in no way affected or was affected by our relationship. He still loved me tremendously. He had listened to podcasts about polyamory and other open relationships, and was wondering if we could start a discussion about this in our relationship. My gut reactions were first to feel afraid and cry because of this fear of losing our relationship, second to try and understand him, and third to ask myself 'why could we not just be a normal couple?' After that weekend we started reading, listening and talking a lot about relationships, our desires and needs, and what we meant to each other.

Later on, we also went to discussion group meetings to meet other people in polyamorous relationships and learn from their experiences. Here is where my anthropological interest was most obviously peeked. There were men and women from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, ages ranged from around 20 to 70, people had diverse professions, they also had varying sexual orientations, and many different experiences with polyamory. Here is where I came to understand polyamory, or poly for short, as meaning multiple loves, literally. But it is also the place where I came to acknowledge more and more that romance and all kinds of relationships were influenced by views on monogamy. It opened my eyes, as even though I had previously acknowledged in some part that the idea of having one true love was a fairy tale, the emphasis for me was still on one partner exclusively, and why was that the ideal? These people showed me that you could have all manner of relationships that did not have to fit that monogamous romantic mould. Some people said they were relationship anarchists rejecting strict relational categories, others went to sex parties, and yet others lived with their different partners and children. Even though I did not know exactly how each individual experienced those categories, it showed me that there was so very much diversity. At these meetings I noticed how I had seen 'normal' relationships and what I expected from others and myself in these relationships. Furthermore, I noticed that people could change from having monogamous relationships to having polyamorous relationships. In short it felt like being an anthropologist in a new cultural context observing and participating to understand polyamory.

Now some 3 years later, I am still with my partner Hector, I've also dated a couple of

people over the years and I want to be in poly relationships for the foreseeable future. So for me it has somewhat turned around coming from a monogamous perspective to now accepting and desiring a polyamorous way of engaging in relationships. I thought it would be interesting to explore polyamory as an anthropologist for this Master's thesis. My specific position in the Dutch polyamory 'community' and experiences with polyamory gave me a unique foothold in this field. I thought I could build a bridge between anthropologists, novices to polyamory and the poly community in the Netherlands. This might have been a big expectation, but I have added to the discussion with my fieldwork and thesis, and see it as a work in progress by talking at small-scale events or sharing experiences and findings in popular media (De Rooij 2017, Mare 2017).

The term polyamory will probably be quite new to you, the reader. Mae (30), one of my respondents, described polyamory as: "to have or want to have multiple intimate connections, sexual and/or romantic, in which everyone who is involved knows about it and gives consent" (translation from Dutch JM). Perhaps you might have heard about 'open relationships', in which one can have sexual interactions with others outside of their more exclusive monogamous relationship, or 'polygamy', in which people engage in multiple marriages. The second term has been researched a lot by anthropologists since the start of anthropological inquiry in the colonial period. In her cross-cultural analysis, Miriam Koktevedgaard Zeitzen states that polygamy is and has been observed and condoned socially and legally all over the world, thus showing it is not "an exotic non-Western custom, practiced by people who have not yet entered the modern world," which it is stereotypically understood to be (2009: 4). Anthropologists researching polygamy in the previous century approached it from a functional standpoint as a kinship system, which could be indicative of how a society was 'developing' (2009: 7). In this period, polygamy was considered as something alien to western anthropologists (Ibid.: 7). Angela Willey's discussion of polygamy, feminism and race adds to an understanding of how polygamy and polyamory are related (2006). She states that non-Mormon feminists in the US claimed monogamy as natural and part of their 'civilized', white status in the 19th century (2006: 331-332), whilst Mormon polygamy was seen as 'uncivilized' and 'barbaric' (2006: 539-540). The anti-polygamy discussions are currently racialized in a similar fashion, according to Willey (Ibid.). Women in polygamous marriages are seen as victims of Mormon or Muslim marriages. They are prisoners who need to be 'saved' by 'western' people, as the Dutch website Femmes for Freedom shows (2017). Polyamory is not the same as polygamy, as many polyamorists I talked to attested, but they can both be seen as forms of consensual non-monogamy and at times could be very similar. Differentiating polyamory from polygamy is not solely a matter of analytical comparison but as the abovementioned literature shows also a complex matter related to alterity, which I will discuss from time to time throughout

this thesis. My study about polyamory can add to anthropological discussions of alterity and anthropology at 'home'.

For this thesis I have focused on the concept of 'intimacy.' I chose this concept because sociologists who have studied polyamorists use it to describe polyamorous relationships: "a form of relationship where it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously" (Haritaworn et al. 2006: 515). This intrigued me because it is such a complex word, why use it to describe something if people do not know exactly what you mean? Furthermore, the use of 'intimacy' in these descriptions is not grounded in quotes from respondents nor defined in a few sentences or paragraph. If it is obvious what is meant, the interpretation of this concept could be universal, which makes the hairs stand up on my neck as an anthropologist. Furthermore, monogamous understandings of intimacy are popularly connected to cheating and romantic exclusivity (itscheating.com 2017, Wait 2014, Meyers 2012). These two aspects are not endorsed in polyamory as people can ethically engage in multiple relationships. So this begs the question that guided this thesis: *How do polyamorists in the Netherlands perceive and experience intimacy in their personal relationships?* To answer this question I approached the field from a qualitative and explorative perspective, as I wanted to understand something that had not been researched much, especially not in the Dutch context in an anthropological way. To answer this question I used the following sub questions:

- How does mono-normativity affect the experiences of polyamorists?
- How is intimacy discussed and imagined?
- How are intimacy and openness related in the personal relationships of respondents?

As will become clearer in this thesis, the polyamorists I talked to live in places where the reigning ideology on love is monogamy, the resulting monogamous normativity (mono-normativity) influences their lives in a manner of ways even though what they are doing can be considered as *non*-monogamous. By focusing on how my respondents are affected by mono-normativity, how they view intimacy on an abstract level and how this can be observed in their personal relationships, I wish to understand how these people perceive and experience intimacy. This could inspire new researchers to be more critical of the concepts they use and the diverse normativities that influence experiences and findings.

As we are on the topic of research, I would like to mention that there are a number of reasons why this thesis is relevant to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. A general reason for the importance of this research is that it is the first of its kind in the Netherlands:

there is no research on polyamorists in this location. Globally there has been more academic interest in countries such as the US (Sheff 2005, Sheff & Hammers 2011), Britain (Klesse 2011, Barker & Langdridge 2010, Barker & Ritchie 2006), Canada (Deri 2015), and China (Zhu 2018, Ho 2006), but the field is dominated by sociologists employing participant observation. My thesis can add to their work and bring an anthropological perspective to the table. An anthropological understanding of "difference through connection" (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 8) is vital here, where monogamy and polyamory are closely related. In such a 'borderlands' (Ibid.: 18) an anthropological approach to social phenomena as I have done can add to the understanding of polyamorous experiences as diverse, emergent and contradictory, yet interrelated. Lastly, with this thesis I would like to stress the importance of acknowledging how monogamy influences understandings of intimacy, which is also apparent in anthropologists' work on amongst other things love, relationships, kinship, and sexuality. 'Our' own cultural views on relationships, love and monogamy were not discussed much in my anthropology classes neither in readings. The deep-rooted ideal of monogamy guides research that focuses on dyadic relationships, family, and even gender. It is with this thesis that I want to firmly emphasise the importance of reflecting on notions surrounding these topics.

This thesis does not only add to academic discussions but also to societal discussions in the Netherlands on polyamory and intimacy in general. During and after my fieldwork, from a conference in Vienna on non-monogamy onward, there has been a growing amount of press interest in polyamory. Multiple TV shows, newspapers and magazines have interviewed polyamorists (stichting polyamorie Nederland 2018b). These pieces have been popular and respondents have been happy about the coverage. Unfortunately, the acceptance of polyamory as a legitimate relationship style that is free from stigma is not yet the case. For example, in the autumn of 2017 the Diversity Office of Leiden University organised a day in which different presentations and workshops were given about diversity, with the title "how inclusion makes diversity work" (Mare 2017). The Dutch Polyamory Foundation, where I have been helping out as the board's secretary since the summer, was invited to have a table at the information market with amongst others the local student LGBTQ+[1] association, LU Pride. Unfortunately, the foundation was asked via e-mail in the middle of the night preceding the event, not to come due to a 'misunderstanding'. Although the Diversity Office stated that the foundation's invitation was solely an organizational mistake, one cannot beg to wonder if the stigma surrounding polyamory had anything to do with it. Additionally, this goes directly against the idea of 'inclusion,' which anthropologist Ruben Reus astutely mentions in a blog post of the Anthropological Professional

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[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and diverse other identities (+)

Association (Reus 2017). What if the national association for refugees was invited and the organizers noticed they did not have enough tables and that 'refugees' were not part of their official diversity policy, as the Diversity Office told the poly foundation, would they be cancelled on so last minute or would one simply have gotten an extra table and noted that the communication should be better for next year's event? This is only one example that shows that there is still a lot of work to be done to normalize polyamory. This thesis can help in understanding polyamorists' experiences better and legitimizing different kinds of intimacies, not just monogamous, romantic partnerships.

This thesis is divided into a number of sections to show how I researched intimacy amongst polyamorists and how my respondents experienced and perceived intimacy. First, I will discuss the relevant literature that my research builds upon and relates to. Then I will cover the field and the people I researched with my fieldwork. After that methodological and ethical considerations will be taken into consideration. Then three empirical chapters will follow: the first will be about mono-normativity, the second about how respondents re-imagine intimacy, and the last about polyamorous experiences of intimacy and openness. I hope to add to discussions on polyamory, intimacy and alterity in methodology and subject matter. This last endeavour will be intriguing with my position as an anthropologist and polyamorist in the Netherlands.

2. Theoretical foundation

In this chapter I will develop a theoretical framework that can help make sense of the empirical data on intimacy amongst polyamorists. It is important that the reader keeps the following research question in mind: *How do polyamorists in the Netherlands perceive and experience intimacy in their personal relationships?* I will discuss the core concepts that have proven necessary as a foundation for this anthropological exploration of intimacy amongst polyamorists: mono-normativity, imagination, intimacy and personal relationships. I will start with mono-normativity, as it is the structural force that affects polyamorists' experiences of intimacy.

Mono-normativity

Mono-normativity is short for monogamous normativity. This construct operates similarly to hetero-normativity, where heterosexuality is seen as the most common and ideal sexual orientation, and other sexual desires were and/or are seen as inferior or deviant. Feminists, gay rights activists and many other people have criticized hetero-normativity, which has made homosexuality a more accepted sexual orientation and identity in countries such as the Netherlands, although this is not the case everywhere. Like heterosexuality, monogamy can be seen as the default, ideal and at times compulsory relationship style in certain locations and amongst certain groups of people. This is a complicated concept that holds its dominance through its naturalness and language. Furthermore, you will see that it is connected to monogamous conceptions of romantic love and sexual exclusivity, which influence polyamorists' experiences in everyday life.

In literature, mono-normativity is described as the "dominant assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy" (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 750). Monogamy is the default relationship style that polyamorists deal with in 'western' settings (Barker and Ritchie 2006: 586), which entails "life-long or serial monogamy with 'the one' perfect partner" (2006: 587). Media, law and behaviour are aligned to facilitate monogamy. Some academics talk about "compulsory monogamy" (e.g. Klesse 2011) and others talk about mono-normativity to show monogamy's "position of hegemonic dominance" (Barker & Langdridge 2010: 587). In The Netherlands monogamy is also the main and ideal relationship style, as polygamy or officially marrying multiple partners is illegal, having multiple partners is seen as analogous to cheating, which is 'unethical', and the ideal and 'normal' way of conducting romantic and sexual

relationships is with one partner exclusively. Even though Barker and Langdridge have a psychological and Ritchie a media culture background their discussions of mono-normativity are sociological in approach and closely related to queer theories, which is why their research and articles are of great importance to my thesis.

Not only is mono-normativity an abstract and ideal structure that holds power over people's personal lives, it is also routed in the language people use to describe identities, relationships and emotions (Barker and Ritchie 2006). An example would be how people in monogamous contexts deal with 'jealousy,' which is "constructed as the 'natural' response to any threat to this relationship, and relationships outside this partnership are categorized as 'infidelities', leading inevitably to break-up" (Ibid.: 587). 'Cheating' and 'infidelities' have negative and hurtful connotations especially when honesty and exclusivity are seen as important pillars of monogamy, although cheating is often seen as more acceptable than polyamory (Ibid.). Words like 'jealousy' and 'cheating' constrain polyamorists' behaviours as they devalue or cannot contain their experiences. This is why diverse poly communities develop new words like 'compersion' the opposite of jealousy, meaning a feeling of happiness about your partner's joy with their other partner(s). Another example is the British 'wibble' (Ibid.: 594), which is when one partner feels uncomfortable or insecure with another partner's relationship. According to Barker and Ritchie, their informants in the United Kingdom were "actively rewriting the language of love, relationships and emotion in a way that enables them to experience a better fit between spoken/written language and lived experiences" because mono-normativity in language constrains those possibilities (Ibid.: 598). The example of jealousy shows how polyamorists are influenced in their behaviour by mono-normative language[2].

Anthropological and sociological literature that focuses on the concept of 'romantic love' has been mono-normative. According to the anthropologists that focus on this concept, aspects of romantic love can be the idealization of the other (Lindholm 2006: 15) and the potential merging with the beloved (Lipset 2004: 209). Wherein it is never discussed that people can experience these feelings for multiple people at the same time, which could have consequences for how people 'merge with' and 'idealize' the other partner(s). Romantic love, also called passionate love, is also seen as a preceding step to 'the companionate phase' of love (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992: 150). First people date or court, then they get married and live together, in which they feel attached in a way that is less like the intense attraction during the romantic phase (Ibid.). This conception of universal developmental stages in relationships is something polyamorists critique when talking about 'relationship escalators' or ladders (Poly.Land 2017). Even though,

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[2] For a more qualitative research on poly experiences of compersion and jealousy see Jillian Deri (2015).

anthropologist Charles Lindholm critiques universalising understandings of romantic love and says as it "varies according to cultural constraints" (2006: 15), he does not acknowledge how multiple romantic relationships complicate these understandings of romantic love in and outside of "our Western culture" (Ibid.). These are only a few examples of literature on romantic love in which one can observe how understandings of romance are mono-normative (more: Illouz 1998, Lipset 2004). Additionally, in Koktevedgaard Zeitzen's cross-cultural analysis of polygamy, there are only seven references to love, none to romance, and when love is discussed it is part of how polygamy is "arranged" (2008: 72), "polygamous sex life" (Ibid.: 78, Ibid.: 101-105), or "jealousy" (Ibid.: 120). Weren't there any polygamists that felt some kind of love for their partners, even though they could be jealous or unhappy with the unequal power relations? This begs me to wonder again, might anthropologists have missed out on these feelings because they were unfathomable for them or was it solely a difference in themes of study in the previous century? On the other hand, there are a number of contemporary ethnographies on love, sex and relationships that are not mono-normative, but situated in diverse places with varying cultural styles surrounding these practices and experiences (e.g. Stout 2014, Hoefinger 2013, Padilla et al. 2007). Unfortunately, these monographs and an edited volume were not useful for this thesis on polyamory and intimacy, as the subject matter strays too far from these concepts. What these findings show is that *romantic* love as a concept is difficult to disconnect from mono-normative understandings even for anthropologists. It should be interesting to observe how polyamorists experience romantic relationships and how they deal with the abovementioned mono-normativity.

Sexual exclusivity in monogamous romantic and sexual relationships is a must. Having multiple sexual partners openly is unacceptable in a monogamous ideology and the only ways to do so are by "cheating" or by being "promiscuous" (Wolkomir 2015: 419), which are both seen as unethical and not as good as being in a completely monogamous relationship. In these relationships sex is seen as something special you share with one person at a time (Wolkomir 2015: 418). Polyamorous relationships challenge these ideals by the sheer fact that people are open about their multiple sexual partners. According to Christian Klesse, there is space in polyamory for multiple "erotic and sexual involvements", but according to many of his informants those "should be of a loving kind" (2011: 13). This sociologist states that 'love' is at the centre of polyamory discourses as it is seen as "more than just sex" (2011: 10), which simultaneously enables non-sexual "loving friendships" and "intimate partnerships", but marginalizes sex or pleasure centred activities or relationships (2011: 13). Furthermore, Klesse, in a different article, shows the tension between polyamory and "swinging, casual sex and

promiscuity," which are still stigmatized, even though some respondents supported a more sex-radical or sex-positive approach, appreciating the diversity of queer relationships (2006: 575-578). Barker and Ritchie add that non-sexual and sexual relationships can be valued equally amongst polyamorists, although this is not always the case even when respondents explicitly try to think differently. Thus, sex can 'still' be a touchy subject for polyamorists even though they are able to conduct multiple sexual relationships ethically at the same time.

In conclusion, even though polyamorists can have multiple romantic and/or sexual relationships, this does not mean that they completely let go of mono-normative ideals and assumptions surrounding romantic and/or sexual relationships. Furthermore, some polyamorists can be quite negative about people who seem more focused on sexual pleasure in their relationships, which they judge as less good as focusing on love in polyamory, as Christian Klesse discussed (2006, 2011). Barker and Ritchie show that it is difficult for polyamorists to deal with dominant cultural views on romance, sex and relationships, even though polyamorous words and ideology give space for new thoughts, feelings and behaviour (2006: 593). Thus these academics show that the relationship between polyamory and mono-normativity remains complex, not solely one part of a counterculture rejecting the dominant structure, but a complicated combination of yes, no's and maybes.

Imagination

'Imagination' has become a popular, but complex concept amongst anthropologists. One of the most well known uses of imagination is Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities,' which refers to the social imagination an individual holds of the nation or other social group (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 10, Yack 2005: 632, Stankiewicz 2016: 798). Yet, not everyone embraces this concept. Damien Stankiewicz writes in an article against the use of 'imagination' "that the concept no longer holds together in any meaningful way and that its semantic excess and ambiguity tend to thwart, or stand in for, more careful ethnographic attention to the processes and practices by which people come to know and think about themselves and others" (Ibid.: 797). This anthropologist's argument is against using 'imagination' as a concept as it can mean so many things that it can gloss over intricate social and cultural processes, but I believe that it is useful for this thesis on intimacy amongst polyamorists.

First, imagination can help anthropologists understand how constructs and structures are not only contextual but also vary depending on individuals. Yack, an author reviewing Turner's

work on social imaginaries, states that the concepts such as 'imagination' and 'imaginaries' "poin[t] us to diverse, contingent, and often unexpected images of ourselves upon which our everyday lives rest." (2005: 632). One aspect that imagination thus highlights in its relationship to social belonging is how contradictory and diverse experiences of belonging and the nation can be. This means that imagined ideas can vary, whilst they are partially shared.

Another useful aspect of the concept of imagination is its acknowledgement of creativity. Stankiewicz[3] calls this "imagination as horizon of possibility" (2016: 800). Here it is often not clear if imaginary/imagination is the source or product of the creative process, which Stankiewicz posits as a critique of the concept's merit (Ibid.). But why can it not be both? Imagined futures, for instance, are outcomes of certain contexts, but also influenced by the ability of different people to imagine futures (Ibid.). Focusing on this creative process of imagination can help anthropologists understand what constrains certain imagined possibilities and structures other processes marked by less imagination. For polyamorists, the question remains how do they re-imagine intimacy and what possibilities do these imaginaries create?

In the English language imagination tends to refer to this same creativity (Oxford Dictionaries 2018). But it also holds a connection to that which is unreal or fanciful like myths and legends (Merriam-Webster 2018). Imagination can also imply an "image or thought of something not present to the senses" (Ibid.) which can be something 'real' or something solely imagined. Acknowledging the creative and potential implications of intimacy in everyday speech can help understand its applicability to the social reality of polyamorists. Additionally it could add to academic discussions of the topic.

In this thesis I focus on imagination, not referring to imagined communities and social belonging per se but to a combination of colloquial and academic understandings of the concept:. Here I will be zooming in on how respondents re-imagined intimacy through a creative process to form an image of something not present to the senses that shows the realm of possibility for diverse 'cultural styles' (Ferguson 1999) like polyamory. Potentially, by approaching intimacy from a perspective of imagination, one can become aware of the factors at play in the perception and experience of intimacy amongst polyamorists.

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[3] When delving into anthropological work on imagination myself, I found ethnographies and articles ranging in topics such as folklore (Chatterji 2016), migration (Salazar 2012), the ethnographic imagination (Willis 2000), feminist research (Wheatley 1999), queer imagination (Valentine 2007), visual anthropology (Pink 2014), cities and planning (Abram & Weszkalnys 2011), and futures in general (Appadurai and Gupta in Stankiewicz 2016: 799). Here none of these ethnographies have been useful, as for instance queer imagination does not discuss the relationship between possibility or agency and structural limitations to what one can imagine to be 'queer'. This is why I solely refer to Stankiewicz (2016) when discussing imagination.

Intimacy

One of the most well-known works on intimacy is Anthony Giddens's book 'the Transformation of Intimacy' (1992). Giddens analysed popular self-help literature to conclude that relationships have changed considerably in 'modern' times. Kaye explains that for Giddens intimate relationships "have to be created by mutual strangers, California-style, through 'a mutual process of self-disclosure' and sexual experimentation *(in Giddens' Consequences, p. 121-22)"* (Kaye 1994: 435). They do this to construct their identity and to seek pleasure. Once this has been done to satisfaction people end the relationship (Ibid.: 436).

There is much critique on Giddens's work on intimacy. Two points of critique I will discuss here. First, Howard L. Kaye argues that Giddens uses 'intimacy' to promote his own ideology (Ibid.: 437). Kaye says Giddens "celebrates" self-help literature as empirical data of relationship experiences, in which a reflexive self becomes autonomous through self-discovery and sexual experimentation in relationships. This idealization of agency often comes up in popular psychology (Ibid.: 435-436). This is exactly the same critique polyamorous self-help literature gets from sociologists: "[polyamorists] tend to endorse an abstract individualism at the expense of critiquing the structural power relations around race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class" (Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse 2006: 519). Giddens's positive evaluation of self-help literature's description of and effect on the experiences of individuals does not acknowledge how power, inequality and diversity feature in individuals' lives and their experiences of intimacy.

Another critique is Giddens's uncritical use of the concept 'intimacy'. Review author Kaye states that in this work Giddens takes concepts like intimacy "at face value with no attempt to analyse their often contradictory meanings" (Kaye 1994: 436). Furthermore, anthropologist Peter Geschiere argues that Giddens uses intimacy to create the image of "a safe haven of trust", without acknowledging the dangerous aspects of this notion (2013: 23). This anthropologist points out that academics often use the concept of intimacy with positive connotations, without acknowledging that it can be "a lethal source of threat and betrayal" (Ibid.: 24). Here you could think of domestic abuse or polyamorous people saying they deal with a lot of heartbreak, which contradicts with an idealized interpretation of intimacy. Now it becomes clear that although intimacy can be seen as a safe place where one can disclose parts of the self, it is also an area threatened by danger. These points show that Giddens's appraisal of intimacy is unaware of its contradictory and negative features.

Looking closer at what intimacy can mean, the concept's relation to sexuality becomes more complex. In sociology and psychology intimacy has mostly been connected to sexuality in

personal relationships (Blumstein & Kollock 1988: 469, Sehlikoglu & Zengin 2015: 20). According to anthropologists Sehlikoglu and Zengin (Ibid.: 22) "*any* form and instance of relatedness can be interpreted as intimate in its capacity to shape people's senses of selves, their feelings, their attachments and their identifications" (emphasis JM), not just sexuality in personal relationships. By focusing on sexuality we tend to forget how intimacy relates to how we deal with "emotions such as affection and/or violence" (Ibid.: 21). In anthropology intimacy can be seen as a complex and dynamic concept as it "creates *boundaries* as well as *flows* and transitions between bodies, selves and groups" (Ibid.: 20; emphasis JM). The anthropological perspective can thus cover all kinds of experiences and opens up the potential meanings and experiences of intimacy.

Intimacy's ambiguous character is also clear when you look at its dictionary definition in Dutch and English (Van Dale 2017, Oxford Dictionaries 2017, Marianne-Webster 2017). Both of these languages are useful in this field as most respondents speak Dutch, some are international and nearly all use English words related to polyamory. Intimacy can mean cosy (*gezellig*), confidential, private or close in both languages. It can also refer to sex, familiarity and even sexual harassment in Dutch (*ongewenste intimiteiten* (unwanted intimacies)). In English it can additionally refer to a close friend or it can be used as a verb (to intimate), which can then mean 'say indirectly' or 'announce publicly'. Intimacy is derived from the Latin 'intimus', meaning 'innermost' and coming from the verb 'intimare, which means 'to make known' (Etymology Online 2018). Taken together, intimacy becomes a complex word with diverse and even contradictory meanings.

Even though this is the case people use the term intimacy a lot. For example, Franklin Veaux uses it in his poly glossary (2017) when referring to emotional intimacy and physical intimacy in his discussions of closed marriages, platonic relationships and swinging. Here, the concepts of emotional and physical intimacy are not called into question, but taken at face value. Another example consists of the definitions sociologists give of polyamory. Sheff (2005: 252), Haritaworn et al. (2006: 515), and Klesse (2011: 4) all say polyamorous relationships are intimate and sexual multiple partner relationships, which is different from Veaux's use of romantic and/or sexual relationships (2017). Unfortunately these sociologists do not go into detail as to what they mean with intimacy or if and how their respondents used these terms. Elisabeth Sheff does go a little further by saying 'emotionally intimate', but what does that mean? When I see these usages of categories, I get the impression that they were made to define boundaries in monogamous relationships when discussing cheating. But taking the above-mentioned literature in account, are these categories of any use for polyamorous relationships?

To conclude, I have shown that intimacy is a complex concept that has its pitfalls and potentials for describing social experiences. Intimacy can be dangerous as well as an idealised safe haven of trust, but what else can it mean and how does this feature in the personal relationships of polyamorists in the Netherlands?

Conclusion

Taken together, the concepts mono-normativity, imagination, and intimacy form the ground from which this research has taken shape. It might be unusual that I have not used terms that seem important like love and romance as my core concepts, but these topics steer us away from polyamorists' experiences, as the anthropological and sociological literature is, as I said earlier, mono-normative without the academics realizing it. Not only academics but polyamorists too are influenced by mono-normativity, and a discussion of polyamorous intimacies can thus not be one without covering the ways in which informants dealt with mono-normativity. For my respondents, to re-imagine intimacy was to try to step away from mono-normative expectations and understandings of the concept, which is how these concepts are interrelated. Before discussing the methodological considerations for this research I will first introduce the people and field that I got to know in the spring and summer of 2017. This is necessary as not much is known generally about polyamorists in the Netherlands and I assume that this is a relatively new subject for anthropologists as well, somewhat at the fringes of our disciplinary, thematic and geographical boundaries at this anthropologist's home and close to my heart.

3. The field and the people

For this research I focused on polyamorists in the Netherlands in and around the Randstad, an area in the West of the Netherlands with the largest cities. I found these through discussion groups and my personal network. In this chapter I will discuss the history of polyamory in the Netherlands, how this field can be conceived and whom the people were that I talked to.

Historical context of polyamory in the Netherlands

According to a number of sociologists researching polyamory (Sheff 2012, Klesse 2011: 7, Haritaworn et al. 2006: 518), polyamory's United States and British histories are grounded in twentieth century counterculture movements. At the time, 'couple-based monogamy,' the nuclear family and private property were criticised by different people. Aspects of these movements are also free love, the emergence of communes and swinging in the 60's, and feminist movements in the 70's (Ibid.). The Dutch association for polyamory (*stichting polyamorie Nederland* (2018a)) and a number of respondents I talked to also start the history of polyamory in the 60's, be it also in The Netherlands. The Dutch polyamory association emphasizes the importance of equal rights for men and women as an integral part to polyamory (Ibid.). On their website the founders state that men have always had non-monogamous relationships outside of marriage, but now that contraceptives are more easily accessible and women have become more independent, they too can have non-monogamous relationships without suffering the previous negative consequences (Ibid.). Additionally a popular contemporary thought is that millennials, people born between 1981 and 1997, are more accepting of sexual diversity in orientation and relationship style (Van Linge 2017). These could all be factors at play in the current rise in attention to polyamory. But all in all, one can acknowledge movements for sexual freedom and gender equality in the Netherlands as related to polyamory's local history and its current interpretation.

Important to add to this, is the relatively short-term history of the term 'polyamory' in the Netherlands. As the word was probably coined in the United States in the 90's and spread more internationally in the previous two decades, Dutch poly history often starts around 2007 with Ageeth Venemans's book '*Ik houd van twee mannen*' (I love two men) and her community building efforts. From different organizers of poly events and people connected to the Dutch polyamory foundation, I heard that much has changed in the past years: first people had to find and build a community whilst there was not a lot of general information about polyamory. Many respondents

say that the Internet has helped their search for information and community over the years. Now, there is much more understanding and acceptance for polyamory than a decade ago. There is more media attention, more events are organized and social media groups are growing with new members each week. Not to forget that many people were and are practicing polyamory outside of these networks or without calling their relationship practices by this name as I found out during fieldwork, which adds to the understanding that my respondents experienced polyamory as part of their identity. According to the Dutch foundation for polyamory there is still much to be done for polyamorists, their different polycules[4] and families when it comes to rights, representation, discrimination and legal protection even though individuals have relative freedom to pursue the relationships they want in the Netherlands. Different respondents discussed these during my fieldwork period.

The field as a fluid place

The field I was in for in the spring and summer of 2017 and have stayed in whilst writing, was not a single place identified as a polyamorous space, it was multisited (Hannerz 2012), spread across and beyond the Randstad in the Netherlands. I started my research with two discussion groups in Leiden & Utrecht and from there the field grew and respondents snowballed (Russell Bernard 2011: 147-148). The people that went to these get-togethers lived in many different cities, towns and villages in the Netherlands, from Groningen to Nijmegen and The Hague. I went to a poly dinner event at a polyamorist's home, to people's houses or nearby cafés for interviews and I had one Skype interview with someone who was living in Denmark and is at the time of printing back in the Netherlands. I found these people through the discussion groups they had gone to, but their lives and relationships were diverse. There were people with varying ages, genders, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, jobs, sexual orientations and polycules (more on diversity in the next subchapter). Furthermore, there were a number of people who were having or had had long distance relationships that stretched the globe.

The concept of "*the* poly community" was widely used amongst respondents. I heard it regularly in everyday speech in English as people did not say '*de poly gemeenschap*', but '*de poly community*' in Dutch. Nevertheless, the use of this term comes with a number of assumptions. First, the reader might have imagined these people to share communal spaces in the Randstad or that they all have similar everyday lives, which are both not the case. Furthermore, one might

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[4] A polyamorous network of relationships, related through partners and partners of partners, 'metamours'.

think that the poly community sits neatly in a specific locality, the Randstad, the Netherlands, the 'West'. This is neither the case. As a concept, 'community' can give the impression of homogeneity, isolation, and small-scale social relations (Rapport 2010: 142), but this is far from reality in a globally, interconnected world full of diversity and hybridity (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 7). These assumptions are grounded in the isomorphism of 'culture' and 'place', where one wants to have 'a culture' fit neatly into a specific 'place' (Ibid., see also Rapport 2010: 145), although cultures and communities are unbounded, heterogeneous, and emergent. One could see the poly community as a global phenomenon where people meet others and share stories and lessons learnt on- and offline. Taken together it is important to connect the variety of respondents in the Netherlands to a wider web of networks that can stretch the globe, whilst acknowledging that my informants nor I will be able to view any 'community' in its entirety.

One aspect Gupta and Ferguson's discussion also points us to is the phenomenon of 'cultural change,' which is what many respondents experienced: a change from the default relationship style of monogamy to polyamory. Gupta and Ferguson write that "cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference through connection" (1992: 8). By looking at "difference through connection" one has to see how polyamory and monogamy are related in the everyday lives of polyamorists. Some respondents said that "mono-normativity" and "cultural frames of reference" are hard to shake or creep up on you, even after years of living in a polyamorous way. Others mentioned that their friends, family or co-workers were monogamous, but accepted their way of having relationships, even though they also found it nice to talk to people who engaged in polyamorous relationships. Polyamoirists also interacted with monogamists, they could have romantic or sexual relationships with them, "mono-poly relationships," and some respondents saw themselves having both monogamous and polyamorous relationships in the future. This makes their lives, identities and the field itself somewhat fluid.

To conclude, my respondents were not isolated and bound to specific places, as the assumptions of the isomorphism of place, space and cultures lead us to think (Ibid.: 7). They were connected through different places and spaces. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that my specific position as a polyamorist and anthropologist added to this conception of the field as a fluid, multi-sited and unbounded place, which clearly changes over time. Even though this is the case, due to practical reasons and the fieldwork period most respondents lived in a 2-hour radius from my home in The Hague or were found at events in that area. To understand what was going on in this lively field, one needs to acknowledge the diverse and interconnected relationships that were part of these people's lives at the time of my fieldwork and how these

people constructed social differences. This leads us to the next section on diversity.

Diversity in the lives of respondents

"As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self." Audre Lorde (1984: 5)

Audre Lorde pushes readers to acknowledge the on-going pressure for the complexity of an individual to be encapsulated by stiff categories of identity that essentialize that reality. For anthropologists this too is difficult when dealing with the complexities of respondents' everyday lives in a thesis. As you might already have noticed I talk of polyamorists in this thesis, because I focused on people who identified as polyamorous, called their relationship style polyamorous or were in relationships they called polyamorous. Even though some respondents talked of 'polyamorists,' most informants referred to other polyamorists as 'poly people' or with 'that person is poly/polyamorous.' All of these designations give the impression that these people belonged to one homogenous group that solely identified as polyamorous, when in fact their polyamory was part of a complex array of identities and practices which were never completely shared by a single other individual. Although this is the case, one can relate these diverse practices and styles to polyamory as respondents used the term, saw their relationships as such, went to discussion groups on the topic or looked for other polyamorists online through Facebook groups or websites about polyamory and events for polyamorists. A constant reminder for this thesis would be to acknowledge that I can never fully grasp the entire complexity of an individual's experiences and that the discussed experiences have been somewhat cut out of their everyday context for the purpose of gaining anthropological insight into the social reality of intimacy amongst polyamorists. In this subchapter, I will discuss polyamorous identity, diversity amongst respondents and how this was related instersectionally (Haritaworn et al. 2006: 516-517) to give an impression of who my informants were.

First, what connects the people I talked to and how does 'polyamory' as an identity cover their experiences? The answer is complex. To begin, I should explain how polyamory was related

to other concepts like open relationships or non-monogamy by my respondents. 'Open relationships' were often understood as relationships in which one can also have sexual relationships with other people, without these becoming romantic, committed or emotionally invested, even though some informants critiqued this idealized view which did not account for changing feelings and desires. 'Non-monogamy' can be seen as everything that is different from having monogamous relationships that are sexually and romantically exclusive: think of cheating, open relationships and polygamy, but also polyamory. It is an umbrella term as the host of a discussion group explained to me. 'Consensual non-monogamy' takes out cheating and other forms that do not base activities on consent, which emphasizes the ethical aspects of these relationship styles. 'Polyamory' is one of the ways to have multiple romantic and/or sexual relationships in a consensually non-monogamous way (Barker & Langdride 2010). For my respondents polyamory meant having multiple, consensual relationships or partnerships, which could be romantic or sexual, but did not need to be. This can be seen as the basic definition. Although this was the case, respondents talked about their open, 'non-mono' (non-monogamous) or poly relationships using these different terms depending on the relationships and experiences, but also on whom they were talking to and how familiar these persons were with the terms. The people I talked to changed it to fit their experiences and desires in which ethics, honesty and openness were important aspects. For example, a number of respondents also used 'open relationship(s)' as a synonym for consensual non-monogamous relationship(s): being open was interpreted as having multiple partners and being honest about it. Thus making it also closely related to their understanding of polyamory.

Furthermore, important for understanding polyamory as an identity and relationship style, are a number of points of tension that came up in diverse settings during and after fieldwork. These were the definition of polyamory, if polyamory was something natural or chosen and how polyamory was related to consensual non-monogamy and open relationships. At discussion groups attendants were regularly reminded not to go too deep into definitions of polyamory as participants often disagreed and acknowledged that polyamory could mean many things to different people. To explain, differences could be seen in, for example, the types of closed or open polyamorous networks, behaviour that is part of a 'relationship', and living arrangements. Another point is an on-going academic and popular discussion whether polyamory is something 'natural' like sexual orientations are often considered or more of a chosen identity (Klesse 2014). Respondents from my field did not agree either way, for some this was how they were born, for others polyamory was something they learnt later on in life and yet others told me they were still figuring out what relationship style fit them best. Heated discussions on this topic came back

regularly in different settings, and were never resolved. Lastly, respondents mixed open relationships, polyamory and (consensual) non-monogamy in everyday speech, even though when formally asked they would see these terms as explaining different things. Why was that? I have not yet found a sufficient answer to this question, but this observation does show that the terms share similar meanings. All of these points of tension revolve around polyamory and show that this concept is alive, its meaning changes and that which it describes cannot be completely contained by the term poly.

On another note, polyamorists I spoke to varied along many other axes of identification and personal contexts. Among interviewees there were 9 who identified as male and 9 who identified as female, all men and 4 women were heterosexual, with two men saying they were "bi-curious" (*bi-schierig*),[5] 4 women were bi- or pan-sexual[5] and one woman was lesbian. In the focus groups this was different with one group having half of the participants state their sexual orientation as bi- or pan-sexual with a mix of men and women. With this I do not wish to imply that there are more bi- or pan-sexual people in polyamorous relationships as some academics have found (Barker & Langdridge 2010: 757), I solely wish to show the diversity and remind the reader to refrain from making conclusions about the entire polyamorous populous in the Netherlands on these few data. People ranged in their different relationship constellations[6] and types of polyamory from triads to single poly[7], in age from 23-68 years, nationality and ethnicity. For instance I interviewed a number of American polyamorists, a Canadian polyamorist and many Dutch polyamorists, two of which talked about their Surinamese identity and background. A few examples of professions were: student, translator, secondary school teacher, IT worker, coach, graphic designer, care worker, post-doc, entrepreneur and pensioner. Additionally there was someone who was muslim, someone who organized spiritual workshops, a few people who had gone to tantra seminars[8] and a number of people who did not see themselves as spiritual in

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[5] Bisexuality implies being sexually attracted to both people with male and female gender identities, pansexuality does not consider this binary distinction. For my respondents this meant feeling attracted to people in general without taking gender into account. One respondent, Mae (31), also mentioned being panromantic, which meant that she could fall in love with diverse people. She made this distinction to be considerate of people who are a-sexual or a-romantic, similar to how Cora (26) identified as a/grey-sexual and a/grey-romantic. I mention Cora in relation to intimacy's conflation with sex for instance (p. 50).

[6] Relationship constellations is another word for polycules or polyamorous networks, as a graphic visualisation can remind one of constellations in space.

[7] A triad is a relationship in which three people have a relationship together, this can be defined differently implying shared homes, seperate living spaces, occasional or regular sexual encounters with all members and probably much more. Single poly is a term which someone who is autonomous and perceives their relationship style as single and dating for instance, like Glen (30) or Yara (24), but again informants interpreted these labels differently and these descriptions are mostly meant to broaden your perspective on the kinds of relationships informants could have.

[8] Tantra seminars are events in which people spend a number of days together to practice tantra. Tantra can be understood as a combination of sensual massages, tantra excercises and meditation. It is in this sense somewhat spiritual, sensual and at times erotic, even though the boundaries and activities were not always clear to me when

any way and preferred to view the world from a more "scientific" viewpoint. Outside of the interviewees I met around 90 other polyamorists some of which were for example gay men, transgender men and women, non-binary persons, Chinese, Indian, French, Swedish and Peruvian nationals, vegans, people who were interested in BDSM, had not studied after secondary school or had longer careers in academia. Some people had small incomes whilst one couple lived in a very expensive area in Amsterdam. During participant observation at discussion groups, poly events or informal gatherings there were people who had polyamorous relationships for years and people who have been since a few months, some practiced it straight away, others explored before practicing, and for some things changed during their lives and with the people they met. Thus there was a vast range of people I talked to and met, yet one cannot generalize about demographic patterns in the larger polyamorous public in the Netherlands as this is not a representative sample, due to my selection method of using myself as a key informant, snowball sampling and having a number of respondents become key informants during fieldwork.

Now, it should be clear that I met a variety of polyamorists during fieldwork, a critical point would be to engage with the literature on polyamory stating mostly white middle or upper middle class people are polyamorists (Sheff & Hammers 2011: 205). I found that depending on the discussion group or meeting, event or polyamorous network I came into contact with I could find mostly queer-identifying feminists, less internationals, only people older than 45, the exact opposite or a mix. Thus, depending on where I looked, respondents varied. During observations in discussion groups people *passed* predominantly as white or middle and upper middle class. I deliberately say 'passed' because I did not methodically ask people about these aspects at discussion groups, as this was not agreed upon by organizers as they felt it would inhibit the conversations of the group. I solely observed and listened to their stories, which gave me some sense of this observation, however flawed it remains. Yet, in work from other academics the issues of race and class are strongly related to polyamory. According to Sheff and Hammers, amongst kinksters[9] and polyamorists in the United States this is mostly related to the privileged nature of engaging in 'perversities,' think of the expenses, the additional discrimination or being a numerical minority in the group, but these sociologists also acknowledged that privileges can have different outcomes globally (Ibid.: 211). It should be fruitful to research how race, ethnicity and class influence Dutch respondents' experiences of polyamory. One of my respondents explained that he had to be especially careful about being open due to the ethnic community he

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respondents explained what tantra was, which might be the mysterious part of what tantra is and the fact that it is often related to sex and thus stigmatized, as respondents mentioned.
[9] Kinksters are "people involved in 'kinky' or 'perverted' sexual acts and relationships frequently involving bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and/or sadism/masochism (BDSM, also referred to as sadomasochism)" (Sheff & Hammers 2011:199).

was part of, but he did not feel tokenised or discriminated against in poly groups which Sheff and Hammers point out often happened for their 'respondents of colour' (Ibid.: 211-212). I believe it should be interesting to research the topics of privilege and discrimination in the Dutch context, as there was a diverse range of respondents that could shed another light on how these issues are interrelated. Important would be to select respondents through different avenues and try to oversample people with experience of discrimination and racism, as Sheff and Hammers also state (Ibid.: 217). Even though I could obviously not talk to everyone or uncover the answers to all of the questions raised in this subchapter, diversity is important to acknowledge when reading this thesis.

4. Methodology

During fieldwork I wanted to uncover what intimacy meant to polyamorists in the Netherlands. I, myself, am also one of these polyamorists, having made use of my network and those of others in the poly community in the Netherlands. In this chapter I will explain how I researched 'intimacy' amongst polyamorists, why I made the choices I did and how that affected my data and analyses.

First, I approached the field as somewhat of an insider, knowing part of the field through my personal experience with polyamory in the Netherlands. Three years ago, my partner Hector started the discussion about polyamory, which at first seemed scary and hard to understand coming from a monogamous mind-set. After a few years of talking, listening, crying, laughing and meeting experienced polyamorists at a discussion group, we made space for polyamory in our relationship so that Hector could explore his feelings for other women. During this process, I also recognized a lot of myself in poly, so much so that I also became open to multiple romantic and/or sexual relationships. During fieldwork I became more active in the community by getting to know more polyamorists, going to other poly events and helping out in the Dutch foundation for polyamory (*stichting polyamorie Nederland*) as the secretary.

When entering the field, I had already made appointments for a number of interviews and discussion groups, using my position as somewhat of a key informant (Russell Bernard 2011: 150-152). Some were with people I had seen once or twice in the past three years, like Geoffrey (68), Zoe (63) and Peet (55). Others were with new people that went to discussion groups regularly or people that I knew on a personal level like my friend Sara (24) or my partner Hector (25). As fieldwork came along, respondents snowballed (Ibid.: 147-148) through other respondents or new meetings, which was how I came into contact with for instance Louise (28), a geologist, and Benjamin (45), who organised a monthly poly dinner. Some of these respondents became key informants like Sara and Louise, with whom I could reflect on polyamorous cultural styles, mono-normativity, research questions and analyses in informal conversations or focus groups. During this process I tried to find many different people, ranging in gender identities, sexual orientations, nationalities, ethnic background, experiences with polyamory, approaches to poly and age. Two examples would be Glen (30) who was poly and approached poly from a single perspective dating different women, and Sascha (31) a pansexual cis-woman[10] who passes

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[10] Sascha stated that she was a 'cis-woman' by which she meant that her gender identity at birth was in line with her current gender identity. Intersex people's experiences of the body and gender complicate this understanding, as they can be born with ambiguous genitalia, complex sex chromosomes or other factors that might not comply with strict

as white but is half Surinamese. Unfortunately, not everyone who I came into contact with or that I approached could meet up with me, as people had work, family, friends, partners and personal schedules to align with mine such as a transgender man who Sascha knew, a Chinese woman working in academia or a gay couple my partner Hector is friends with.

Second, this research was explorative and qualitative in its methodology. As there is not a lot of anthropological literature neither on intimacy nor on polyamory explicitly, I had to rely on sociological and psychological literature to guide my efforts, which made this research explorative. This is also why I wanted to find many different polyamorists to get a general impression of what intimacy meant to these people. To understand this I used qualitative research techniques, as they are more attuned to this kind of question (Ibid.: 338). I used a combination of methods: observations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation and informal conversations. These different practices helped uncover what intimacy means in different settings, from a more formal research setting to an informal one like the discussion groups or dinners with informants. I did this to get 'backstage' (Berreman 2012: 162-163, Goffman 1990 [1959]), get to know respondents better and compare how people talked about intimacy in those different settings.

I would like to give a more in-depth overview of the methods used to help the reader understand how I gathered my data. But first, depending on the persons present in the field settings we spoke English or Dutch. This fit the everyday context of for instance the discussion group in Leiden and shows that a number of Dutch respondents felt comfortable to speak about polyamorous relationships and experiences in English. For me, being raised bilingual I could switch easily between the languages and notice nuances in meaning. I held 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews at cafés, restaurants and respondents' homes in villages, towns and cities in the Netherlands. At four interviews we also had lunch or dinner and all in all respondents were very hospitable and generous with their time. Interviews ranged from an hour to two and a half hours, with an average duration of one and a half hours. All of these were recorded with permission of each respondent. During the appointments I took notes, which I later typed up and elaborated with parts of the recordings I found important for the specific interview or the research questions. Additionally, 10 people reacted to a Facebook group post for interviews, showing how helpful informants were. Unfortunately, I could not meet with them due to time constraints.

Not only did I interview people, I also participated in poly discussion groups. I went to four discussion group meetings in Leiden and Utrecht, with 12 to 30 people ranging in perceived

ideas of a gender binary (Van Heesch 2010). Unfortunately I am not aware of any intersex persons taking part in this research, although only a few individuals have come out as intersex in the Netherlands (Ibid.).

age, gender, personal experiences with polyamory, and personal and working lives. During these meetings I participated less than in my personal life to be able to observe the space, respondents and their interactions. The meetings in Utrecht were at the host Isa's home and in Leiden at a local pub in a private room separate from the bar area. After the meetings I would record myself, sometimes with my partner Hector who went to the Leiden discussion group regularly, to take note of the different people, topics, atmosphere and proceedings. The data from these post-meeting recordings were heavily anonymized to meet respondents' requests for privacy.

I also organised two focus groups: one in Leiden and one in Nijmegen, because I met a group of polyamorists from Nijmegen at a meeting in Utrecht who were very enthusiastic about the research. In both focus groups the topics were 'intimacy' in the first half and 'polyamory' in the second. I did this to compare the answers of the different groups. Participants were again diverse in many ways. They were happy to talk about polyamory on an abstract level, but would also connect it to their personal experiences. Some respondents in the focus groups new each other, were partners or metamours[11] and others were completely new to the group. In Leiden I invited a number of people I had interviewed or had got to know in discussion groups during fieldwork. In Nijmegen a key informant sent a message in the Nijmegen poly Facebook group and people signed up. In total twenty people came to these focus groups.

In between all these activities I had many informal conversations with respondents at dinners, poly events or walking home from a meeting for example. All in all I observed and spoke with around 90 people, not including the different stories I saw every few days in secret poly Facebook groups, which I will not share here due to privacy agreements in those groups. All of this information has influenced my general impressions and understandings of polyamorists in the Netherlands

An important point to make is that my informants were the focus in all research settings, not just the interviews (Hiller & DiLuzio 2003: 5). Their experiences were what we talked about in interviews, focus groups and discussion group meetings. I wanted to know how they started with polyamory, how they described their relationship style, what the situation was at the time of the interview, who knew this about them and why, what cheating meant to them and how they perceived intimacy. Respondents talked and talked about past relationships, feelings, polyamory, monogamy and other topics related to relationships and sexuality. Many were interested in these themes outside of their personal relationships, and discussing these societal issues intrigued them. At discussion groups I would let respondents lead, and share my experience from time to time. In all of these settings respondents were triggered by 'intimacy' as a concept from my

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[11] The partner(s) of one's partner(s).

introduction, without me guiding the subsequent conversation. At one discussion group I only introduced myself and then the group started talking about what intimacy meant to them, even though I said "just do what you usually do." This shows how interested the respondents were and how much the topic of intimacy resonated with their personal lives.

On the other hand, informants were also intrigued by my personal experiences with polyamory and research. I told respondents about my past experiences when they asked about me or shared a relatable story. In these polyamorous settings sharing personal stories about romantic and/or sexual experiences was what people did comfortably and regularly. People were there to learn from one another's experiences, which is why I would give my take on relationships or share one of my stories to help give a more diverse image of polyamory. During fieldwork I noticed this enabled me to gain other data than my interview questions did, because people did not think of everything when they answered a question and informants were used to share an experience that was related to someone else's experience as in the discussion groups. This has influenced the data I uncovered, which thus became somewhat different than a novice to polyamory or another polyamorist/anthropologist would find, but it has proven fruitful, as you will see in this thesis. Furthermore being open and honest about my personal experiences and my research helped me gain rapport in this context, because it fit in the polyamorous discourse of being open and honest (see the subchapter on polyamorous openness and honesty in chapter 7 on poly practices p. 57-59).

The inside-out-sider

As I said earlier, my position was that of an insider and an anthropologist, which I will call an 'inside-out-sider', because this identity is not only a dual position, but also a dynamic and unusual one. Being an inside-out-sider kept me on my toes, reflecting on my position, ideas, and analyses. For anthropologists this position is expected to come with biases that will affect the data, but novices also take their biases to the field albeit different ones (Russell Bernard 2011: 278-280). To understand my biases I reflected a lot during fieldwork, talked with fellow anthropologists and friends who were not part of the research, and discussed these issues with respondents as well. One of which was Sara (24) my anthropology friend and fellow polyamorist. She interviewed me (23) to see how I experienced polyamory and intimacy. An important finding of this interview was that I see sexual activities as very intimate, which respondents did not all agree with or complicated. Another point was that I experience intimacy as a way of bonding with other

people, which as you will read later was something that respondents also mentioned. Lastly, important to note is that I do not see polyamory as something that is better than monogamy or more 'enlightened', it is something different that fits for some people in some parts of their lives. Maybe in 5 years I will have a monogamous relationship and feel no need or desire for multiple relationships. Who knows?

There were a number of consequences of being an inside-out-sider. First, I was already acquainted with polyamorous discourse, practice and some respondents beforehand, which gave me a head start during fieldwork as Zaman (2008: 146) also mentions, and helped me think of useful questions that fit their everyday lives. Informants told me that I followed-up on their answers well and some said it was easy to talk to me because I did not need to ask about basic things which meant we could go deeper than novices tended to go. Furthermore, I was not judgmental about their behaviour, as different informants experienced in their everyday life. Being a trained anthropologist and polyamorist with some experience helped me to take the analytical distance needed (Russell Bernard 2011: 258), but also talk comfortably with respondents. What I also did was ask questions about bad experiences or breakups that people did not immediately delve into. On the other hand, I did show respondents that I did not know things at times like when one respondent said she was pansexual or another talked about tantra seminars. Respondents did not mind when I did not know everything and being open and honest about that made them comfortable to help me out with tips or answers to tough questions. Additionally, after the first two interviews I noticed it was important to discuss what polyamory meant to each respondent, as meanings varied, although I at first assumed to understand what they meant, which was influenced by my own experience of polyamory. All in all, by being empathetic, respectful and open I gained 'rapport' with respondents (Russell Bernard 2011: 277-278). Being an inside-out-sider helped me do that smoothly, systematically and critically.

Something that I believe was special to being an inside-out-sider was using emotions as a research tool. Like this it might sound manipulative, but this was not the case. What I noticed was that people were very enthusiastic to talk about past experiences with polyamory and they showed their happy, sad and confused emotions openly. By mirroring those emotions an interview partner would go on with their story. I did feel joy when another person was happy, and I felt sadness when someone else talked about heartbreak. Showing these emotions, shows you understand what this person went through. By showing empathy an interview partner feels comfortable to share more, at least in the situations I came across with polyamorists. It was not seen as a sin to show emotions and they did not think less of me as a researcher. Because I was well acquainted with polyamorists and because I am a person who reflects on and is aware of my

emotions, I could do this in a way that fit the polyamorous research context.

In Robben's discussion of ethnographic seduction he does not agree with this. He cautions anthropologists *not* to get too emotionally close to their informants' experiences as one can forget to stay critical when emotionally overwhelmed (2012: 184). It might be clear when you condemn violent behaviour that 'ethnographic seduction' can take place whilst talking to someone who committed violent crimes, like Robben did, but what if you are talking about romantic and/or sexual relationships and it is rather a lot of fun? Additionally Catherine A. Lutz (1988: 59-64) states that a stereotypical 'Euramerican' view of emotions is that they overwhelm and make one uncritical, which resonates with Robben's statement. I often showed emotions like smiling or laughing as primes to encourage respondents to tell more about their experiences. During the interviews I tried to stay conscious of disclosing these things and was critical of when, how and why I would do so. I did not experience being less critical when acknowledging how my emotions were responding to a respondent's story. It actually was the opposite.

Being aware and critical of my position as an inside-out-sider was a complex task. This will have come with blind spots, as will be the case with any other anthropologist. For me, being in this position enabled certain endeavours which were paired with critical reflection on the limits of this methodology. One should not assume that intimacy in the field is inevitably unscientific, as anthropologists have shown, key is to balance analytical distance with closeness to the phenomenon being studied which has to come with reflection. For this research my position is not only a point that influences the methods used, but also the ethics needed to consider when dealing with respondents part of a stigmatized minority that one has relationships with.

Ethical considerations

Being part of the research population and knowing that some people were not completely open about their polyamorous identity or relationships made me aware of the importance to take ethics and respondents' safety into account. The two main ethical concerns in this research were about informed consent and anonymity, and relationships with respondents. These two points have been very important during my fieldwork, but they have changed over time due to interactions with research participants.

Whenever I would talk to people in polyamorous relationships, be it in interviews, discussion groups or casually at a dinner, I would always tell them about my fieldwork, the topic and the potential reach of the thesis. This way people would know what I was interested in and

understood the consequences of sharing their stories. Fortunately, I could participate in the discussion groups like an insider, which meant that people were not influenced a lot by my being there. One respondent said that she forgot I was a researcher, because I acted like any other participant and did not ask any unusual questions, even though we casually talked about my research during a break. Another informant said that he had experience with research students at another discussion group where they asked many basic questions, which influenced the flow of conversation. Thus, being able to blend in as a polyamorist gave me the possibility to observe and participate as if there **were** no researcher around.

Furthermore, I would ask in what way interviewees wanted to be anonymous and if they were okay with me recording the interview. What I did not expect was that two thirds of the interviewees wanted to be open about their identity, even though I said that there could be a chance that a newspaper picks up on my research and that I would present my thesis at an interdisciplinary conference. Furthermore, some respondents even reminded me to record interviews and my first interviewee explicitly advised me to always keep recording until the very end to include informal conversations. These people wanted to be very open about their experiences and felt good about sharing those stories. Some respondents explicitly acknowledged stigmatization but felt being open was worth it. Because all of these people are connected through the different discussion groups and they could still be found through the non-anonymous respondents I anonymized everyone to protect their privacy and to do them no harm. I discussed this with some of my respondents and they agreed that this was a responsible choice. The only people I did not anonymize were myself and my partner Hector, as our identities are easy to find.

Another ethical concern was about relationships with respondents. According to the AAA's code of ethics (2009) an anthropologist should "negotiat[e] the limits of the relationship" with their informants. For me this implies boundaries in personal relationships with informants, because we are indebted to them and conflicts of interest can interfere with doing research. But where do those boundaries lie and why do they lie there? Anthropologists can become friends with their respondents and some fall in love with them, but 'going native' is still seen as a big taboo (Kulick 1995: 10). Yet anthropologists have shown that 'going native' does not necessarily lead to loss of objectivity or bad research (Russell Bernard 2011: 262, Messerschmidt 1981).

As I already have different kinds of relationships with a number of respondents (e.g. friendship, partnership and (past) discussion group member) and because one builds relationships through interviews and participant observation, these limits become unclear. I talked a lot about this with different informants during fieldwork, with many seeing the benefits of me doing

research amongst peers as I already knew things about their lives and I understood their relationship style in such a way that we could go beyond stereotypes and more into detail in less time. On the other hand informants were also candid about what they did not want to share and why; one woman, Kiki (30), said she did not want to share things that she had not discussed with a partner yet and another woman, Leontine (45), was not comfortable talking about her sexual experiences in the focus group, even though some participants did share these stories. Then again, these relationships caused me to be careful about what I share about respondents' lives. Although this meant that I could not share everything that could have been pertinent, I believe to have conducted research ethically by acknowledging informants as individuals.

The most curious limit was the taboo of having sex with respondents. This is a specific point that is often discussed (Kulick 1995: 3, Russell Bernard 2011: 282), with many pros and cons, even though sex can mean different things to different people (Kulick 1995: 5). For me the essence lies in the taboo on sex itself, biases that can result from any relationships with people and the ideal of being an objective fieldworker. What is not discussed often is dating in the field. It is as though sex just happens, but in reality many other things can happen without sex, like dating or developing loving feelings for a research participant. For me dating is especially intriguing because it is in a sense liminal as you are figuring out in what way you like each other and how you want the relationship to change. This can be an intriguing research tool, if discussed openly with the respondent(s) involved, but for me this draws on a personal boundary. This is because this research is already somewhat in the margins due to its topic, the research group and my methodology as an inside-out-sider. I felt that researching these changing romantic and/or sexual details would do me harm as a researcher or harm respondents I interacted with, and could harm the reception of this research.

I approached ethics in my methodology by being transparent about my research goals, personal experiences and emotions. This worked well with the topic of intimacy amongst polyamorists. Furthermore, I tried to be respectful towards respondents and chose to leave parts of their stories out if it could harm them or their relationships. It was important to me to do no harm and practice informed consent as an anthropologist, which echo poly practices related to consent and openness (see chapter 7 on polyamorous openness and honesty p. 57-67). It would be interesting to compare these poly ideals with anthropological ideals of honesty, transparency and informed consent in future research or an article in a peer-reviewed journal as Zhu has done (2018).

Data and analyses

Now that I have covered my actions, position and ethics in the field, I should discuss what kind of data was gathered and how I analysed this information. All of the data gathered was qualitative accept for demographic data on variables like age, gender, and sexual orientation. I had many fieldnotes and transcripts to analyse from observations, discussion group meetings, interviews and focus groups. Not all of the data will be visible in this thesis, but all of the conversations and observations were important for the arguments and analyses made in this work.

To uncover which themes were part of certain patterns I employed interpretative analysis and coding (Russell Bernard 2011: 415-416, 429-430). Thanks to many hours spent doing fieldwork, participating in poly events, talking in English and Dutch with respondents, reading about polyamory academically and popularly, and reflecting on my personal experiences as an inside-out-sider I became submerged in polyamorous culture in the Netherlands. This "deep involvement" and "intimate familiarity with the language" of polyamory enabled me to interpret field notes and interviews in a way that was in line with emic understandings (Ibid.: 415). Important to mention is that I also asked informants to clarify points made in the interviews to be even more in line with their personal meaning, even though this could have been done better.

When dealing with the data during fieldwork, I made important or recurring words and themes bold in my digital notebooks after events and interviews. These I had copied from my paper notebook that I took to interviews. To these digital notebooks I added details from my audio recordings. After participant observations or interviews I recorded my impressions, observations and analyses. Sometimes I would do that with my partner Hector if he came with me to an event. His insights and memories were very useful. I also included these notes in my digital notebooks, where I could easily find notes and quotes. Additionally, I wrote about my days and research related thoughts in my digital research journal. All of the digital notebooks were easily accessible on my phone and laptop, enabling quick additions to the notes.

After fieldwork, I listened to a number of recordings again, the ones that I felt were important for or contradictory to my argument, and added that information to the interview and focus group notes. This was followed by a stage of coding with ATLAS.ti, so that I could see how often certain codes came up, in which contexts and parts of the interview, and see how different respondents talked about the same or related codes. This helped with reflecting on my own experiences, as these analyses showed different conclusions than some of my first hand impressions did in the field. I started off with taking codes from my research proposal, subsequent questions and fieldnotes. During the coding process, I found new codes and added

them to the list, employing grounded theory and thus dealing with both deductive and inductive codes (Ibid.: 430). Once I coded half of the interviews and focus groups, I organized the codes into groups ranging from 'labels' to 'mono-normativity' or 'sex', which are related to how I organized the thesis into chapters, subchapters, and paragraphs. After coding my notes and transcripts, I could zoom in on the codes, compare quotes and relate them to observations I had made. Taken together, these insights became the core points made in this thesis.

5. Polyamory in a monogamous world

I got to know Louise at the first discussion group I went to for fieldwork in February of 2017. There were around 30 people in a separate room of a cosy pub in Leiden, in the west of the Netherlands. We sat on chairs in a large circle waiting for the start of the afternoon with our drinks in hand, some people quietly chatting with their neighbour. I had been there often in the past three years, but it had not been so busy for a while. Some people were regulars and others were new to this group, coming from different areas in the country, but also a number of expats and one "nomad" planning on staying for a few months and then traveling to another country of his choosing. I had agreed with the host that I would introduce my research and myself so that people knew that I was there before they did their personal introductions. I explained that my research focus was on intimacy and polyamory, that I had just started my fieldwork of three months and that I was going to interview different people and go to different discussion groups in the Netherlands. I also explained that I was looking at what intimacy means not only in romantic relationships but also with family and friends for instance. This last bit is what I think caught people's eye or ear for that matter, and one of those was Louise.

After everyone had introduced themselves by explaining why they were here and how their relationships were going, we had a break. Beforehand, I thought I would be able to go downstairs to the bathroom to write down some notes, but before I could stand up there were already a few people standing near me to strike up a conversation. One was Louise, who explained that she had some experiences with polyamory that were rather special to her regarding intimacy. She said that she had a boyfriend a few years ago, not Fabian who she had taken to the discussion group but a previous partner called Alex, with whom she started exploring polyamorous relationships. During that time, Alex started dating two of her good friends, one of which had originally started the conversation on polyamory with Louise. The dynamic between all of them was very special to Louise, and different than the intimacy she had known before. Sharing the same boyfriend with her close friends was something she regarded as special and to me it seemed like an interesting experience to talk about some more in an interview. So after the discussion group I sent her a message and suggested we meet up for that interview.

A few weeks later we met up in a town near Amsterdam where she was living with Fabian. She picked me up from the station and together we walked to a coffee café she frequented from time to time with friends. Louise explained she was 28, nearly 29, had started with polyamory a few years ago and was finishing up her PhD in geology. What struck me during this conversation was the moment she casually dropped the word 'mono-normativity,' when

critiquing views on cheating and acknowledging how people construct love and relationships
through movies and social representations. As an academic focused on these topics and a person
in polyamorous relationships myself, I had not adequately acknowledged the extent to which these
concepts and the subsequent theories are spread across polyamorous communities globally. What
Louise showed me was how critical, reflective and aware of certain cultural dynamics these people
are.

In this chapter I will discuss how mono-normativity[12] affects the experiences of polyamorists. These experiences are diverse, but a few trends and paradoxes can be seen when looking at the data I have gathered. Furthermore, relating these insights to current literature on the relationship between monogamy and polyamory can shed more light on how people experience these things in everyday life. Lastly these issues influence how intimacy is perceived and experienced, which is why I discuss them in this chapter.

Mono-normativity, cultural change and normalization

People that I talked to during fieldwork view monogamy as a cultural construction which they had learned to believe and live, through near constant socialisation. It is the dominant structure that sets the ground rules and ideal situations for relationships from which they actively take a step back and choose different relationship styles. Some called it a "*denkraam*" (a frame for thoughts) or talked about "conditioning" since childhood. This echoes literature on monogamy that uses terms like 'compulsory monogamy' and 'mono-normativity' to show how monogamy is the default and ideal relationship style available in 'western' contexts (e.g. Barker & Ritchie 2006).

Respondents also critiqued the "normative" aspects of monogamy by talking about "relationship ladders" in which "traditional relationships" between two people are the end goal and other types of relationships are only a means to that end or seen as inferior connections. Things like living together or marriage as relationship 'stages' were often discussed and criticized by my respondents. Alternately, one could see mono-normativity in partnerships where people marry on other terms like spiritual ceremonies or marriage ceremonies that differed from traditional marriage in many ways, but for the people I talked to these only emphasised a

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[12] An important point to remember is that monogamy and the normativity surrounding this relationship style were seen through the eyes of my respondents. This means that it is clearly related to their understandings of polyamory and the points at which they feel 'society' constrains or struggles with their relationships and behaviour. This gives a skewed view of monogamous reality, which needs its own research to shed light on how monogamists do monogamy in their everyday lives.

connection between people and a commitment to the future, without excluding or devaluing other bonds. By reflecting on monogamy's normative features and seeing it as a frame of reference one can choose to reject or reform. This observation makes it clear that respondents perceive monogamy as a cultural construction.

Although monogamy is seen as a cultural construction, mono-normativity influences polyamorists' everyday lives. An example of how these people reflect on monogamy's power over their lives is how, after his burnout, Jonathan came to see how he had dealt with relationships with women in general:

> *Jonathan (49), a recently divorced, straight, Dutch father with Suriname-Hindustani heritage and a muslim upbringing, had gone through a burnout which he came to see as a "hard-reset" of his life. During our meeting at a local pub, he explained that he used to have very strict ideas about what relationships should be and how close a man can be with a woman, as friends and as people in a 'relationship' when "looking from a monogamous ethos" (*vanuit een monogame sfeer bekeken*). He thought it was very interesting going to discussion groups on polyamory and open relationships, as they showed him how "you could be in a relationship and still keep distance" instead of completely losing yourself in the other person, which had previously happened to him with his ex-wife. He also said that something that had changed was that he used to look for that "piece of the puzzle" that fit perfectly, but now he finds those things in different women and different kinds of relationships with women. Jonathan started approaching new people with an open mind to see where that connection leads them, without imposing limits on people before figuring out what it is they share.*

Although Jonathon did not think polyamorous relationships were what he wanted at the time of our interview, he is of the opinion that thanks to the discussion groups on polyamory and other kinds of open relationships he came to see that monogamy guided the rules and limits in his previous relationships with female friends and romantic interests, which did not fit his personal needs and desires. This is one theme multiple respondents experienced and Jonathan put into words clearly.

For some informants it had been and still was hard to shed monogamous ways of dealing with relationships, which shows that mono-normativity is something they can still deal with even though cultural change was what respondents said to have achieved. For instance Annet (36) said she remembered being very much aware of her strict ideas (*vaste denkbeelden*) in the early months of learning about and practicing polyamory, but during our interview and informal conversations

it was clear that she felt monogamy did not influence her ideas anymore. On the other hand, Laurie (47) explained that after 40 years of living amongst monogamous relationships it is obvious to be influenced by monogamy, even though she wants to be free from the assumptions and ideals related to monogamy. Furthermore, a discussion group meeting in Utrecht was planned for after my fieldwork to talk about "monogamous legacy," where the question was in what way monogamy influences people's non-monogamous lives and what people want to keep or lose from that heritage. A respondent I interviewed during the summer, Cora (26), talked about "monogamous baggage" which she sees as "all those normative ideas, concepts, feelings and thoughts that you take to your non-monogamous relationships". Cora thought it was important to be aware of one's monogamous baggage, because otherwise it can cause a lot of pain and difficulties as it does not fit in non-monogamous relationships and can guide one's choices and behaviour unconsciously.

Like Annet (36), there were informants who said polyamory came "natural" to them, was more "logical" than monogamy or that they no longer felt a monogamous relationship style had an influence over their lives, but they too dealt with mono-normativity be it in a different way. This can be observed in the way attendees reacted to monogamy when discussing polyamory in general or their personal lives. Informants reacted to monogamy when explaining why they started with polyamory in discussion groups, how their 'relationship' is more open now than a more monogamous 'relationship' or when they discuss poly in the media for instance. Words like non-monogamy or non-marry (*niet-trouwen*) also show how monogamy is related to polyamorists' lives. When you take into account that monogamy is experienced as the default romantic and sexual relationship style in the Netherlands this is not so unusual. This way mono-normativity is still seen as the norm from which these people deviate, it is the "assumed status quo" as Hector (25) said in our interview.

Furthermore respondents acknowledged the prejudice towards polyamory; people new to poly expect jealousy to be a huge issue and see sex with multiple people as the main factor in living polyamorously, which is not seen as a positive interpretation by polyamorists. One person also explained that he experiences judgment in his hometown and others pointed out that they have had bad experiences with psychologists or at their workplace. In these cases people do not see these relationships as viable options and judge persons who are in polyamorous relationships. An attendee of the Utrecht discussion group noticed she heard participants say "a relationship ended, not because of a poly reason but something else" (*een polyreden*), many times during the evening. This shows how people are attuned to and have internalised certain prejudices, even amongst peers. In a presentation for humanities students, which Delilah (50) the Leiden

discussion group host and I organised and my partner Hector (25) presented, we explained that mundane things such as a home purchase contract is set up for two people and songs about finding the one true love show how being a couple is seen as the norm. Delilah often told me that she did not like to listen to romantic pop songs or watch mainstream movies because most were exclusive towards polyamorous relationships.

In this sense my informants were part of a stigmatized minority, what Sascha (31) called "somewhat of a fringe existence." But these people also acknowledged that things have changed over the years and some had not had any negative reactions: they can walk hand in hand outside with multiple partners, meet new monogamists who are open minded and up for dating a polyamorist or read positive articles in the media about polyamory. Hosts of poly events in Leiden, Utrecht and Amsterdam agreed that over the past few years the media have become more understanding. Although this does not mean that polyamorists feel completely accepted or free to organize their relationships as they see fit.

A way to make space for polyamory was "normalization", which many respondents called for. "Normalization" was something people discussed amongst themselves and with me: they felt this was important. Sascha (31) said, polyamory needs to be "*een* legit *optie*", a legitimate option, so that people can make their own rules in their relationships. Examples of normalization ranged from sharing positive representations openly on Facebook and being role models to just acting normal about it in everyday life. Some respondents had already been interviewed for news articles and two were active in the Dutch foundation for polyamory (stichting polyamorie Nederland). Sara (25) said she followed different blogs in her Tumblr feed related to gender, sexuality and polyamory (and much more) because she felt it was important to see people who live differently, especially if you see it less in your everyday life, where you are surrounded by monogamy. Seeing and talking to people who were in polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous relationships reminded her of how it could work.

Taking all of this together you can see how mono-normativity impacts these people's everyday lives and how they make space for polyamorous relationship styles through normalization. Furthermore this discussion also shows how these polyamorists reflect on their behaviour and dominant cultural norms related to relationships. In the next subchapter I will discuss how mono-normativity affects expectations through the labels used for relationships and experiences available in English and Dutch.

Expectation management and 'labels'

Labels work to constrain your behaviour and expectations as they are connected to stereotypes, but they can also give people a sense of security and understanding of what you share with someone. Unfortunately, they can then become hierarchical or static, making you less open towards other people and change.

From my notes on a discussion group in Utrecht about expectations, where people talked about labels, in February 2017.

This excerpt sounds to me like your typically nuanced anthropological 'yes, but no, and maybe...' construction, but there was only one anthropologist at this discussion, being comparatively quiet observing the participants. What I wrote down remains somewhat of a conundrum though: using labels that define behaviour or relationships to *clarify* what is going on, experiencing them as *restricting* and laden with *assumptions*. Being confined by labels, expectations and monogamy is something that my informants talked about many times during fieldwork.

Respondents explained that they wanted to go beyond the confines of mono-normative categories because these "*hokjes*" (boxes or categories) constrained their behaviour. Feli (58) said she wanted to break the moulds of those categories (*hokjes verbreken*) when in a focus group I organized on intimacy and polyamory. In various discussion groups different people said they felt constrained by monogamy when explaining how and why they started with polyamory. People felt polyamory was part of one's freedom to determine your own choices without being constricted by the norm, as Kevin (62) and Benjamin (45) said.

Words that label the kinds of relationship respondents have, how informants interact and how they feel hold assumptions grounded in monogamy. Barker and Ritchie "suggest that the dominant version of relationships available in western culture is of life-long or serial monogamy with 'the one' perfect partner [...] These representations serve social functions, maintaining monogamy in a position of hegemonic dominance" (2006: 586). Monogamy and its idealization of the couple can be seen as the dominant relationship model in 'western' settings, according to these academics. In Barker and Ritchie's article they explain how mono-normativity is part of language by referring to Judith Butler when stating "language functions to enable (or constrain) our ability to 'do' or to experience" (2006: 586), which is exactly what my informants noticed with labels for relationships.

Categories like 'friendship,' 'relationship,' 'family,' 'boy-' or 'girlfriend,' different activities like 'dating,' 'sex,' 'marriage,' and 'cheating,' and emotions like love and jealousy hold mono-

normative connotations that influence respondents' expectations. Management of these expectations was a topic that came up many times in discussion groups and interviews. Laurie (47) felt this was the most difficult thing: dealing with different expectations from different partners. They cannot always be aligned harmoniously and even before that you need to figure out what it is people *exactly* expect. Dealing with unacknowledged expectations was difficult according to the attendees in a focus group in Nijmegen. Belle (24) related expectations to a more monogamous "classical expectation scheme" (*klassieke verwachtingsschema*), that of the relationship escalator or ladder with specific stages of relationship development. Louise (28) related expectations to this too when talking about the first dates she had with her partner at the time, where she did not "like-like" him straight away: "maybe I'll feel differently in a while, but why do I actually want that?" Rationally, she said, she had accepted that connections did not fit strict '*hokjes*' (labels), but her hopes and feelings still moved to fit into that mould. I believe expectations were such an important topic, because many of my interlocutors did not use this "classical expectation scheme" anymore, but they need to discuss these expectations because their meanings are cultural and vary amongst individuals.

An example of these diverse cultural interpretations and uses is how people label their relationship style and relationships. I found respondents through discussion groups about polyamory, but 'open relationships' was also used in a meeting title and in another group 'non-mono' was also used, referring to consensual non-monogamy. Some respondents felt polyamory was too constricting as it held assumptions and rules about how to have multiple relationships, which was why Sascha (31) preferred consensual non-monogamy, which had more room for changing relationships, even though she used both. The host of the Utrecht group, Isa (28), once told me that she preferred polyamory because "it rolls nicely over the tongue (*het bekt lekker*), and" added jokingly "consensual non-monogamy sounds like an STI". Some respondents explained that they used all three terms depending on the setting and people present. If people were not used to the terminology some chose open relationships, whilst others preferred non-monogamy or even polyamory, because they could then explain it. For some, open relationships had a strong sexual connotation whilst others felt it described openness in the broadest sense of the word. All of my informants felt they did not fit into the monogamous relationships model and most felt that what they were doing was polyamory, although they did not all agree as to what it was and which other words could be used to describe it.

Words are necessary to communicate about the relationships you share with people, as it is useful to clarify what is going on even if you do not like the words available. Some people, like Annet (36), preferred to talk of connections instead of 'relationships'. Many, like Louise (28), said

some connections could not be described in words, "there just were not any words to describe them" (*er zijn echt geen woorden voor*). Informants do want to find the words, even though there is no easy label to stick on their relationships. So they use constructions like "sweetie" or "*liefje*" in Dutch, others used "partner" instead of other words like "girl- or boyfriend" and some also added 'poly' to words: "*polylief*," "*polyprobleem*" or "*polyblijdschap*" (poly-sweetie, poly-problem or poly-happiness). Internationally coined words were also used to describe emotions and relationships for which there was no language: "compersion" being the opposite of jealousy by which some respondents acknowledged happiness for another partner's joy with their subsequent partner, even though this was not a popular term as there was no good translation in Dutch, or "comet," mentioned by Sascha (31), meaning a person with whom you are in a 'meaningful' relationship with and see for a short period of time which recurs after longer periods of being away from one another, like a comet in space. It should prove fruitful to research poly language, interpretations and experiences in the Dutch context, as it differs from the more researched United States context and could show more diversity in use and experience of these shared terms.

Even though there were new words to describe relationships and more words were being constructed, labelling and defining what respondents shared remained an unclear process. I heard respondents say "we have something" (*we hebben iets*) or "it might become something" (*het gaat misschien iets worden*). Another thing informants said was "we are a thing" (*een ding*), and at times air quotes were added to 'thing.' During fieldwork I came across the same constructions amongst monogamists and in popular media. The use of these constructions signifies indefinability yet also some tangible connection. This shows how hard it can be to define the kind of connection people share. Yet, the available labels for polyamorists are full of mono-normative meanings and expectations, which they have to deal with, deconstruct and at times find new labels for.

Polyamory, intimacy, and stigma: "it's not about sex"

> *"Poly is not about sex, it's about something else."* Says a man smiling in the circle of chairs at a *monthly polyamory discussion group. People agree with nods and mumbles. "But don't you like* *sex?" asks a woman a few chairs to the left and the group laughs together, to which the woman* *adds "But I know what you mean, it's not about the sex."*
> From my notes on a discussion group in Leiden in May 2017.

This quote comes from the last discussion group I went to in Leiden. I noticed that people

tended to frame polyamory away from sex. We even discussed this explicitly, after talking about an American news article on poly and media reactions to polyamory in general. Although the host, Delilah (50), was positive about coverage in general, there were some issues that people new to poly kept bringing up. This was the case in the American article she mentioned: most notably the focus on sex and infidelity, with sex with multiple people being the main reason to have polyamorous relationships but also a huge stumbling block. We then talked about how people introduced the topic of polyamory and how they would focused on other aspects than sex, thus framing poly away from sex, because the conversation would otherwise be dominated by sex. But why is that so bad?

According to my respondents there still lies a taboo on sex in society in general, which we talked about on different occasions. We discussed this also because many respondents were interested in sexuality in general. Different respondents said it would be better if people could just talk about sex. But reflecting on this taboo did not mean there was no stigma attached to sex amongst my informants, as you will see with the words they use to camouflage sex in conversations and in the way they react to polyamory's conflation with sex by novices to the subject.

Polyamorists I talked to wanted to be free from the stigma on sex but this did not mean they could completely let go of that taboo. Glen (30) explained this by saying in a serious but slightly joking manner: "I'm kind of convinced that the world would be a better place if one could speak with as much ease about sex as about the last book you read. I'm not there yet myself, uhh I do my best, but I uhh stutter at times too". Talking in great detail about sex, or introducing sex into a conversation was something that Glen found a sensitive task even though he enjoyed engaging with sex as a topic of discussion. The mere fact that he acknowledges this difficulty in our interview when talking about sex, exemplifies this sensitivity. Furthermore, as Zoe (63) noticed about herself during an interview we had: 'intimate' can be used as a "code word for sex." This was the case in interviews and discussion groups, in English and Dutch, amongst young and old, different gender identities and people with diverse experiences with polyamory. Using intimacy as a euphemism for sex shows that sex is a sensitive topic.

Furthermore, sex had a slight negative connotation in certain discussions. This was the case when outsiders assumed polyamory was about the sex or when polyamory was equated to swinging, where a couple has sex with people outside of their relationship at specific events or with specific couples, and these outside relationships mostly revolve around the sexual

experiences (Bergstrand & Williams 2000[13]). When this was the case, polyamorists tried to steer the conversation away from sex, which they said was because their relationships were not about the sex. This is understandable as the focus for polyamorists I spoke to was not on sex; most respondents did not have poly relationships to have more, better or different sex. For some this was more about love, which resonates with Klesse's (2011) article that zooms in on his respondents differentiating their behaviour from sex or pleasure focused interactions or relationships. But, sex was part of most of my respondents' lives, for some more and others less. In the situation I mentioned, respondents deal with the stigma on sex that affects how others see polyamory, but other times sex was nearly made invisible, which shows how sex was a sensitive topic for my informants as well.

We did talk about safe sex practices in one discussion group meeting and shared links on the Facebook page on this topic, as this was a reoccurring and recognizable topic of discussion for many respondents. But I do believe there is some sensitivity or awkwardness when discussing sex amongst polyamorists, as sex was or details about sexual practices were omitted or discussed with code words like "physically intimate" or "being intimate" when talking about current partners or relationship history. Furthermore, Mae (30) said she had friends whom she hugged and kissed and at times did "more" with. This could of course also have to do with the amount of time I had spent with respondents; they could be more open about these things after more interviews and conversations, as one interviewee told me. But the different strategies used around sex in personal conversations, discussions and interviews show that it is also a sensitive topic for the polyamorists I talked to.

The quote "It's not about sex – But don't you like it?", at the beginning of this subchapter, shows the tension between sex and polyamory. When looking back at conversations with respondents, I believe they cannot completely shed this taboo, even though they want to. Seeing polyamory as more than sex, can devalue sex and relationships or experiences that are more focused on sex, as Klesse also states (2011: 13). Furthermore the taboo on sex can also be seen amongst anthropologists and their research as Kulick discusses (1995: 3), even though some say we have gone past that point no longer seeing a taboo on sex amongst anthropologists or in their ethnographies (Donnan & Magowan 2010: 18). I experienced this taboo a number of times during the academic year in class. Students would expect my research to have the most "juicy" anecdote and in a comedic presentation for Bachelor's students, the organizing committee wanted funny stories from a colleague and myself, where "sex stories" were seen as crowd

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[13] Although swinging tends to revolve around sexual experiences, boundaries between swinger friends and partners can become blurry as a podcast series that shows the overlap between swinging, open relationships and polyamory shows (Life on the Swingset 2018).

pleasers. There is a fine line between humour and disrespect, especially when dealing with taboo topics or minority groups that deal with stigma. Polyamorists hold a double position here being part of a stigmatized minority for having multiple 'relationships' and dealing with a taboo on sex itself.

Conclusion

What the subchapter on sex shows is something that other academics have also pointed towards: a complex relationship between monogamy, polyamory and sexuality (Klesse 2011, Haritaworn et al. 2006). Polyamory cannot be seen as an isolated counter culture disconnected from monogamy free to reshape sexuality, relationships and romance. Neither can it be understood as a subset of the more dominant relationship style of monogamy. It might be better to perceive it as a 'borderland' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 18) where cultural differences are reshaped and maintained in processes influenced by mono-normativity, stigma and individual agency. In this fluid place it becomes less clear who the 'native' or 'local' is and what polyamory is, as it is not a specific or singular culture, but more a 'cultural style' (Ferguson 1999) differentiating itself from whilst also being influenced by monogamy.

Mono-normativity is something that my informants dealt with even though they wished to resist monogamy's hold over their lives. In this chapter I have made apparent how polyamorists negotiate with this structural force to make space for polyamory. Some aspects are consciously reworked, others change without much notice and a few aspects that are part of a mono-normative ideology are not reworked as much, like sensitivity around sex or relationship expectations. In the next chapter I will discuss how informants discussed and re-imagined intimacy, which will lay the foundation for the last empirical chapter that will cover intimacy in polyamorists' personal relationships.

6. Re-imagining intimacy

One of the most insightful experiences of my fieldwork for understanding intimacy was the extended case of Geoffrey (68), Zoe (63) and Peet (55).

On a rainy afternoon I arrived a little late at Zoe and Geoffrey's beautifully designed early twentieth century home. Both in their 60's, American, married, very hospitable and not unknown to me as I had met them a few years ago at a poly discussion group. They welcomed me with a hug, a tour and some dry, fluffy socks. The fireplace was crackling and they played instrumental music in the background that felt relaxing to me. After getting a cup of tea and some cookies we sat on the couch, talked about how everyone was doing and I reintroduced my research. After that, Geoffrey said he was going for a coffee around the corner so that I could talk with Zoe. When Geoffrey left he gave her a soft upside down peck on the lips whilst she was still sitting on the couch.

Zoe and I talked about how they had started with polyamory and where they were now. She explained that many things had changed since I had seen her a few years ago and now she was dating another man Peet, whilst Geoffrey had broken up with his partner Elsa a while ago. Zoe told me it was quite a tough and chaotic time, as she felt torn between three people: Geoffrey, Peet and herself. At times she talked about the different options there were and that she had to make some tough choices. After our interview, Geoffrey returned and we had a short break. Then I interviewed Geoffrey, which felt a little difficult because I was sad for him and Zoe. I did not want to dive directly into the pain of his breakup with Elsa or the chaos he might also be feeling. So I asked him to start at the beginning.

It was hard to be in the middle of two people at this chaotic time, not knowing if and what Geoffrey felt about the current situation, and not wanting to step wrongly when discussing sensitive information, even though I probably did at times. To me it felt like I was a relationship therapist, without doing anything to help them. It was as though I was in the midst of them and the chaos, this was very intimate and I felt we were all vulnerable.

Then a month later, I went to Peet's house. We met at the station where he was working, gladly recognized each other and shook hands to say hello. We drove to his home in the countryside. First, I had an interview with him. He showed photos of his kids, talked of difficult previous relationships and the feelings he now had for Zoe. He also showed me a book he made with sweet things he had said to Zoe. After our talk we went to pick up Zoe from a small train station where they met every weekend. We walked onto the platform to pick her up where they

hugged and kissed hello. Zoe also gave me a hug and together we walked back to the car. Peet explained where we were and how they had cycled through the area. Zoe said it would be nice to cycle there again, but this time a longer trip. At dinner we talked about my research, how to know if respondents, or any people for that matter, are flirting with me (as I am quite clueless on the topic), and what intimacy means. This was because I had experienced a situation in which I did not know if it was just a very intimate interview or that the interviewee was attracted to me. Peet thought the latter, even though he wondered if it hadn't happened more often with me, a young woman being approached by male respondents seemed likely. But this was not the case at the time. Peet went on to explain that after our interview things had 'changed' between us, he felt closer to me, more at ease, like we came to know one another, and after he drove me to the station we hugged and said our goodbyes.

Experiencing intimacy as an anthropologist by being part of people's personal lives through interviews, informal conversations and spending time with them showed me that intimacy is possible in all kinds of shapes and settings. By focusing solely on intimacy in romantic relationships we tend to forget intimate experiences in other relationships such as that of the ethnographer and informant.

In this chapter I will discuss how respondents discussed and re-imagined intimacy. These data came from two focus groups on intimacy and polyamory, one in Leiden and one in Nijmegen, interview questions about the meaning of intimacy, informal conversations and participant observations. First I will talk about intimacy as 'deep' connection and then about the relationship between intimacy and sex. After that I will discuss if and how intimacy can be negative and I will end with the possibilities a re-imagining of intimacy gives to polyamorists. Taken together these elements will show how respondents re-imagined intimacy on an analytical and at times philosophical level.

Intimacy as a way of connecting at a 'deep' level

During our conversations a lot of respondents said they had not put intimacy into words before or that it was "hard to describe". One respondent jokingly said she preferred to talk about "fifty shades of intimacy" to show how complex and diverse intimacy can be, although she did not particularly like the book it referred to. Even though this concept was hard to put into words, also for me as the anthropologist guided by literature, there were a number of things that

informants discussed more often.

First, something that came up a number of times in different settings was a sense of 'closeness' between people. Informants talked about different kinds of ways to be close to each other, which they divided into physical, mental and/or emotional intimacy. Being intimate meant "taking down walls," "barriers" or other things that stood between people. Important was to be open towards yourself and others. Knowing a person, sharing sensitive information and essentially being so open "you can be yourself completely" (*helemaal jezelf zijn*) were seen as intimate. In these situations one felt accepted without fear of judgment or other negative consequences, and most informants attached a sense of appreciation to this acceptance. This was also connected to vulnerability in the different focus groups and in some interviews.

This 'closeness' is built around an interpretation of the self and the other in which there is an authentic, honest and sincere self that one can come close too, "your original self" as Feli (58) said. Belle (24) referred to this when saying "intimacy is when you can share exactly what you think and feel, directly from the inside out". You can "go deeper", by sharing "deep feelings" for instance or being "deeply touched" by a person. Here connections are built, according to my respondents. In this 'depth' you are "on exactly the same page (*precies op een lijn*) with the other person". According to Sehlikoglu and Zengin: "[t]he 'depth' of intimacy is related to its connection to our very sense of selves" (2015: 22). As one focus group participant said: "they get who you are in your *core*." This 'core' and 'depth' that one tries to understand, reminds me of the anthropologist's search for knowledge during fieldwork. We try to get to the core of an issue in the everyday lives of respondents. Through our methods we become intimately acquainted with the lives of our informants by empathy and listening with an open mind, essentially "being a sponge" as Glen (30) said to me. We become a confidant by gaining rapport, which makes people behave like 'themselves' as though they are not being watched by a researcher (Berreman 2012). But what is part of this backstage arena Robben justly asks (Robben 2012: 179)? Furthermore, what is the original or authentic self? This is of course a question for a research in its own right. My informants understood intimacy as an interactive process in which one can show the self without keeping secrets or hiding things, feeling accepted and safe to be 'yourself' openly.

Furthermore, a number of respondents explained that sharing routine or boring parts of everyday life could also be seen as intimate. A polyamorous friend told me during fieldwork that brushing teeth with another person every night and morning felt intimate. Laurie (47) said that seeing her cat do something funny for a split second with her husband on the couch was also intimate. Sara (24) pointed out in a focus group that sharing her daily routines with another person was intimate to her. I did not have the chance to observe these parts of informants' lives,

because of the time constraints of research and because I wanted to talk to many different people instead of focus on a few to explore what intimacy meant to polyamorists. For future research on intimacy, it would be interesting to follow and live with a number of polyamorists, poly families and other kinds of polycules that are closely related to observe everyday intimacies in their more private lives.

The "goal," as Kevin (62) called it, or function of intimacy for the people I talked to was to build connection at a 'deep' level, to "really connect". Louise (28) showed this idea of depth when saying "it was absolutely not superficial (*oppervlakkig*), it feels as though we really, really made a connection" (*echt heel erg een connectie maken*). Informants' perception of intimacy was similar to Jamieson's view on intimacy:

> "intimacy involves a very special 'sort of knowing, loving and being close to another person' which in the late 20th century depended upon a kind of 'disclosure and disclosing'. Generally, it involves close association, privileged knowledge of each other, and a general 'loving, sharing and caring'" (Scott & Marshall 2009).

But people I talked to rarely connected intimacy to love even though polyamory was often related to love by respondents and in popular and academic articles (e.g. Klesse 2011). Furthermore, seeing intimacy as 'deep' connection is not included in Jamieson's quote. Jamieson's work (1998) builds on Giddens's book on intimacy (1992), which you can see in her focus on romantic relationships. But the people I talked to explained that intimacy can be with anyone and sex or romance can be without intimacy, as intimacy is about building 'deep' connections in the broadest sense of relationships. This reiterates the anthropological understanding of intimacy that does not focus on sexual relationships and acknowledges intimacy's diverse interpretations (Sehlikoglu & Zengin 2015: 22). Even though my interlocutors emphasized that intimacy could happen in all kinds of relationships and was not always related to sex, intimacy was often related to sex.

The ambiguous relationship between 'intimacy' and 'sex'

"But some friendships are intimate relationships!" Sascha (31)

"Intimacy is everything starting from a kiss" Mae (30)

"[Intimacy is about] sharing feelings, which is often connected to sex for me"

Gerard (48)

These were only three of the many quotes in which intimacy was or explicitly was not connected to sex. As I said in the previous chapter, intimacy is seen as 'more than sex' or 'not just sex' by respondents, although the word is often used to describe sex, especially when informants said "physically intimate". This shows that intimacy can never really shake its association with sex, at least amongst the polyamorists I got to know. Christian Klesse also observed this amongst his respondents in the United Kingdom (2006:575-578, 2011: 10). Additionally, sociological and psychological literature on intimacy has often connected intimacy to sex (Sehlikoglu & Zengin 2015: 2, Blumstein & Kollock 1988: 469). So this might be more generally shared than solely related to polyamory, even though there is something specific going on amongst polyamorists. In this subchapter I will zoom in on the ambiguous relationship between intimacy and sex that goes further than the stigma surrounding sex, which I discussed in the previous chapter, and can be connected to varying interpretations of intimacy amongst polyamorists.

A number of respondents talked about intimacy as a process including hierarchical stages that ended up in sexual activity. Mae (30) told me she thought "[i]ntimacy was everything starting from a kiss", which gave me the impression she meant sex, although she had previously told me she had romantic relationships that were not sexual at all. Geoffrey (68) talked of becoming more and more intimate when discussing sensuality and sexuality in a previous relationship. Gerard (48) and Benjamin (45) connected intimacy to sex, but acknowledged that this was not always the case. Even though some respondents like Louise (28) did not agree with constructions like "more than friends," sex was still seen as a way to be very intimate with others. Participants of a focus group in Nijmegen could not clearly distinguish why sex was so intimate in some relationships. It seemed hard for these informants to shake the impression that sex was that part that made their "partner relationships" more intimate than platonic friendships. Sex thus had a strong hold over intimacy and was often seen as having the potential to be considered more intimate than other experiences.

But what is 'sex'? When Sara (24) interviewed me (23), we discussed how we felt about sexual interactions, and where and when they started. We could not agree and Sara critically pointed to a question often on her mind: where does sex begin and when is it sex between women? As a bi-sexual woman she wondered at this because sex for her was associated with heterosexual intercourse and a person's orgasm signalling the 'successful' ending of sex. We both were not satisfied with these two associations. Additionally, I was urged to re-evaluate what I mean with sex by a poly activist and BDSM organizer at the conference I went to in the summer

of 2017 on non-monogamies (NMCI 2017). This person stated that in BDSM communities 'sex' was not a useful term. In my mind, I was talking about all kinds of sexual and erotic interactions, but as this reaction shows it could be interpreted as heteronormative sex and not inclusive of for example more kinky sex, which I am less familiar with personally and academically. These two points exemplify how understandings of sex were influenced by heteronormitivity, yet this was different for diverse respondents. Additionally it shows that the definition of sex can be different between ethnographer and informants (Kulick 1995: 14).

To complicate and confuse matters further would be to look closer at physical intimacy and sensuality exemplified in Zoe (63) and Geoffrey's (68) discussion of the meaning of intimacy:

> *Zoe and Geoffrey had gone to a number of tantra seminars over the past years. Via these experiences they both had come to see sex or sexuality more as sensuality: revolving more around touch. When asked what intimacy meant to them and what they related it to Zoe said the following: "I guess I hadn't thought of it in concrete words before so I'm going to kind of go with my stream of consciousness, which is: you know when I think about intimacy I do think about uhm, creating a space of trust, of uh, openness, of being calm, of having a, a lot of affection and touch, uhm being truly there with your partner or maybe multiple partners, being really uhm present with them, lots of really good eye contact, and just putting yourself in a little bit of a bubble, of being very cherished and honoured. And uhm... and if that evolves into a physical uhm sense, of where you are having sex, or going further into, you know, being physical, that's a bonus, but I really think when I think of intimacy I really think of it of really kind of being in a bubble with somebody else, feeling calm, and nurtured and loved, and of course the physical sense is also very important." When talking about this, Zoe noticed she used intimacy as a codeword for sex and she wondered if this was something bad as intimacy described positive experiences where she thought one would prefer to say "I was intimate with this woman" than "I've had sex with this woman." Geoffrey did not agree and said he did not use intimacy as a codeword for sex. He would just say "sex with or without a connection."*

Here sensuality, physical contact and intimate connection came together, but were not always related according to Zoe and Geoffrey. Being physical was an important aspect for Zoe when discussing intimacy. Additionally, she could imagine being intimate with someone whilst not necessarily having sex, which would be a 'bonus,' thus implying a slight positive emphasis on sex. Zoe also questioned if it was a bad thing to use intimacy as a code word for sex and Geoffrey talked about how he preferred to say "sex with or without a connection". These observations

show that first, sex gets introduced when discussing intimacy, second that sex is valued more when intimate, and that intimacy is related to connecting with other people, which has already been mentioned. Tantra seminars and massages were often discussed amongst other informants because not all respondents appreciated these activities, mostly because of the spiritual and sexual connotations these activities held, yet others enjoyed them a lot. Thus some respondents did not mention this idea of sex as sensuality, but the way Zoe and Geoffrey add meaning to sex with relating it to intimacy is something shared by many informants.

On the other hand, being physically intimate with another person could be completely devoid of 'sex', like spooning with a cousin was for Sara (24) or hugging a fellow discussion group member after a meeting. Furthermore, many respondents emphasised varying kinds of intimacy when answering the question what intimacy meant to them: mental, emotional, physical, sexual, and romantic. Additionally, Cora (26) critiqued the "touch escalator" that values touch on specific body parts or kinds of touch like hugging and intercourse hierarchically, as this did not fit her experience as an a/grey-sexual person. These three points show even more diversity in experiences of intimacy, yet these did not outnumber the times that sex remained the elephant in the room.

Taken all of these points together, I conclude that the relationship between intimacy and sex was a tense one for my respondents. Intimacy is a complex and broad concept that can cover diverse experiences, which were not solely emotional, romantic or sexual for polyamorists as the descriptions of polyamory might imply (Klesse 2011: 4, Haritaworn et al. 2006: 515, Sheff 2005: 252). It can be so much more, yet it was strongly related to romance and sex. This could be due to definitions and interpretations of polyamory that focus on romantic and sexual relationships, as respondents also pointed out in a focus group in Leiden. Yet I propose that both of these points are related to a mono-normative, romantic valuation of sex, in which sex is idealized and intimacy is a way to idealize sex. For polyamorists I spoke to this meant that intimacy and sex were ambiguously related as it complicated how diverse intimate experiences and relationships were interpreted, often having mono-normativity pull at alternative interpretations like an anchor holding a boat in place.

Negative intimacy?

Can intimacy be negative? This was what attendants at a focus group I organized in Nijmegen were discussing after they had shared their thoughts on what intimacy meant to them. They all

agreed intimacy was not negative by definition. One participant, called Yara (24) who identified their gender as non-binary, stated that they thought crying was obviously not a lot of fun, but felt nice with another person. This negative experience was seen as intimate and the other participants then went on to discuss different intimate experiences like reading a bedtime story to your child, having skin to skin contact with another person through cuddling, and laughing a lot together. This discussion shows that negative intimate experiences are generally seen as facilitating 'deep' connection, which is seen as something positive. Thus not only academics use intimacy with positive connotations, as the anthropologist Peter Geschiere noted (2013: 24), but respondents I talked to during fieldwork did this as well.

Only one respondent related intimacy to negative experiences: Sara (24). In a focus group she said the following:

> "I was thinking about something that I would call disruptive events. So sort of something that was really happy; like traveling, for example, traveling with someone is for me a really intimate connection or…, but also sad things, like going through a period of disease with someone, but even things like abuse for example, I can see they are very intimate, because they are so disruptive and you are very vulnerable at that moment. So I would count that not necessarily as positive intimacy, but as intimacy."

In this quote you can see Sara too associated intimacy with connection and positive outcomes, but she also acknowledged intimacy can be negative when dealing with disease or abuse. All other respondents imagined intimacy as something positive, as a "bonding" activity, a way to make connections.

Intimate relationships or experiences can have negative outcomes, even though my informants did not imagine the process of intimacy to consist of negative aspects. Intimate experiences or relationships can obviously be dangerous. Geschiere states that intimacy can be "a lethal source of threat and betrayal" (2013: 24), which can be related to heartbreak, arguments and abuse in polyamorous relationships. Respondents discussed heartbreak when I asked them to tell me about how they started with polyamory, how things changed over time and where they were now. Arguments and abuse came up more in discussion groups and Facebook groups for polyamorists than in interviews. One respondent said that she felt it was good she could discuss the bad or difficult experiences in discussion groups without feeling judged.

By looking at Geschiere's critique on Giddens the overestimation of intimacy by

polyamorists becomes clearer. According to Geschiere, Giddens approaches intimacy as something positive, like my respondents did. He sees 'modern' intimacy as a special way of disclosing parts of the self in romantic relationships to grow as a person (Kaye 1994: 435), but Geschiere reacts to this idealization by saying intimacy can be rife with danger (2013: 24). My respondents imagined intimacy to be a process that gave access to the innermost parts of their 'selves' by "taking down walls" and becoming "vulnerable" through for instance "sharing sensitive information" or interacting in other 'intimate' ways. Although intimacy can facilitate 'deep' connection, it also becomes a risky endeavour as one perceives this process of showing the self as vulnerable. Furthermore, by "letting one's guard down" and assuming these interactions and spaces to be safe, danger can come close without one noticing it. Additionally, I believe intimacy to be especially dangerous for polyamorists because certain forms of intimacy, e.g. sexual or polyamorous experiences hold a stigma that can have negative social and interpersonal effects such as discrimination. To conclude, even though intimacy was often considered as a positive process of connecting it can be dangerous because polyamorists saw being intimate as being vulnerable and showing the self as risky especially with multiple people as one can experience heartbreak multiple times.

Intimacy's possibilities

As intimacy was mostly seen as something positive it is no wonder that people were enthusiastic to be a part of this research. Additionally this enthusiasm could also be because the concept 'intimacy' gives space for multiple and emergent interpretations. Think back to a respondent saying "fifty shades of intimacy" or take Sara's point made in a focus group discussion into account:

> "Nobody of us wants to use 'love' because it's so, like, such a thing that we can't self- determine anymore, so we have to do away with it. That's why I think a sort of step down from love is intimacy [and sex], two words that are less used so it's easier to, like, mould them to your own way [sic]. When you say it, they're like 'ow intimacy what is that,' then you can explain it easier. Whereas when you say 'I'm in love with that person,' everybody's going to be like 'I know what that means.'
> (*focus group attendants laugh and agree*)"

Intimacy was a complex and unusual concept, which made it useful for Sara: it gave her the space to describe and value the relationships and experiences she shares with other people without being constricted by mono-normative assumptions that are connected to love. This realm of possibility that intimacy tapped into, I argue, is one of the main reasons polyamorists enjoyed being a part of this research project. Additionally, it gave informants the means to acknowledge and value their diverse relationships.

Respondents in the Netherlands were not the only ones to appreciate the term 'intimacy,' organizers of an annual conference on non-monogamy also endorsed this concept. I have briefly mentioned this conference, as I went to the second one in Vienna in August 2017. Here not only academics were welcomed but also artists, therapists, polyamorists, kinksters, and other interested parties. Three respondents, Isa (28), Cora (26) and Belle (24), and I went to the conference together. As respondents and academics mingled, and information shared at the conference was dispersed through these respondents' networks through news, social media and informal conversations in the Netherlands. This can be seen as a part of my field, be it a little further away making it even more multi-sited as respondents, intimacy and polyamory are related in these different places (Hannerz 2012: 403). The title of the conference was 'Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies,' NMCI for short. You cannot only observe intimacy's potential in the title, but also in the content. The conference covered all kinds of intimate connections from sex-work to BDSM, swinging and bisexuality (NMCI 2017). Additionally, after I gave a presentation on the ambiguity of intimacy and sex amongst polyamorists to some 25 people, I asked the attendees what their thoughts and experiences were on the matter. Many people shared insightful points, but here Isa's remark is most enlightening to the point I am making: she said that intimacy was such a good concept to use because it could encapsulate diverse relationships and value those interactions without reducing them to mono-normative categories that could not do those connections justice. This reflects Sara's point discussed previously and the overall endorsement of the concept of 'intimacy' at the conference.

For me it is not clear what comes first, a re-imagining intimacy or polyamory. Respondents also discussed this point in a focus group:

> "For me the basis is forming meaningful connections with other people. The more
> you give freedom to let that connection be whatever it is, the more it can happen
> (*Louise 28*). ... How about, if polyamory is the effect not the cause; where the cause
> is connection and intimacy, polyamory might be an effect, but it's not the cause,
> the cause is being with people (*Kevin 62*). No, but it facilitates it also, but it... yeah,

definitely. I agree (*Louise*)."

So a desire for intimacy or a renewed understanding of intimacy might cause polyamorous relationships? Well who knows, but this clearly shows that respondents also related polyamory to re-imagining intimacy and the concept's possibilities.

The way informants interpreted intimacy echoed academic understandings of imagination as a creative process (Stankiewicz 2016: 800). This re-imagining of intimacy created space for their poly relationships or the way informants viewed polyamory created space for more fluid intimacies. But these re-imagined intimacies could not completely shed monogamous understandings and expectations of relationships, love, and sex, as I have previously discussed in different sections. Mono-normativity thus influenced how polyamorists re-imagined intimacy. What this finding shows is that my respondents were not completely free to reinvent or create diverse intimacies. This points us to an important relationship between imagination and a structural factor like mono-normativity that constrained the possibilities for these actors.

To conclude, my informants re-imagined intimacy in ways that gave space and legitimacy to polyamorous relationships. What has not become clear is who can re-imagine intimacy and why. I believe this question could be researched by looking at intimacy from an intersectional perspective taking privilege into account as Sheff and Hammers have done in their article on the "privilege of perversities" (2011). This could shed more light on how structural forces and power dynamics influence the process of re-imagining intimacy. For my respondents, the question of what "meaningful connections" (Louise) were was complex as they tried to make space for what they found meaningful without wanting to be influenced by mono-normativity, although this could not happen all the time.

Conclusion

To summarize, for the polyamorists I came into contact with during fieldwork intimacy was something they valued, but not something they had put into words earlier. Through focus groups, interview questions, observations and informal conversations I came to see that polyamorists re-imagined intimacy in a way that enabled them to have diverse relationships with people and value those interactions. At times these discussions were abstract or philosophical, but not unrelated to their everyday lives. I mentioned that intimacy was understood as a way of connecting at a 'deep' level with others in which one could be themselves freely and safely. Even though intimacy was experienced in all kinds of relationships it had a sexual connotation that was

critiqued yet also upheld somewhat subconsciously by my respondents. Additionally, informants enjoyed the topic of intimacy and saw it mostly as a positive way to make connections with other people, even though intimacy can be a sight rife with danger (Geschiere 2013: 24). This positive interpretation of intimacy was part of seeing intimacy as something that could make space for poly relationships, even though mono-normativity was still lurking around the corner.

Polyamorists, anthropologists and other academics should be careful when using 'intimacy' as a concept because it has mono-normative tenets. At times the concept can be sex negative, overvalue 'deep' connection compared to 'superficial' relationships, and overly idealistic. These points have consequences for informants' experiences of different relationships and research findings in general. For instance, I did not speak to anyone who had attachment issues or (discussed) traumatic experiences. On the other hand, 'intimacy' helped respondents to appreciate and create legitimacy for relating to one another in ways that did not fit the monogamous ideal. Additionally, the way respondents re-imagined intimacy echoed their poly values and can thus be related to polyamory. In the next chapter I zoom in on this relationship through informants' appreciation of being 'open,' which was related to their interpretation of intimacy.

7. Poly practices; openness as a core value

> "Polyamory is a relationship style in which you are more open than assumed in a traditional monogamous kind of relationship, especially about your internal life (*je interne leven*); that you share what you experience in terms of feelings and stuff a lot, and how that relates to the other, to which the other can react, which is still quite limited in a monogamous relationship, in my opinion... if you look at how my stereotypical view of such relationships has been shaped. For example: that the question remains as to what 'cheating' is and that you don't know what it means nor how far you can go. What I like in an open relationship, is that this can be discussed, so that you get a clearer image of what you have agreed upon and what not. The idea of stepping into an open relationship demands a lot of communication, by which you come really close to another person."
> From an interview with my partner Hector (25)

In this quote Hector talks about his interpretation of what 'openness' means in poly, which he connects to communication and how that brings people closer to each other. A number of elements from this quote will reoccur in this chapter, as Hector's focus on openness in polyamory was shared by many informants in amongst other things their appreciation of open communication. In the previous chapter I discussed how research participants re-imagined intimacy, which most informants did not connect to polyamory. Although most informants did not think their experiences of intimacy were related to polyamory, I argue that the way they re-imagined intimacy was related to polyamorists' interpretation of openness and their poly practices, which will become clearer in this section. In this chapter I will discuss how intimacy and openness are related in polyamorists' personal relationships and experiences.

Polyamorous intimacies grounded in "openness and honesty"

Polyamory was defined differently by my informants and some did not completely identify with this term or used other words interchangeably like (consensual) non-monogamy or open relationships depending on the setting and people, as I said in the paragraph on labels and expectation management. But one thing that came up many times was the importance of being open and honest, which can be seen as the root of polyamorous intimacies and has a number of

aspects to it.

First, openness and honesty cover polyamorous ethics on how to conduct relationships Mae (30) described polyamory as "romantic love with multiple people *completely* open and honest" instead of having multiple partners and lying to them about it, like people do when "cheating" in monogamous relationships. This idea of being "*completely* open and honest" was critiqued by respondents in a focus group in Nijmegen, because complete disclosure is never possible and not always desired by the different parties. On the other hand many respondents did value being honest and sincere towards others, because they did not like hiding or lying about things, which can be seen as one of the core values in other poly communities as well (Zhu 2018, Klesse 2011: 16-17). Furthermore, the ethical aspects of this approach when mentioned were related to 'consent,' which could only be gained when being open and honest in one's relationships.

This appreciation of being open and honest could also be observed at discussion groups and other informal gatherings like poly-dinners or drinks. People who were at these events talked about their romantic relationships, personal lives, current struggles or positive experiences. They also tried to help each other in conversations. One example is the last discussion group I went to in Leiden, where we talked about how the host was feeling about a breakup she had recently experienced. We then gave different 'poly horror stories' mostly about breakups, with some positive experiences. Being able to talk about one's personal, romantic, sexual and/or emotional lives with strangers is something that one can do in these settings, as is the case in other support groups. But being open and honest in these settings emphasised the previously mentioned poly ideals that informants enjoyed in their everyday lives outside of these groups.

But this openness and honesty could only occur when respondents felt safe to do so. In the different discussion groups I went to safety was emphasised and created. The hosts often talked of the groups being "safe places" to talk about polyamory. In Utrecht Isa (28) would start the evening with talking about the guidelines for the night: she would discuss that the focus is on the theme of the evening, everyone should get the chance to talk and be aware of giving each other space to share their experiences, talking about the topics and stories outside of this event is okay but do not go into detail about individuals as you do not want to 'out' them without their permission, and lastly do not judge if you do not agree, ask for more information or reasons why. This safety that was implemented can be observed in all other events I went to where people try not to judge, are keen listeners and storytellers, and respect others' privacy outside of the meetings. This safety was necessary for respondents to share their stories because they could often not be open about their relationships to everyone as people would judge or discriminate against them.

Another point that highlights how much my respondents valued being open and honest is that a number of informants did not want to be anonymous. For example, Tjeerd (29) explained that he was very open and honest about his relationship style towards other people, so much so that he said that he enjoyed our interview in the sunshine on the bench on a square in front of his home, where passers-by and another person sitting on our bench could easily hear our conversation. Feeling comfortable about being open and honest was also why he wanted to not be anonymous in this research. Another example was Louise (28) who even asked the different people she talked about if it would be okay to share their first names, with which they agreed. She felt comfortable with what she had told me as "it's nice to be open" about this topic. Although there were a number of respondents that wanted to stay anonymous, the other research participants that wanted to share their names did this because they were "out and proud" as Belle (24) said in a WhatsApp conversation we had, which fit into the polyamorous value of being open and honest.

Lastly, being open as an inside-out-sider (see p. 27-28) helped me gain rapport and made respondents forget that I was an anthropologist. Participating in discussion groups was necessary to see how people acted in everyday life outside of a more formal research setting. Respondents told me that they felt so comfortable with my presence that they forgot I was a researcher. I believe this is because I could share my personal experiences in polyamory and speak the same language. Even though this position can make me less aware of things that a polyamorist might also take for granted, it granted me the possibility to relate with respondents and also be open about my personal, polyamorous life. One informant told me that at one meeting there had been students doing research who were new to polyamory and they would ask questions about the basics. This informant said knowing the basics was a benefit for me, we could go further because of it, even though it can also lead to blind spots in which the 'basics' can be assumed to be similarly understood (Russell Bernard 2011: 280, Zaman 2008: 146). Furthermore, in many meetings people would share experiences, in some this was part of an exercise and in others this was how you would talk about a topic. Informants appreciated me sharing some of my experiences, with many wanting to know more about my story, as I said in the chapter on methodology. Me sharing information about my personal life can be related to polyamorists' appreciation for openness and honesty, which can also be seen in openness towards other polyamorists' experiences.

If my respondents saw intimacy as 'deep' connection, then being open and honest can be seen as the ground from which that intimacy grew. On the other hand, this clearly is something that is idealized and does not take into account the occasions when one does not tell everything,

like informants not telling some colleagues, friends or acquaintances about their polyamorous relationships. For future research it would be interesting to zoom in on the poly practice and ideal of being open and honest, when it does not occur and why, and how this is also a political act. Be reminded here of Belle's statement of being "out and proud" which clearly resembles LGBTQ+ rights discourse (Minning 2004, Itakura 2015: 48) where being open about being part of a minority can be seen as a political act. In the next paragraph I will discuss how respondents experienced trust through open communication, as this can shed more light on how intimacy and openness are related in poly practices.

Open communication, trust and misunderstandings

"You really need to communicate—otherwise you just don't know—which can
be really good, if you actually do it! If you don't, you risk making assumptions."
From an interview with Louise (28) in March 2017

The necessity of communicating openly and clearly was highlighted in many discussions with informants. In interviews respondents said it was necessary especially in polyamorous relationships, because as Annet said (36) it is easy to stick to assumptions in "close" relationships but this could have negative effects, like Annet's "heart going through the meat mincer" (*mijn hart ging door de gehaktmolen*). In a previous chapter I explained how these assumptions were related to mono-normative labels, here I want to focus on respondents' appreciation of open communication.

For Sascha (31) open communication and honesty were the basis for trust. She said that trust was especially important in any intimate relationships from friends to family. Sascha explained that she had one *afspraak* (an agreement): "that we discuss everything and that I know everything as soon as possible". She added that if someone would keep things from her, she would wonder why and distrust would arise. To overcome this, honest and open communication was needed and that way she could let her happiness for the situation take over. Seeing open and honest communication as the basis for trust was something other respondents also mentioned during fieldwork.

Even though open communication was seen as an important and integral part of polyamorists' relationship practices, misunderstandings still happened. The example that triggered me most, was Belle's (24) story about what dating:

Belle, a 24-year-old, pansexual woman and Master's student in cognitive linguistics, met up with me in a coffee shop at a train station close to her home. I had met her at a poly dinner event in Amsterdam and heard she was part of the Dutch foundation for polyamory. Thinking it would be interesting to learn more about her and the foundation I sent her a message to meet up for an interview. I had muddled up the dates and thought we were meant to meet that week, but during my delayed train ride she told me it was actually next week. Shortly after pointing that out, she added that she could come to the station now. It was no problem as she lived close by. Furthermore it would make her start her day, instead of hanging out at home procrastinating.

At the coffee café we talked about her past relationships and work for the foundation. She said she had relationships with everyone, disagreeing with seeing the word relationship solely to define specific romantic relationships. At a certain point she talked about a friend, Stanley, with whom she had gone to a coffee café a couple of times. Belle said Stanley had started to think they were dating, when Belle thought they were friends.

As I explained in the subchapter on labels and expectations, language can be interpreted differently and labels can have mono-normative assumptions even in polyamorous contexts. In this example Stanley assumed that because Belle was polyamorous she was available and romantically or sexually interested in him: their coffees were dates. After verifying with Belle, this was not the case. Even when one communicates at length about these topics some things can be misunderstood especially when it comes to what 'dating' means, as things like going for a coffee or a late night drink can be either a date or not, as Belle and I also discussed on other occasions.

For other respondents dating and flirting were clearly understood. An example was Zoe (63) who helped me out when trying to understand how another respondent felt when saying I was a very nice person, giving me a long hug and three kisses on the cheek. She felt she could tell this with ease and had appreciated me and my attention, even though we both never came to know what that respondent actually felt. Ferguson explains this contradictory observation best in his book on 'modernity' in the Zambian Copperbelt:

"Everyone is a little confused (some more than others, to be sure), and everyone finds some things that seem clear and others that are unintelligible or only partially intelligible. [...] Miscommunication and partial communication were not simply temporary obstacles in the methodological process of the ethnographer but central features of the 'authentic' cultural experience." (1999: 208)

Here it becomes clear that one can never completely understand what is going on in any situation on a cultural level as well as on an interpersonal level. If 'local' respondents cannot understand everything, how can an anthropologist think to understand people without misunderstanding some of their behaviour, experiences and perceptions? Additionally, miscommunication is part of "the 'authentic' cultural experience" (Ibid.) for polyamorists as the abovementioned examples show, even though respondents valued open and honest communication. An important question would be: why and how are some things misunderstood and others not so much? In the case of dating this could be due to mono-normative understandings of the word, but also due to what happens in this interaction. It could be that to misunderstand is necessary in this liminal space, but this is only a hypothesis and should be researched in its own right.

For now what I can conclude is that respondents related open communication to trust and thus safety, but even in that space one can misunderstand things. When respondents discussed open communication the self and self-knowledge often came up, but showing or opening up the self was not only a rewarding experience, it was also a dangerous process that I will discuss in the next section.

Opening up the self: a dangerous endeavour

"My heart only has a way in" – "*Mijn hart heeft alleen een ingang*"
Quote from an interview with Gerard (48).

Talking about openness and polyamory, might give the impression that boundaries dissolved as respondents could have romantic and sexual relationships with nearly anyone. As Gerard's quote shows: being open towards others could imply that there are no boundaries, no no's and no restrictions to how much love you can feel for people. You can only let them 'in'. But this was not the case as respondents set limits to openness and intimacy. In this subchapter I will discuss how boundaries, others, and the self were related in the poly practices of my informants.

Boundaries or limits (*grenzen*) could be experienced by respondents as restrictive, but if they came from the individual not 'society' respondents respected those boundaries. For instance, Tjeerd (29) said that it was important to think from your boundaries (*vanuit je eigen grenzen denken*) when being intimate with someone else to "authentically" open up and connect with another person. In this part of our interview he also said it was important to do this with each person's

consent when you get a "deeper" connection and come closer to yourself and the other person. Here it becomes clear that for Tjeerd, intimacy was related to boundaries and consent. It was something that one treads into mindfully without crossing someone's boundaries. This point, exemplified by Tjeerd, was something that many other respondents respected and mentioned in interviews and focus groups.

Furthermore, during fieldwork informants regularly referred to "consent" when talking about being intimate with others. In the focus group in Nijmegen respondents concluded after reflecting on academic descriptions of polyamory (Klesse 2011: 4, Haritaworn et al. 2006: 515, Sheff 2005: 252) that I showed them, that consent was always important in polyamorous relationships, and that this was how it could be considered ethical non-monogamy. These informants also critiqued the idea of "full knowledge" in openness and honesty, as there are limits to what one can know due to privacy or individual desires. On the other hand, an often used metaphor for starting out with polyamorous relationships was that of the "tortoise and the hare". This stood for the faster person, the hare, slowing down for the slowest person, the tortoise, to be able to explore polyamorous relationships and also be together. With these points one can see that partners have equal rights and freedoms in polyamory (Klesse 2011: 15), even though they can at times disagree and people could still cross boundaries. This sense of equality and the emphasis on consent are important differences from polygamous relationships in which there are often gender inequalities in who can have multiple relationships and how power is dispersed amongst actors (Koktevedgaard Zeitzen 2009: 125-144).

Respondents did not only focus on others, they also highlighted their sense of self. For example, Annet (36) mentioned it was important to take care of oneself (*op jezelf letten*) as she had not done that in the past and got hurt or was swept away by others in some poly relationships. Furthermore, reflecting on one's own behaviour was vital for knowing what you want and learning from experiences, according to Laurie (47) and Annet. For Laurie polyamory made her better acquainted with who she was, even though polyamory was hard at times and it could be confronting, it was rich (*rijk*) not just because of the people in her life but also because she could grow as a person by learning more about herself. Anthropologists Sehlikoglu and Zengin relate intimacy to the self when stating: "[t]he 'depth' of intimacy is related to its connection to our very sense of selves" (2015: 22). I have previously argued that the polyamorists I spoke to experienced intimacy when they opened up to others which was a vulnerable process. This vulnerability around the self and the subsequent potential for pain was managed through self-care, reflection and communication with others.

To conclude, opening the self up was necessary to facilitate intimacy, to connect at a

'deep' level which was considered the level of the self (refer to deep connection subchapter). For my respondents, being intimate with other people meant taking boundaries into account by communicating about consent, reflecting on personal desires and implementing self-care. Here it becomes apparent once again that the intimacy my respondents experienced was related to a potential for danger and pain which had to be managed to be able to have polyamorous relationships.

Open to changing relationships: what is a 'relationship'?

During fieldwork I saw Sara (24), a close friend of about 5 years, at least six times: twice for our interviews, once for a movie night, another time for a focus group, one day for a trip to the sauna and a last time to have dinner at another anthropology friend's house. If I would be an anthropologist in a new environment this would be seen as a lot of precious research time and I would believe that I had a very good sense of Sara as a person in my field. But Sara will always be an enigma, especially when it comes to her relationships. At the time of our interview Sara had relationships with different women and all of these connections changed during and after fieldwork. The only constant with Sara's relationships was gradual change, and her desire to see the people she enjoys spending time with. I regularly asked her about her situation and we often laughed about how unclear it was. I still do not understand exactly what she shares or how she experiences her connections with some people, whom she might see as partners or not. Even though we discussed this at length, the ever-changing situation of Sara remains a conundrum to me and I expect to her to some degree as well.

Although Sara's (24) situation exemplifies a point from a previous subchapter on misunderstandings (Ferguson 1999: 208) by being enigmatic, it also showed me how relationships are constantly changing. This did not mean that informants moved quickly from one person to the next or that their lives were rife with breakups, it meant that connections, situations and people change. For example, during fieldwork and shortly after, Isa (28) moved into a new house with her two partners and Zoe (63) felt restless in her relationship with her husband Geoffrey (68) but found equilibrium when he also started dating someone. Additionally a couple of people had started dating just before fieldwork, were partners during and broke up just after.

Another example of how polyamorous relationships change was Sascha's (31) story. She told me that she and her husband had gotten their marriage annulled, not because they wanted a

divorce, but because he did not want to be a legal father to Sascha and her other partner's baby. They did get re-married with a pagan "handfasting" ceremony by which they showed their long-term commitment to each other. Even though they are not legally married anymore and their relationship has changed compared to a year before fieldwork, Sascha said she was very happy with the current situation in the summer of 2017. She and her "baby-daddy" are living together and her husband lives around the corner. Sascha calls it "complete poly-happiness" (*complete poly-blijdschap*).

If relationships change so much, what are they, what connects them? In social sciences we use relationships in the broadest sense, but in everyday life my informants and monogamists I met, heard or interacted with in the area talked of 'relationships' as a clearly defined and consensual agreement covering specific romantic relationships. But that is where the difficulty lies in using this concept: what about all those relationships that do not fit that label? For example: Sascha had a transgender friend whom she called family[14] and with whom she was physically affectionate and at times used to be sexual with. Would she call their relationship a 'relationship' and would she also consider this person a 'partner,' a 'friend' and/or a 'family member'?

In the empirical chapter on mono-normativity, I already discussed labels and expectations connected to these categories, but respondents also discussed the difficulties surrounding 'relationship' as a category. Informants would talk about "relationships" and add air quotes or emphasize the word in such a way to acknowledge it as a category that could not contain the complex realities of their relationships. Additionally, one respondent Annet (36) preferred to talk about "connections" as opposed to "relationships". On the other hand, I heard diverse polyamorists talk of "complete relationships" (*volledige relaties*) even though they acknowledged that no relationship was the same and there were no universal criteria for these relationships. Sascha (31) talked about the time that she experienced her first "other real relationship-relationship" (*andere echte relatie-relatie*), when talking about her first polyamorous relationship with another partner. Additionally, Louise (28) talked about "meaningful relationships," although I did not know what she exactly meant. But here respondents also disagreed: at a focus group in Nijmegen respondents critiqued understandings of polyamory that emphasize "long-term commitment," as in their experience short-term relationships can be equally 'meaningful' and intimate. The constant tension between complexity and reductionism is something clearly shown in respondents' discussions of the term 'relationship.'

Another example that complicates the discussion around 'relationships' was Cora's

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[14] For a discussion of 'chosen families' amongst polyamorists see Sheff (2011) which echoes chosen families in gay relationships Weston (2005).

understanding of polyamory and intimate friendships. Cora (26) was a young woman I got to know when we went to the NMCI conference in Vienna. She considered herself lesbian, a/grey-sexual ("a-slash-grey-sexual") and a/grey-romantic, with which she meant that she did not feel sexual desire and romantic love the same way as people in general talked about. She described herself as somewhat of a relationship anarchist, as she critiqued strict categories of relationships and questioned if romantic and sexual relationships were more valuable than friendships. She called her partnerships or poly relationships "intimate friendships," in which, she told me, sex or romantic feelings were not expected to stay and if they would not be present in the relationships she would not consider this a loss. This resembles Klesse's observation amongst his respondents in the United Kingdom where friendship was an important aspect in their polyamorous discourse making space for "loving friendships" and "intimate partnerships" (2011: 13). But his point (Ibid.: 17) that there is more space for friendships in polyamory than in monogamous relationships is not exactly what I observed amongst my respondents. It was more so that *diverse* relationships were perceived as meaningful to the polyamorists I spoke to. Here there is a slight difference in that these polyamorists tried to re-imagine intimacy and relationships more fluidly, than what Klesse shows in discussions of his respondents. Even though Cora was one of the few respondents who considered themselves a/grey-sexual or –romantic, her story exemplifies the diversity in what relationships meant to informants.

As the previously discussed examples show, respondents were open towards changing relationships. But these 'poly relationships' still revolved around some kind of romantic or sexual aspect or future prospect as Tjeerd (28) pointed out. Being open towards the possibility of being sexually or romantically involved with multiple people, as Tjeerd (28) said, was how he enjoyed being in polyamorous relationships. Other informants also acknowledged this on different occasions. This point has to do with a mono-normative boundary on those interactions which polyamory took away. On the other hand diverse respondents mentioned how they interacted with 'ex-partners' and that they saw a breakup not as the end of a relationship: "we broke up but it hasn't failed" ("*het is uit maar niet mislukt*") Laurie (47). In her quote, Laurie also pointed out that breaking up did not have a negative connotation to her, the relationship just changes, which other respondents also mentioned by telling me they stayed friends with ex-partners and could not understand why this was difficult for monogamists. Even though polyamorists were open to changing relationships, the definition and implications of polyamory revolved around sexual and romantic interactions because mono-normativity formerly set boundaries to those relationships. This is why I think polyamory is 'positioned ambiguously in the conjuncture of diverse normative and counter-normative discourses on sex and relationships' (Klesse 2006: 579). Re-imagining

intimacy and relationships could not be done in a bubble or in isolation from mono-normativity amongst my respondents. Poly relationships were thus also influenced by mono-normativity.

Changing circumstances of respondents and a plethora of different kinds of relationships meant that taking diverse relationships into account as a researcher was and will be important for future projects on polyamory. This could be done better with additional fieldwork to get to know my respondents and their different relationships in more detail. As relationships change and labels hold such different meanings for different informants, I believe to have missed out on certain experiences of connections. This is not something that is acknowledged much in academic literature on polyamory, but I believe it is very important to understand how polyamorists experience connections in all of their personal relationships and how they deal with change. It would be fruitful to do a longitudinal research with a number of respondents to see how and why their relationships change and who is part of their lives intimately to come to a better understanding of polyamorous intimacies.

Conclusion

In this last empirical chapter I focused on the ways in which intimacy and openness are related in the personal relationships of respondents. Even though respondents emphasised being open towards diverse kinds of intimacy, polyamorous intimacies still revolved around sexual and romantic relationships due to the relationship between polyamory and monogamy, discussed in the previous subchapter. Thus not all personal relationships of respondents were mentioned in the field and we focused mostly on sexual and/or romantic relationships. Respondents' poly practices held openness and honesty in high regard, which was part of creating intimacy with others. With this intimacy respondents mentioned trust and communication as necessary to be clear about what they were doing, what they wanted and where boundaries lied. But this was not without misunderstandings as confusion is part of the "'authentic' cultural experience" (Ferguson 1999). Even though intimacy and openness were idealized, opening up the self was a dangerous endeavour for respondents. They managed the potential for pain by communicating with others in which consent, self-care and reflection were important aspects. Lastly I discussed how respondents were open to changing relationships and how they dealt with the definition of relationships. Taken together this chapter gives insight into polyamorous intimacies that are grounded in an appraisal of openness, even though respondents could not be and were not open all the time towards everything and everyone.

8. Concluding remarks

"Although it doesn't have to be a definition of poly, but a direct consequence is that you throw away the rulebook. A relationship can be anything? Emotionally, sexually, intellectually connected, all configurations…it affects my friendships as well: the whole idea of connecting to people, I can't put it into any labels anymore [sic]" Louise (28)

With this anthropological research, I set out to uncover what intimacy meant to polyamorists in the Netherlands. To do this I used the question: *How do polyamorists in the Netherlands perceive and experience intimacy in their personal relationships?* Intimacy was not a term informants often used in their day-to-day lives, but it resonated with their personal experiences. 'Intimacy' highlighted aspects of their polyamorous lives in such a way that one could understand their relationships from their point of view: as a sight for re-imagining intimacy. Louise showed this in the abovementioned quote from a focus group on polyamory and intimacy: she perceived polyamory as making her re-evaluate what relationships were by doing away with the rule book and labels. With this she refers to a monogamous rulebook and mono-normative labels that value monogamous romantic or sexual connections over others. In an ideal poly world, my informants could have relationships with whom they wanted on their own terms, not being influenced by mono-normativity. What I have shown with this thesis is that even though polyamorists re-imagined intimacy as facilitating deep connection in all kinds of relationships and as an openness towards cultivating these relationships, mono-normativity still related their relationships to monogamous understandings of romance and sex in contingent ways. The polyamorists I spoke to made space for diverse connections and appreciated intimacy in ways that fit their ideology, but this could not go without being influenced by mono-normativity.

In anthropology, Gupta and Ferguson saw this point of connection between different cultural styles as a 'borderland' (1992: 18). As I have said, polyamorists do not live in an isolated place far away from monogamous influences. Thus researching polyamorists one must consider this space of connection, as I have mentioned and hopefully have shown with this thesis. For anthropologists this can inspire us to be more critical of questions of alterity and the position of the ethnographer, which my fieldwork and thesis have inspired me to do. I will end with a discussion of these two points, a few ideas for future research and a word of thanks.

First the concept of intimacy is a topic well suited for anthropologists as we go to intimate spaces and become intimately acquainted with the everyday lives of our respondents. We

bed ourselves into these lives and if we are lucky we can come back many times over the years to see how life changes. Becoming more intimate with one's field and topic of study changes the position of the anthropologists to a partial insider, some anthropologists keep their distance whilst others "go native" (Russell Bernard 2011: 260-261). Additionally, anthropologists have historically focused on those cultures that are considered 'other' or 'exotic' trying to understand these different cultures from a 'local' perspective whilst reflecting on the ethnographer's ethnocentric position (Messerschmidt 1981: 3-4). For example, polygamy was one of the topics of study that anthropologists looked into, in awe of this non-monogamous kinship system (Koktevedgaard Zeitzen 2009: 4). Would polyamory then too be 'other' enough for a Dutch anthropologist to study? This was not the case from my perspective as an inside-out-sider.

In 'our' anthropological imagination alterity has to do with an 'other' outside of ourselves who is different enough to keep distance whilst also come close with understanding and participant observation. Ideally an anthropologist experiences some culture shock, writes down their first impressions and asks questions that someone well habituated to a cultural style might forget to ask (Messerschmidt 1981: 3). But this distance is idealized as we also become closely related to our respondents through relationships, shared experiences, language and most importantly time. Auto-ethnography and 'native' ethnographers question the boundaries of what anthropology is and what our field of study can be (Ibid.: 13-14). My fieldwork as an inside-out-sider exemplifies this point: I too am a semi-insider as one should not overestimate the understanding I had before starting fieldwork and underestimate the critical and reflexive inquiry I partook in systematically during the research project. As Zaman points out with his research as a Bangladeshi doctor amongst doctors in Bangladesh: "Am I therefore, really a native amongst the natives?" (2008: 152). He comes to this question by acknowledging the diversity amongst 'natives' and the process of entering the field as an anthropologist (Ibid.). I believe that the ethnographer in al settings must constantly become intimate yet distanced with one's field and respondents, by systematically doing this and reflecting on one's position can one create a rich and critical ethnography. Only by promoting both 'insider' and 'outsider' research can we learn more about humanity, not by assuming one fosters 'better' anthropological insight than the other.

Although I am of the opinion that my position of inside-out-sider was a useful one for this research, it came with a number of stumbling blocks and critical points. For instance, it was hard for me to extract myself from the field everyday, because my personal life was embedded in the field. Additionally, nearly everything in my life became part of the field, at which point I had to put up some boundaries and meet up with friends who were not in polyamorous relationships to stay sane. Although this immersion was useful for ethnographic and practical reasons to check

findings and find respondents easily, it has coloured this research with some 'Jemma'. Furthermore, I could not take the distance and see the field as a novice could. On the other hand, it added to the experience of knowing that there was always more to find and that my analyses were never complete, which made me a humble, and I believe, better anthropologist for it. To somewhat deal with these effects I constantly reflected on my position, discussed observations and analyses with supervisors, colleagues, friends, respondents and fellow researchers at the NMCI conference. Additionally I (23) was interviewed by Sara (24), respondent, friend and fellow anthropologist and organized a focus group with respondents to discuss a number of my analyses in the summer of 2017. Being open to this feedback and these insights helped the research along, let me stay close to what respondents experienced and acknowledge who my academic audience was. It should prove fruitful to also have novices study polyamory in the Netherlands. But for this fieldwork of around 3 months it was worthwhile to have a foot in the field, to be able to do far more than one could have done if one had to start from scratch.

For future research on intimacy amongst any group of people it would be worthwhile to follow informants in their personal lives. This way you could get empirical data about life at home, dates, everyday discrimination, and arguments, instead of only accounts of those events from respondents. People forget feelings and experiences, and tell what they think is necessary in more formal research settings. Additionally one could research how polyamorists deal with emotions and cultural change. Deri has researched how polyamorists deal with emotions such as jealousy (2015), but I have observed respondents change the way they deal with emotions like jealousy and love during fieldwork. Researching this point of cultural change could give more insight into the cultural construction of emotions and make anthropologists more aware of how these culturally constructed emotions can change and why. Building on this anthropological research and focusing on polyamorists in the Netherlands could add to a cross-cultural understanding of polyamorous emotions and 'emotion work' (Hochshild 1979).

Lastly I would like to end with a word of thanks to the polyamorists I met up with during and after fieldwork: thank you for the generous amounts of time and enthusiasm you put into working with me and the ease you experienced when talking about your private lives. You inspire me to be a better anthropologist. Thanks to Sara my anthropology friend and fellow polyamorist for proofreading this thesis, and the other friends, respondents and colleagues who helped me shape the arguments made here. Also thanks to the attendees of the NMCI conference in Vienna for their input and appreciation. Another thanks to my two supervisors for their time and insight: thank you Jasmijn and Paul. And finally, thanks to my partner Hector, who has supported me in this project not only with delicious food but also critical reflections on my work.

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