Many Loves: An anthropological exploration of the values and narratives of consensual non-monogamists on love, sex, and relationality

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Abstract

This article explores the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives of people practicing consensual non-monogamy (CNM) and questions how their values about love, intimacy, relationality, and sexuality relate to their practice of CNM. To gain these insights, I used experimental ethnographic methods such as autoethnography, film, and in-depth unstructured interviewing, alongside a theoretical framework based on Foucault's view on sexuality and the concept of mononormativity combined with the wider contextualizing academic discussion surrounding CNM. This resulted in argumentation that centers around the idea that the discourse and narratives surrounding love sex and relationality one adheres to, relate not only to various practical approaches to CNM but also to one's sense of identity and morality within it. First, I explored sexually nonexclusive relationships or *open relationships,* in the context of the youth *hook-up* culture, and then in married couples exploring swinging and BDSM non- monogamously. I argued that both of these relationships' structures depended on a mononormative separation of romantic love and sexuality, while for the first group this separation was implicit and extradyadic sexuality went unspoken, the second group created this dissociation voluntarily and critically as they presented sex as a form of play and claimed to take advantage of the conventional structure of marriage. After this, I focused on *polyamory* i.e., romantic CNM, and its use of language to label feelings, relationships, and social phenomena to change the way polyamorists relate and communicate. Which impacted not only polyamorists' philosophy of relationality but also causes a reorganization of their lives and their sense of identity. However, as this sanitized holistic vision of love is essentialized into a relational identity, it still carries underlying mononormative tendencies.

Introduction

"But doesn't it make you feel jealous?" and "What if you want kids someday?" are two of the questions I get asked most regularly when I tell people that I am polyamorous. Usually, their eyes widen, and their brows lift with curiosity, as they decide to shower me with questions about my life choices and sexual preferences. After picking my brain for hours and used me as their very own relationship's therapist, they typically all come to the same conclusion: "Oh wow, I could never do that."

For this research, I would like to introduce a topic that is very personal to me: the practices, identities, and worldviews created around consensual non-monogamy (CNM). This umbrella term refers to "intimate, sexual, and/or romantic relationships that involve more than two people, in which those involved are aware of, and consent to, the non-monogamous aspects of the relationships" (Hamilton et al. 2021: 1217). This includes polyamory, open relationships, monogamish relationships, swinging, multi-partner sex, and relationship anarchy. These labels differ in their relationship structures and practices but overlap in their principles of consent and non-exclusivity (Ibid.).

I have been polyamorous for a few years already, and while my approaches have fluctuated over time, it has always felt right somehow. The more I learned about it, the more content, warm and honest I grew with myself and others. This research has allowed me to be more open about these ideas with the world around me, some of these were met with awe and curiosity while others echo in waves of fear and disgust. It was a fascinating opportunity to witness how we, as people, create these rules and narratives for ourselves, especially when it comes to defining relationality and intimacy. In a world where we are increasingly accepting of a variety of worldviews and lifestyles; where we are starting to open our eyes to the societal power relations of colonialism, ableism, racism, homophobia, and sexism, why are we still so dependent on the heteronormative monogamous idea of dyadic coupledom?

Monogamy and Polygamy

Over the last few years, there has been a renewed interest in various types of consensual non-monogamous relationships, both in academia and in popular culture. Nonetheless, while the visibility and research about non-monogamous people have grown, the stigma and discrimination against them have remained. To address this issue at its roots, we first must go back in time, to consider how relationality, love, and sexuality were conceptualized in different cultural settings.

To gain a sense of the universality or subjectivity of these human behaviors and the societal structures built upon them, we must first define what monogamy is. Monogamy is a form of dyadic entanglement in which an individual only has one partner during their lifetime. For humans in contemporary society, this partnership can be sexual, marital, social, or genetic (Reichard 2003: 3). Monogamy is often rationalized biologically by describing it as a survival strategy. Evolutionary theorists generally explain that humans are born with large brains causing them to have a lengthy developmental period, they, therefore, need bi-parental care to be raised, fed, and protected (Low 2003: 161).

However, monogamy is commonly used to refer to the concept of serial monogamy, which means having only one partner at a given time, instead of the lifelong monogamous coupledom observable in the animal kingdom. Koktevedgaard Zeitzen argues that in anthropology, serial monogamy in which divorce and remarriage occur, can be seen as a form of polygamy, since it also links together different households through paternity and income (2008: 15). Let's consider alongside this, the rising divorce rates, according to Lewis's (2001) study, 62% of parents are split up, and the rates of hidden infidelities in marriage are estimated to be up to 60 or 70 % (Vangelisti and Gernstenberger 2004). Current relationships are thus monogamous more in name than in deed.

Is monogamy therefore really the most natural form of human relationality? When an overwhelming 85% of societies have some form of marriage with multiple partners? (Koktevedgaard Zeitzen 2008: 14). Indeed, in the *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967), Murdock compiled data from 1,231 societies around the world and claimed that 186 were monogamous; 453 had occasional polygyny, which refers to when a man marries multiple women. 588 societies had more recurring forms of polygyny, and 4 had forms of polyandry, in which a woman marries multiple men. Koktevedgaard Zeitzen argues that the prevalence of polygyny, compared to polyandry makes sense from an evolutional standpoint because "on the individual level, polygyny appears to reduce fertility, whereas polygyny main contributes to high fertility at the societal level" (2008: 63). Indeed, according to Starkweather and Hames, polyandry is often associated with certain regions such as Northern India, Nepal, and Tibet, and the Marquesas, and certain societal structures such as "small-scale egalitarian societies that produce food through hunting and gathering, and horticulture" (2012: 166). However, through their analysis of both classical and non-classical forms of polyandry, they concluded that "it is probable that polyandry has a deep human history" since it happened in all sorts of communities throughout the world with a wide variety of environments (Starkweather and Hames 2012: 153).

Monogamous and non-monogamous relationship structures are thus both modes of human organization based on biological facts such as reproduction, climate, and resources. However, I would argue that these forms of relationality are deeply intertwined with the societal construction of gender, sexuality, and

capitalism. Indeed, Rubin argues that in many different cultures, a social contract of trust and mutual aid between families is built through the exchange of women, for sexual access and genealogical lineage. Since the taboo of incest keeps men from marring their sisters, they offer them as a gift to a worthy husband in the community, in hopes of increasing their chances of marrying that family's daughter in the future. (1975: 173). Rubin draws inspiration from this theory of kinship, to argue that the unequal and gendered division of roles, where a woman cares for the home and the children while men provided resources through economical labor, has existed for centuries through this control and exchange of women. According to her, most economic structures in the world are based on these socio-sexual systems based on certain taboos, the main one being the social norms generated around gender, as a taboo that emphasizes the differences between biological sexes to justify gendered human activities. (Ibid.: 178). Additionally, there is a standardization of heterosexuality, she explains that while many cultures have forms of homosexuality, these individuals often have to take on the roles and labors of the other sex and aren't allowed to embody both genders at the same time. One of the main taboos is also the repression of female sexuality, which implies that women must passively accept whoever they are supposed to marry, without having any agency or desire of their own (Ibid.: 180).

These deep-rooted taboos and underlying gendered social structures seem to come forth both in monogamous and polygamous relationships. While polygamy has historically existed in ways that were repressive and patriarchal, so did monogamy, through "the unequal expectations and costs of compulsory monogamy for women and men" and "the constructions of women as property" (Willey 2006: 531). In her article, Willey argues that similar to the exclusion of women of color and other intersectional voices in the mainstream white feminist discourse, polygamous women are excluded and robbed of their agency through the narrative that polygamous women need to be saved (Ibid.: 538). Indeed, she analyses Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) to show that monogamy was naturalized by associating it with racelessness, civilization, and Christian moral values. Similarly, Witte's work (2015) centers around how and why Europe rejected polygamy ideologically, legally, and religiously through the centuries. Witte argues that while polygamy was practiced in Ancient Hebrew society, "the Christian tradition wavered in its opposition to polygamy" throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages (2015: 450). However, the discoveries of "unnatural" polygamous practices in the New World helped the western Christian world crystallize their views of non-monogamy as a violation of men's natural God-given rights to "fidelity, property, honesty and respect" (Ibid.: 454). Additionally, polygamy has a prominent role in nineteenth-century anthropological theories of kinship, which were often guided by an evolutionary worldview that identified other cultures as being less civilized and modern than western society. Polygamy was viewed as a sign of promiscuity that "denoted the contrast between the original, immoral condition of humanity and its ultimate stage of monogamous family life i.e., the moral perfection of Western civilization." (Koktevedgaard Zeitzen

2008: 42). In early anthropological discourse, the practice of non-monogamy was thus viewed through the lens of polygamous marriage framing it as uncivilized, racialized, and separate from the idea of love (Willey 2006: 532).

Lindholm argued that "ethnographers have been far more comfortable writing about cannibalism and incest than writing about romance" (2006: 7). He explains that love and romantic practices have been under-researched in anthropology, although this started shifting with the *Geertzian turn* that generated more focus on emotions as a form of embodied cognition. Nonetheless, recent anthropological research on love relationality and sexuality has continued perpetuating the values and traditions of Western society, in which exclusive romantic coupledom is normalized and presented as a universal emotional norm. Indeed, in Koktevedgaard Zeitzen's book, she explores existing ethnographic works about Mormon polygyny in the USA, Hindu polyandry in India, and Muslim polygyny in Malaysia. She compares the existing evolutionary, environmental, and political theories behind polygamy, with the economic, status, emotional, sexual, and logistical concerns of polygamous unions. She comes to the conclusion, that polygamy is a widescale phenomenon that is currently taking place on all continents, amongst adherents of most religions, and that polygamy needs to be addressed more in this contemporary context of globalization, economic development, migration, and political struggles for civil and human rights (Koktevedgaard Zeitzen, 2008:165). Yet she only mentioned the word love a handful of times in this entire book. Additionally, polyamory is only mentioned twice in her book. In the introductory chapter, she defines it as a mode of romantic extramarital non-monogamy (Ibid.: 14), which is forgotten completely until the very end of the book when it is quickly enumerated as part of the possible futures of polygamy (Ibid.: 179). This brilliantly exemplifies the gap that I am starting to notice in academic literature between polygamy and polyamory, which possibly illustrates a gap in worldviews. The anthropological research on polygamy, that we have reflected upon in this section functions through the lens of kinship, inspired by traditional colonialism theories in spite of itself, contrasts with the emerging literature on consensual non-monogamy and polyamory, based on feminism and queer studies, which tends to gloss over the complex history of polygamy.

This short contextualization has allowed me to shed light on several ideas, first, that non-monogamy has always existed in a variety of shapes and forms all over the world. Secondly, both polygamous and monogamous forms of relativity are intrinsically linked with the gendered heteronormative division of economic activities. And thirdly, the discipline of anthropology has historically had a bias again polygamy based on the western cultural and religious context, which caused them to *other* non-monogamous communities even in their own countries.

Consensual Non-Monogamy

After having explored the cultural and ideological context of monogamy and polygamy, this introduction will return to its initial focus, CNM in contemporary western society. Indeed, while anthropologists were still researching polygamy in African and Asian societies throughout the 20th century, the sexual revolution was underway in Europe and the United States.

Bogle explains that in the mid-1920s, the dominant model of courtship, "getting to know each other en route to marriage", shifted into "dating", which at that time typically implied temporary relationships in which men sought sexual gratification while they were delaying marriage till after they graduated from university (2008:14). On the course of the following decades, the emergence of contraception, and increased female agency, the rise of the Gay Rights movement, combined in counterculture movements such as the Free Love movement in the 1960s and 1970s (Haritaworn et al. 2006: 518). This sexual liberation is also emphasized in academic circles with influential works such as Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and Giddens' *The transformation of intimacy* (1992). However, the liberatory effect of this sexual liberation was later contested in the feminist sex wars and by authors like Foucault, especially in light of the HIV/AIDS epidemics in the 80s.

So, which forms of relationality and intimacy are we left with in the 21st century? As I have explained from the 1960s onwards, men but more newly so women, had more access to sexual promiscuity without being outlawed (De Graeve 2019: 855). This grave rise to new types of entanglements particularly amongst young people that Boyle characterizes as "friends with benefit" and "hooking up" which are primarily sexual and sometimes non-exclusive (2008: 7). While the institutions of monogamous and polygamous marriage still exist through the world, Anderson argues that "premarital sex, divorce, and infidelity are the norm today" (2012: 88). In the gaps between the idealist monogamous romantic life and the permissiveness of extradyadic sexuality behind closed doors, sprouted various forms of so-called, *consensual* or *ethical* non-monogamy. These non-monogamous terms and practices are difficult to categorize because of their elusive and everchanging nature, I, therefore, choose to use Hamilton et al.'s definitions through this article, as well as *consensual non-monogamy*, i.e., CNM for short, to refer to them as a whole. (For a more complete, visual, and playful view of the different types of CNM see Appendix 1.)

First, there is *swinging,* which "refers to a couple having sexual relations with other couples and could involve "swapping partners". They explain these relationships emphasize, "sexual relationships, typically during the same time and place. "(Hamilton et al 2021: 1217). According to Terry Gould (1999), swinging began during World War II, because of the high mortality of pilots going overseas, which caused them to take care of the wives of their deceased colleagues, both emotionally and sexually. Swigging thus gained

its popularity during the 'Swinging 70s', which it lost in the next decade as an overall 7% of swingers had quit swinging because of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Jenks 1998: 515). While swinging made some occasional comebacks in the 21st, it gained some negative connotations because of its associations with STD risks and its supposed intolerance of same-sex male sexuality (Frank 2008). Nowadays swinging is majorly overshaded by a new term, *polyamory*.

Polyamory is a patchwork of Greek and Latin which translates into "many loves". Haritaworn et al. describe it as a "form of relationship where it is possible, valid, and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously" (2006: 515). The rise of polyamory as a form of CNM in the 2000s was thus mostly attributed to the increasing importance of the internet which allowed online communities to sprout, connecting people with a niche interest in sexuality and relationships all over the globe. Although the term polyamory has been around for a few decades, in the United States, Klesse (2014) argues it is only just starting to become popular in Europe and is still relatively unknown in the rest of the world. He explains that "seeds for this movement have originated from within the intersections of a range of subcultures, including the bisexual and BDSM scenes, the Pagan and new age movements, computer enthusiasts, the Science Fiction Fan scenes, and political or countercultural groups committed to communal living" (Klesse 2014: 566). This increased interest in consensual non-monogamy was also mainly linked to the growing acceptance of queer and LGBTQ+ communities, but also to the rise of self-help books about love and relationships, such as Easton and Hardy's world-famous *The Ethical Slut* (1997), as well as the influence of celebrities who started openly presenting themselves as non-monogamous (Hamilton et al. 2021: 1217).

The charm of polyamory has often been attributed to its "potentially universal appeal" (Sheff 2020: 889), and its attempt to distance itself from sex-radical politics, while attempting to reconcile itself with more traditional Christian ideas on love (Klesse 2006:568). The term polyamory has swallowed up the discourse on CNM, omitting lesser-known forms of non-monogamous relationality that are used in the day-to-day. These include *relationship anarchy*, inspired by the tenets of political anarchy, which is "the practice of valuing all relationships in one's life as equally important and not privileging relationships that have romantic or sexual components." (Hamilton, et al. 2021: 1217). There are also *monogamish relationships*, in which "partners engage in sexual activity with others outside the relationship but remain primarily monogamous" (Ibid.). As well as the very widely used but completely understudied term *open relationship* that ended up being a key notion of this research, which is defined as "a catch-all term for many CNM configurations but tends to center around a dyad whose relationship is sexually non-exclusive." (Ibid.).

Rubin's *Whatever Happened to Swingers, Group Marriages, and Communes?* (2001), famously critiqued the lack of consideration of nontraditional family structures in academia and shed light on this unexplored

and often misunderstood field of study. However, over the last two decades, an intense popular interest in these alternative forms of relationality thus arose, particularly in polyamory, which was echoed in academic circles, through the lens of feminist and queer studies (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 749). These academic works dealing with non-monogamy have been polarized, they have either been very celebratory of CNM or criticized it heavily. Barker and Langdridge explain that the former category, situated in a feminist and Marxist discourse presents non-monogamy as a radically new way of relating that generates more personal autonomy through equality and negotiation in relationships (2010: 754). However, some authors are more critical of these ideas and question to what extent non-monogamy is revolutionary. They question the apolitical or even harmful motivations of the people taking part in these types of relationships. Indeed, De Graeve's comparative analysis of men in open relationships and "cheating men", similarly critiques the term "ethical nonmonogamy" claiming that these men perpetuated the same gendered dynamics and stigmas, without giving much importance to the values of openness and equality behind these concepts (2019: 856). Additionally, while some forms of sexually non-exclusive relationships continue operating in the shadows, the values and sense of identity surrounding polyamory might contribute to setting up "new regimes of normativity, endorsing individualism at the expense of critiquing structural power relations around race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality" (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 755). They argue that these texts sometimes propose a universal model that conceptualizes non-monogamy as natural and ethical which might perpetuate essentialist notions rather than addressing the intersectional experiences of non-monogamy.

Which leads me to ask the question: What role do the categories of *open relationships* and *polyamory* serve for the people practicing consensual non-monogamy, and how does the existence of such concepts relate to their beliefs and values about relationality and intimacy within the context of a mononormative society? To reflect on this problem, this research project will first define a theoretical framework based on Foucault's history of sexuality and the concept of mononormativity, after which, I will detail my methodological and ethical choices in the field. In this section, I will explain my positionality as an auto ethnographer, my techniques of in-depth and art-based interviewing, as well as my relationship to filmmaking as a method of inquiry. Thereafter, will be my empirical section, which is divided into two parts that deal with the values and practices behind open relationships and polyamory respectfully. Finally, this article will be closed with an attempt to recontextualize my findings within the wider academic discussion on how love and sexuality relate to identity and moral values.

Theoretical Framework

> "Recent authors have playfully suggested applying a polyamorous approach to theories themselves rather than adhering rigidly to one particular theoretical or political stance. One might have a primary relationship with poststructuralism, secondary relationships with existentialism and socialist feminism, occasional brief but satisfying encounters with anarchism, and the odd secretive fumble with Rogerian humanism, for example." (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 764)

The analysis of this article will be built primarily on Foucault's constructionist views on sexuality but will take inspiration from a patchwork of theories and conceptual tools, mainly derived from queer theory such as the main concept in consensual non-monogamy research: mononormativity. As opposed to objectivism, constructionism refers to the worldview that "social phenomena and meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors," they are "not only produced through social interaction but they are in a constant state of revision" (Bryman 2012: 33). In this ontology, we, therefore, understand that our perception of reality, and the rules and labels we abide by, are collectively constructed, through shared ways of articulating the world around us.

Scientia Sexualis and Ars Erotica

This view is largely inspired by Michel Foucault as he explains that the language, narratives, and forms of representations we use are vehicles for power relations, ideologies, and thus socio-cultural change. In his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he critiques the *repression hypothesis*, the popular belief that while the discussion on sexuality was socially repressed in previous centuries, it was freed by the sexual liberation movement at the end of the 20th century. His main argument was about how truth and knowledge about sexuality are produced. Indeed, he claims that in a lot of Eastern and Ancient civilizations:

> "truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul." (1978: 57)

He opposes this "ars erotica" with "scientia sexualis" which is the preferred method in our Christian western society. He argues that our production of truth is characterized by confessions which are a form of speech

acts, they're "a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement." (Ibid.: 61).He thus applies these notions to 17th-century western society claiming that there was "a veritable discursive explosion" in interest in sexuality (Ibid.: 17). He argued that as the church was losing its importance, confessing one's sins was not, as there was increased governmental interest in biopolitics, which implies analyzing sex as a way to managing and studying populations (birth and death rates, marriages …). However, sexuality was only discussed through a specific and restrictive "authorized vocabulary" which defined the *normal* sexual practices of married straight couples having sex to populate the nation (Ibid.). These practices, promoted through both canonical and civil law were dissociated from the increasingly scrutinized *deviant* sexual practices like women's "hysteria", children's masturbation, and the "perverse pleasures" of homosexual practices (Ibid.: 104).

While this naming process aimed to promote healthy and moral sexual practices while condemning deviant practices, the interest in the "world of perversion" in the 18th and 19th centuries inadvertently contributed to what Foucault called "the deployment of sexuality", which is the "dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities" (Ibid.: 13). For Foucault, the Christian confession ritual is a liberating and purifying ritual in which we give up our power through our expression (Ibid.: 60). We perform it as we declare our crimes in the courtroom, our symptoms at the doctor's office, our affection to our lovers. However, he particularly links this to the rise of psychotherapy and its process of subjectification which is the becoming of an intelligible subject (Ibid. : 59).

Indeed, he explains that sexuality has become increasingly medicalized and rationalized through the disciplines of medicine, sociology, and psychology. While homosexuality for example was first perceived as a disorder thought to be caused by biological and hereditary factors, slowly it become a form of self-identity: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (Ibid.: 43). He describes that both the exercises of confessing and meticulously studying and observing, generate a sense of "pleasure and power" both to those researching sexuality and the perverts themselves (Ibid.: 44). Finally, he ends this chapter presenting 19th-century bourgeois society as "a society of blatant and fragmented perversion" which engages in perversity but regulated it through a "sexual mosaic" of sexual categorization (Ibid. : 47). As opposed to the conventional narrative of sexual liberation, Foucault thus didn't believe that we achieved the desired epistemological state of *ars erotica,* instead we still relish in our *scientia sexualis* (Ibid.).

Mononormativity

While Foucault didn't address CNM in depth in his work, he offers a very interesting analysis of the different ways we understand and discuss sexuality, morality, identity, and discourse in western society, which might offer a model for how different forms of relationality and intimacy can be understood.

There were some passages of his introductory volume in which he questions "was the nineteenth-century family a monogamic and conjugal cell?" (Ibid.: 46). Indeed, he explains that the monogamous heterosexual family structure has specific norms:" the polarity established between the parents' bedroom and that of the children (…), the relative segregation of boys and girls...". This "complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities" is legitimated by the state and religion yet non-monogamous and deviant behavior persists at the margins of society (Ibid.). Indeed, as opposed to the deployment of sexuality which is characterized by pleasure and fluid and contingent power relations and subjectivities, he defines the "deployment of alliances." The deployment of alliances as a fixed system aimed to use sexuality as a "technology of power" to populate the state (Ibid. : 108). It relies on the rules of morality and legality, "defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit," but also on economics, "a system of marriage, of fixation and development of kinship ties, of transmission of names and possessions" (Ibid. : 106).

In this passage, Foucault is starting to hint at a tension point that is key in the academic discussion about non-monogamy. It is not only the discourse and power relations of sexual practices and expressions that are controlled and regulated but also forms of relationality, partnership, and what we define as love. Indeed, inspired by Foucault, Willis introduces the concept of "Relational Panopticism" as "a theoretical and analytical tool to understand how sexual and romantic normativities are reproduced in the resistance strategies of those engaged in non-monogamous and polyamorous relationships" (2019: 508). She argues that institutions and social networks orient people towards monogamy and therefore non-monogamous people resisting this framework must either self-surveil in the context of this "compulsory monogamy" or "to disrupt the pattern of compulsory norms, develop their own mirrored image with explicit codes of conduct as the ''right'' way to arrange and perform non-monogamy." (Ibid.)

This is where the concept of mononormativity comes into play. The term mononormativity was coined by Pieper and Bauer (2005) and derived from queer theory's concept of heteronormativity. Introduced by Warner (1991), heteronormativity refers to the idea that heterosexuality, along with the assumptions about the gender binary and the nuclear family associated with it, is viewed as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. Also referred to as *monocentrism* (Bergstrand and Sinski 2010) and *compulsory monogamy* (Emens 2004; Willey 2015), mononormativity is the dominant societal assumption that monogamous romantic and sexual coupledom is the only natural and morally correct way to form a relationship. This assumption is enforced through various institutional, cultural, and legal mechanisms, which contribute to

non-monogamy remaining "demonized, pathologized, marginalized, and subject to the social regulation of ridicule" (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 756). In her analysis of the contested definitions of *swinging* and *polyamory* from non-monogamy blogs and online glossaries, Kean argues that this relationship typology relies "on mononormative assumptions about sex, love, and friendship" (2016: 458). She identifies certain recurring mononormative tropes which will be helpful for me to situate the values surrounding relationality and intimacy in my own field:

> "1. the passionate/romantic ideal of "one true love"
>
> 2. the steady/companionate ideal of a "soul mate"
>
> 3. the idea that the measure of commitment is sexual "fidelity"
>
> 4. the idea that the measure of commitment is emotional "fidelity"
>
> 5. the fact that "fidelity" and "faithfulness" are understood as synonyms of "monogamy"
>
> 6. the belief that having one sexual-romantic partner at a time is mature/natural/best
>
> 7. the idea that there is a clear, coherent, and sustainable distinction between the category's "friend" and "lover"
>
> 8. the belief that sex is healthy only in the company of romance and commitment
>
> 9. the way romance and commitment are understood as leading to or synonymous with monogamy
>
> 10. the belief that sex means you are serious about someone
>
> 11. the contradictory belief that sex with more than one person shows you are not serious about those people." (Ibid.: 470)

Throughout this theoretical framework, I have explored different overarching theoretical dichotomies and tension points. First, I identified the core of Foucault's *History of Sexuality,* to bring to light his main epistemological concepts of *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. Based on this categorization, Foucault introduces his sociological and historical concepts of *the deployment of sexuality* and *the deployment of alliances*. I have argued that these might be an early attempt at introducing the concept of mononormativity which is the main concept of the academic discussion on consensual non-monogamy. Now that both my methodology and my theoretical framework are defined, I will develop the practical methods I have used in the field.

Methodologies

Autoethnography and the Selection of Participants

> "A queer approach to autoethnography is one which recognizes that bodies are immersed in, and fixed by, texts, but also recognizes these bodies as doing, speaking and understanding beings, forthrightly incomplete, unknown, fragmented and conflicting" (Nash and Browne 2010: 211).

Nash and Browne define several parallels between autoethnography and queer theory, claiming that both question the received notions of traditional methodologies while making use of fluidity and intersubjectivity (Nash and Browne 2016: 197). Autoethnography was one of the core methods I used in this research. Adams et al. describe autoethnography as "a method for exploring, understanding, and writing from, through and with personal experiences in relation to and in the context of the experiences of others" (2015: 23). They explain that ethnography has gone through a crisis of representation, and anthropologists have ceased to try and create a sense of scientific objectivity in social reality and started using a method which included more subjective and artistic "personal-cultural entanglements" (Ibid.: 22). My research subject is particularly prickly and intimate since our perceptions of love and sexuality are very personal and deeply linked to our sense of self, our religious or political beliefs, our sense of openness or shame. My work would therefore necessarily be tainted with my own biases and perspectives, as an insider-outsider in the world of non-monogamy. This is why I choose to integrate my own experiences in both this article and my film, *Multi Love, a Collection of Non Monogamous Tales* (2022).

My positionality as someone practicing and thinking about non-monogamy was, therefore, useful in many aspects. It was a key starting point for finding participants and a way to establish a trusting relationship with them. It also provided a set of embodied and emotional experiences that I could tap into to relate to my field. Additionally, autoethnography also allowed me to provide an added layer of depth to my audience through capturing and writing about instances of my own life. Adams et al. explain that the autoethnography process centers around uncovering what links someone with their research topic. This can take the shape of "epiphanies" as key transformative events in the researcher/participant's life or a collection of mundane everyday moments, as well as objects, artworks, or pieces of media that contribute to a person's ideas or experiences which need to be dug out in an "auto-archeological" way (Ibid. : 49). I tried to take this a step further by experimenting with filming in my daily life, recording conversations with my partners in long static takes or trying to capture significant objects or places. This is therefore something I kept in mind throughout my research, as I tried to write out which feelings, thoughts and moments contributed to non-monogamy emerging in my own life. I filmed and wrote about my partners, family, and friends as we

dialogued on these ideas together. I tried to be attentive to my prejudices and assumptions when I was faced with the existential testimonies of my participants. I also reflected on how these encounters affected me, sometimes reassuring me some time making me doubt these life choices.

Of course, autoethnography also has its limitations, since researchers might overlook "self-data" because of their familiarity with the subject (Chang et al. 2016: 21). This is why Chang et al. focus on the idea of collaborative, intersubjective, and analytical autoethnography, in which the evocative experiences of the auto ethnographer are used as a tool to connect with the narratives of other participants and situate it into a wide sociocultural context (ibid: 18). To gain access to my field, I thus started by using my positionality to meet participants through my own partners, friends, and acquaintances, as well as through online tools and using the snowball method. Bryman defines this as a "sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had experiences or characteristics relevant to the research." (2012: 424). He argues that while this method might not be scalable, it allows researchers to reach populations that are hard to access because of their lack of a clear sampling frame. Which was my case, since for a lot of my participants this is a very private dimension of their lives.

I also made use of online tools, first to get accustomed to the world of non-monogamy, its terms, and ideas, but also because various online spaces are used by non-monogamous people to connect either for advice or dating. These online infrastructures included an organization called *Pluk de Liefde* which organizes events linked to polyamory in the Netherlands. As well as the *Stichting Polyamorie Nederland* which moderate the biggest Facebook group about polyamory in the Netherlands. I contacted several of these websites and made publications on most Dutch Facebook groups about polyamory, however, I didn't get many responses from this. I ended up finding most of my participants through Feeld, a dating app that claims to value the inclusivity of different genders and sexual orientations, sex positivity, and consensual non-monogamy. This allowed me to pitch my project to a variety of different people directly who had all sorts of ideas and relationship structures. I ended up conducting a total of 17 in-depth unstructured interviews with individuals, and 4 with couples, from my field. My participants ranged from the ages of 18 to 55, the majority were living in the Randstad area of the Netherlands with activities ranging from student to architect, artist, academic, policy maker, polyamory influencer, or medical editor... These interviews averaged around two hours. Some of these took place in mutually convenient cafés, while others were conducted in participants' homes. The majority of these were audio recorded, nine of them were filmed and some were only recollected in my fieldnotes because of the spontaneity of the encounter.

Experimental Interviewing and Art-Based Elicitation

While anthropology often centers around participant observation, Katherine Frank argues that the traditional observational methods of ethnography are difficult to execute when it comes to studying sexuality since the presence of an observer would often impact the encounter (DeLamater and Plante 2015: 123). However, my research doesn't center on sexuality as an act but more on how people perceive themselves and others through the worldview and practice of non-monogamy. I, therefore, choose to combine the autoethnographic approach with in-depth open interviewing to gain a deeper and more varied understanding of my field. Inspired by the philosopher Stephen Mulhall, Brinkmann explains that "the human world is a conversational reality", and that our whole existence can be seen as a pursuit of dialogue (Brinkmann 2020: 425). While there is this universal dimension of conversations, I also had to beware of what Atkinson and Silverman (1997) call the "interview society" which claims that the prevalence of interviews in our culture has contributed to certain expectations and certain performative behavior. While we must be critical of the limitations of speech as a vehicle for information, I have tried to draw inspiration from feminist interviewing to create more open and conversational encounters.

The feminist interviewing method criticizes standardized unidirectional questioning as it creates a power relation between the interviewer and interviewee. Feminist interviewers put the emphasis on rapport, reciprocity, and vulnerability in interviewing (Bryman 2012: 492). This is why I wanted to use a more informal approach to conversational interviewing to build an environment of trust, openness, and reflexivity. This is also something I tried to represent with the filmed interviews. Most of my footage was captured as lengthy calm handheld portrait shots, where I allow my voice behind the camera to dialogue with my interlocutors to contribute to a sense of embodiment and presence behind the camera (Albright 2011: 39). Alongside, I made some B-roll footage of their home space and material culture, to help create a "realistic impression of the personalities of flesh-and-blood human beings" (Carta 2015). I applied these ideas in combination with Wengraf's (2001) qualitative interviewing method, which is a variation on the biographical interviewing style which zooms into certain details of lived experiences "more specific storied aspects of human lives, building on the narratological insight that humans experience and act in the world through narratives. "(Brinkmann 2020: 437). This allowed my participants to reflect on their past experiences, present their current emotional state and practices, as well as confine their hopes for the future

Indeed, while I had some recurring topics and questions that I would ask all my participants, I was open to letting them lead the conversation to their interests as it gave me insight into who they are as a person and how they situate themselves in the world of non-monogamy. For example, one of my participants was an archeology student, for our interview, she prepared a small presentation about archeological examples of

non-nuclear family models in the prehistoric ages. While this didn't actively contribute to answering my research questions these sorts of moments gave me great insight into how she relates academic knowledge to her own life to deepen her worldview on polyamory. Alongside these interviews, I also used some creative methods to gain a greater understanding of non-monogamy during some of these interviews. I first experimented with letting my participants draw out timelines of their relationships or attempting to map their relationships in space. However, in the end, I resorted to a more artistic approach of encouraging them to represent love, sexuality, and relationality through drawing or mind mapping.

As Kuschnir (2016) claims, drawing diagrams and maps can be a highly effective and visual way for the researcher and the participant to communicate. In Chilton and Leavy's methods of Arts-Based Research, they also explain that "arts-based research draws on the oppositional, subversive, transformational, and otherwise resistive capabilities of the arts" to generate knowledge through a holistic and multidisciplinary approach (Chilton and Leavy 2020). However, Literat explains that the artworks are intimately linked with the individual's particular cultural context, so to keep the researcher from over-interpreting them, these drawing exercises are ideally accompanied by a reflective discussion where the person explains their choices (2013: 12). Some of my participants expressed unease with the medium and preferred not to participate. Nonetheless, 6 participants drew for me, and I documented each drawing process, and the participant's explanation by filming with an over-the-shoulder camera and a tripod. Once we got past the childishness of the exercise, it allowed me to understand their vision of love, intimacy, and relationality in a more intuitive and iconographic way, which was very insightful and became a key part of my film.

Ethics, Film, and Representation

Since anthropology is a discipline that deals with real human situations, we have to take the consequences of our research into account and consider how to generate knowledge ethically and consensually. This is even more important in visual ethnography because the people one captures can't be anonymized in the same way as in written ethnography. As I established earlier, my polyamorous worldview and my position as a Dutch speaker helped me build trust with my research population. While this positionality will help me in not being viewed as a voyeur in the non-monogamous community, my gender and age caused me to have to establish boundaries to be taken seriously as a researcher.

The people I meet have sometimes expressed worry about my safety as a young woman meeting strangers alone in their homes. It was quite ironic getting those questions from the strange men in question. I always made sure to detail the aims and method of my project before meeting my participants to sense their genuine

understanding and interest in our collaboration, and to weed out all the libidinous men on Feeld asking to see what the person behind this research looks like. This generally worked out well, as it led me to meet many kind and interesting people. However, similarly, several of my interviewees asked whether I was using this to meet potential partners for myself. While I saw a clear division between the people that I interview for the general research and the ones I included as part of the autoethnographic aspect of the research, it allowed me to reflect on the potential possibility of getting closer with my participants. While the AAA's code of ethics (2009) claims an anthropologist should "negotiate the limits of the relationship" with their informants, a lot of anthropologists actively try to create a friendship with their participants to gain more intimate insights. After exploring the literature, a bit further, there seems to be an odd fixation and taboo about the idea of having sexual or romantic relations with participants. This issue is most famously discussed in *Taboo: Sex, identity, and erotic subjectivity in anthropological research (1995)*. In this collection of articles, they explain that anthropology "has consistently maintained the importance of suppression rather than irrelevance of sexuality in the field, as a means by which objectivity might be assured." (Manderson 1997: 334). They also emphasized the double standard of sexuality in the field, claiming that in the colonial traditions of anthropology, men would commonly marry a woman in their field and take her home, while women and members of the LGBTQ+ community remained shamed, and their academic reputation threatened, by sexual interactions in the field (Ibid.: 335).

Henceforth, during and after the fieldwork, I tried to use the method of relational ethics, "friendship as a method" which prioritizes nurturing a benevolent and healthy rapport with participants, while still being transparent and communicating any disagreement, maintaining contact after the end of fieldwork and sharing outputs or representations of the research (Adams et al. 2015: 61). Indeed, at first finding participants, especially for the film was difficult, however, I allowed everyone to take part to the extent they were comfortable and checked in with them to maintain their informed consent as my research evolved. I was especially careful with the film, sending my participants multiple different edits over the last few months, to be sure they felt comfortable with how I portrayed them.

Over the course of this research period, I entertained a tumultuous relationship with my camera, partly because my research topic was difficult to capture, since it focused on the thoughts and feelings in non-monogamists' heads, and partly because of my own discomfort in using this mechanical object as a method of inquiry. For me filming presented itself as a double edge sword, the visual record of these interviews made their discourse more vivid, but the camera between us made it difficult to connect. The presence of the camera might have helped some of my participants be more deliberate and solemn in their interviews, while others might have restrained their thoughts when confronted with the gaze of the recording devices. Snowdon argues that "Documentary filmmakers often seek to conceal, or silence, their "true" intentions

while filming (supposing they themselves know what these are…), thus creating (or trying to create) a structural imbalance between themselves and their subjects." (Snowdon 2017: 4) . I struggled with what felt like an inherent perversity in the act of filming. I didn't manage to capture any observational footage of my participants, because many of my participants felt awkward doing so since CNM is so intimate and seeps into small intangible moments of their daily life. Nichols also conveys this by making an analogy between pornography and ethnography, claiming that they are both "modes of representation are governed by a desire to see Others and have developed codified systems of controlling this fascination" (Russell 1999: 122). I, therefore, made a conscious effort not to fall back on either a fetishizing pornographic trope or a naïve romantic trope when representing my participants, and instead focus on trying to capture them as complex and multisided individuals who happen to be practicing CNM. Looking back, I might have been too hyperaware of the weight of my gaze and my audience's gaze on my participants' intimate and interpersonal lives.

In the end, I took inspiration from other films to overcome these issues of representational ethics. I used Ravi Hart Lloyd's technique of combining personal souvenir photographs with audio interviews from Treasured Moments (2016). Sunjoo Lee's *Wavy Tales* (2019) was also a key inspiration. In her film people's ideas about microwaves are compiled through a multitude of different interviewees and their drawings, creating a playful and humorous atmosphere. This allowed me to show the different modes of representations my participants themselves were using, through drawing but also photography and archival video material from my participants. The narrative of my film thus emerged as the result of a slow process of weaving together words, stories, and images. I was also inspired by Bing Liu's *Minding the Gap* (2018), in which Liu follows his childhood skateboarding friends over the years and delves into issues of race, abuse, and poverty in a very personal and heartfelt way. His positionality in the film as being part of this group of friends was introduced very explicitly from the very beginning and was reminded to the audience by his voice behind the camera and rapport with his subjects, which is something that I also tried to emulate. Nora Bacily's *Kom Binnen* (2017) was also a huge inspiration. This former Leiden student dealt with the subject of female sexuality both in a highly reflective and quite daring way. Indeed, she interviews and films some young women masturbating and interweave these moments with self-reflective instances where she discusses her process with her loved ones. I ended up with a kaleidoscopic patchwork of different people and ideas intertangled with my own experience as a red thread, by appearing in front of the camera through handwritten titles and static long shots of intimate conversations with my partners.

Even if I viewed the film as a separate entity and don't plan to integrate it any further into the argument of this paper, I do believe the filming and editing process helped me gather my thoughts and give meaning to

my findings subsequently also helping me in writing this article. As Suhr and Willerslev explain "Meaning can be reached by slowly prying out connections, contrasts, causalities, congruencies, and other relations" (2013: 223). Now that I have defined the various instruments in my theoretical and practical toolboxes, I will share and analyze the concrete experiences of participants to understand what the different forms of CNM entail and how non-monogamous people might value love, sexuality, and relationality.

Open Relationships

Drawing 1 by Mika representing his main relationship in the center surrounded by his peripheral sexual partners

On a sunny November morning, I started recording my friend and former causal partner Mika as practice for a film assignment. As we played around with the camera, he started talking about his other partner whose birthday was coming up.

"-I also asked her yesterday," he grins and shakes his head as he confesses, "she wants to be my girl."

I was taken aback for a second. We had been hanging out on a nearly daily basis for a few months, and while I didn't feel any jealousy or hostility towards his partner, his phrasing sparked my curiosity.

"-What does that entail?

-A relationship.

- Exclusive?

- No." he shrugged," you know me Mowgli! Open, of course. "

I asked him whether he told the women he was 'seeing' knew that he was 'seeing' others. For him, that was only something he mentioned when it was explicitly asked. This led us to talk about another girl whom he hadn't told about his non-monogamous status yet:

"I have to tell her; I don't want to hurt her feelings (…)."

-So, you haven't told her?

Drawing 2 by Mika representing his main romantic relationship and his peripheral sexual partners

-I mean what should I tell her, I'm single, or I was single till yesterday. "

(Transcribed from my autoethnographic film material)

As introduced in this vignette, this first section of my analysis will center around the rather nebulous category of *open relationships*. As I have explained in the introduction, polyamory and open relationships are sometimes used interchangeably, both in academia and in daily life, as in Deri's *Polyamory or Polyagony? Jealousy in Open Relationships* (2018). However, while the title implies fluidity and openness, throughout my research, I have come to realize open relationships mainly take the shape of sexual nonexclusively while maintaining romantic monogamy, which is also how Hamilton, et al. (2021), defined

it. This section will thus explore two different approaches to open relationships, the first one zooming in on the butting open romances of young people in the context of the hook-up culture, while the second one will focus on established relationships and marriages in which both parties practice sexual non-monogamy. How do these different ways of enacting an open relationship relate to these non-monogamists' values and narratives surrounding love and sexuality?

From "Seeing Someone" to Open Relationships

As we established in the introduction, the norm of sexual and romantic monogamy in western society is an ideal rather than factual reality. While infidelity, i.e. non-consensual non-monogamy has existed since the dawn of time, the so-called sexual revolution has contributed to making serial monogamous dating the norm. This caused skyrocketing divorce rates but also the rise of new forms of relationality such as *hooking up*, particularly amongst young adults, which typically implies a lack of expectations of emotional commitment and monogamy (Bogle 2008: 2014). According to Manning, et al. (2006), this status of *non-relationship* is typically used to refer to relationships that don't clearly reflect the codified social script of dating, such as sexual relationships with friends or ex-partners, or non-monogamous interactions. While these non-relationships are often expected to be *casual*, in reality, they mostly "do not fit neatly into the sex-with affection versus hooking-up stereotypes." (Manning et al. 2006: 479). Yet this study also emphasizes that 44% of their respondents "who had sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend were seeing someone else or believed their partner was seeing someone else" (Ibid.: 478)

These non-relationships apply to a number of monogamous relationships, as it is common for people to have an initial phase of *dating* before committing to *officially* being in a relationship with one person. However, these blurry categories of non-consensual non-monogamy, casual forms of non-exclusive dating, or open relationships can also be the first steppingstone toward discovering various forms of CNM. Indeed, 8 out of my 24 participants argued that they committed some form of cheating in their monogamous relationships, before coming across their preferred form of consensual non-monogamy. For some of my polyamorous interviewees such as Jasmine and Juliette, this took the shape of "emotional cheating" where they would get close to someone while being sexually monogamous with another. Even for the ones who didn't have a sexual affair, the majority of my participants were introduced to non-monogamous went through this experience of confusing and label-less open relationships. Indeed, before becoming polyamorous, Ellen suggested having an open relationship with her partner at the time when she was leaving to study in another state. Ellen explained that at first, she could "do that on a level, and rationalize it," but when her sexual partner developed romantic feelings towards her, she panicked: "how can you have feelings

for me, if you're in this other emotionally connected relationship? So, (…) I freaked out and I kind of backed away". She argues that she believes this was linked to her own ignorance of the subject: "I didn't have the language for what I wanted. I didn't know that it was called a certain thing."

In this section, I will thus argue that as opposed to the traditional monogamous view of sexual exclusivity as proof of fidelity, in these practices of open, and sexually nonexclusive dating, sexuality and intimacy are framed as unimportant, casual, and slightly immoral acts. A practice that is not clearly discussed nor negotiated, which corresponds to Foucault's view on falsely liberated 20th-century western sexuality. Throughout this section, I will explain that while the blurry nature of these categories of relationality is often perceived negatively, I believe it is caused by a lack of appropriate language and modes of representation to describe these clashing worldviews on love, sex, and relationality.

The majority of my participants, including myself, have thus been through an open relationship at some point in their non-monogamous journey, and four of my interviewees are currently still in open relationships. While I wasn't particularly aiming at centering this section on the people close to me, the hidden and messy nature of these relationships, as well as their relative prevalence in university circles, has brought me to mainly use these examples here. Indeed, my former partner Mika (22) has been in two open relationships, one with his current girlfriend and one with his ex-girlfriend. He explains that he views love as "devotion." This represents, for him, a conscious choice not to "give into his feelings", and present himself as unavailable to his casual partners, while choosing to commit romantically to one person. In doing so, he believes he proves his love is even more unconditional because while he can be physically satisfied by others, he still chooses to stay romantically devoted to his main partner. Yet, this clashes with the views of Constanza (24) his ex-girlfriend, who describes their attempt at an open relationship as a "cover-up".

I vividly remember meeting her for the first time. At the end of my second date with Mika, we went back to their shared apartment, and I revealed to him that I was polyamorous, and to my surprise, he excitedly expressed he was in an open relationship. She came home a while later, excusing herself for intruding as her plans ended earlier than expected. Her boyfriend responded that I was non-monogamous too so that I understood. We all sat on the couch together and watched cartoons. Part of me was intrigued by how comfortable they were with all of this, yet another part was overwhelmed by this unexpected turn of events. These sorts of interactions would happen a few more times, they would always remain somewhat awkward and made me feel guilty for being in her space. Mika struggled to understand that this bothered me. Several months later after they broke up, I decided to contact Constanza for an interview. When I asked her about this moment, she explained that they never discussed these sorts of details or made any kinds of agreements about bringing partners into their living space. She said that it made her feel unconformable but that since

she was allowed to do whatever she wanted, he was allowed to as well. They later broke up because she had been cheating on him romantically.

This lack of shared agreements on how to behave around extradyadic sexual partners might hinge on the cultural presupposition that frames sex as casual and unimportant, it is thus not worth discussing. This echoes Kean's mononormative tropes, including the belief that romantic feelings are monogamous and serious and that non-exclusive sexuality "shows you are not serious about those people" (Ibid: 470). I believe this is also exemplified by Tommaso who also took part in my film (Legein 2022: 10:07-12:59).

Tommaso (23) is a psychology student from Italy. Last summer he started a relationship with a woman from his hometown, and when he returned to the Netherland, they agreed to have an open relationship. I met Tommaso a year ago, through a dating app, and we had remained friendly acquaintances ever since. When he told me about his new open relationship, he asked me for advice. He expressed that it frustrated him, and claimed he still viewed himself as monogamous. Intrigued by this, I invited him to share his experience with me for this research. To maintain their romantically monogamous and sexually non-monogamous relationship, they agreed upon a set of specific rules. Firstly, they are only allowed to have singular sexual encounters or *one-night stands*, and they mustn't have sex with a person they are romantically, or even platonically interested in. Nonetheless, despite these rules, each time the other has a sexual encounter it is accompanied by "a small fight" between them. Tommaso confides that as he struggles to find sexual partners, hearing about his girlfriend's successful sexual experiences is increasingly painful. He explains that he has trouble understanding how she can have intercourse with others without an emotional connection, while simultaneously being annoyed at the jealousy she expresses as she worries, that he will fall in love with whomever he has sex with.

I believe these tensions might be linked to their different values and perceptions when it comes to relationality and intimacy. Indeed, during his drawing elicitation, Tommaso presented sex as an almost sacred act that is meant to further a romantic relationship: "Sex is something that binds you, inevitably, to a person". However later, he compared his girlfriend's sexual practices, with others, to an illness that he helps treat: "She is a nympho", "She uses sex to cope but I'm helping her with that." The differences in his discourse when discussing their shared sexual life and her sexual encounters with others, seem to exemplify Foucault's (1978) understanding of normal versus abnormal sexuality.

These cases exemplify that in this current western context our introduction to CNM often happens through unsaid assumptions and non-consensual non-monogamy. This was also the case for Ruby (23), who believed she was in an exclusive relationship when her partner kissed another girl and told her" We have a relationship, but not *the relationship*". Even in the cases where both parties agree on having an open

relationship, they are often still riddled with miscommunication, which was the case for Julia (25) when she had sex with someone else, and forgot to tell her main partner in advance, causing a fight between them. In this section I thus argued this was mainly because open relationships are often understood within the hook-up dating phenomenon which makes use of a hierarchical conception of love and sexuality, allowing them to practice these narratives separately. While for some of my participants, non-monogamy will have been part of their phase of sexual experimentation in their youth, and others might use these experiences to go into polyamory, some will have maintained sexual openness in their marriages through swinging or monogamish relationships and through their pursuit of specific sexual practices such as BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Sadism, and Masochism). In the next section, I will contrast these views with participants who have been able to integrate their sexuality with others in their life more sustainably and critically, by presenting it as a form of play.

"Playing" outside of Marriage

In this part, I will continue to argue that open relationships are related to a vision of sexuality as separate from love. Yet, as opposed to the previous section, for these participants sexuality is not merely viewed as inferior but, through a wider vocabulary and knowledge about niche sexual practices, it becomes an enjoyed and valued activity, like a hobby or game.

Alex was one of the first people I met through Feeld. At first, he offered that I come film one of his dates. He explained that this women's husband had a cuckold fetish, which means that he enjoys seeing his wife have sex with another man. While it sounded interesting, I didn't feel comfortable doing that just yet. So, we just met up at a café in the Hague. While I was a bit nervous since this was my first proper interview, I was captivated by his openness and vulnerability his sexuality and open marriage. Some months later, I can to his home to film an interview with him and his wife (Legein 2022: 06:31-10:05).

Naomi (37) and Alex (42) have been together for 8 years and are raising their 3-year-old daughter together. They met through a website called SDC (Swingers' dating club) and connected through their shared interest in BDSM. They enthusiastically recount that they planned their third date to be an elaborate form of sexual power play, which they describe as a "brat play abduction date". They candidly showed me pictures of it afterward where I could see Naomi in lingerie tied up and blindfolded in the back of a truck. They explained that their sexual adventures continued through the years, "sometimes with other people and couples, or sometimes with a girl", meanwhile, their monogamous romantic relationship continued blossoming. While they can't imagine their lives as sexually monogamous, they also argue that they don't see themselves ever

becoming polyamorous. When I asked them if they viewed themselves as swingers, they claimed that while it was technically true, they preferred the term "open relationship." They explained that they prefer to distance themselves from *lifestyle* swinger's: "their friends are swingers, their holiday is about swinging, they go every weekend to a swinger's club, we have met some of those couples but that is not our kind of people."

As Dee McDonald indeed explains, swinging adds the "element of the excitement" of single dating experiences with the stability of monogamous relationality. She argues that swingers draw on a "recreational discourse" when talking about their sexual practices and "By acknowledging that they are playing a game, swingers are able to more easily divide emotion from physicality." (2010: 75) Indeed, Alex and Naomi enjoy dating together, they each have an acute sense of the sexual practices they enjoy and pursue. Alex explains that he mainly likes to introduce women that he meets on Tinder, to unconventional sexual practices. He keeps an extensively detailed excel file with all his sexual encounters over the years, in these, he specifies what they did ranging from "bukkake" in which several men ejaculate on another person, to extreme forms of "breath play" where he puts a rope around a woman's neck and suspends her women in the air with a forklift. When planning an "extreme date" he explains a lot of work goes into defining which practices and kinks the person is confrontable with. However, when the date comes around, he compares it with his hobby of surfing "at first there is this anxiety but then it becomes natural (…) I feel very at home and like I can be myself." Naomi claims, "For me, love is like a feeling, (…) and sex is a biological urge" She explains that she likes to try out very specific fetishes or fantasies often including some sort of consensual sexual power play like prostitution or rape fantasies. She explains how she tries to find to match these specific sexual practices, usually through Fetlife, an online fetish platform that is something between a pornography website and social media community.

This specialized language and understanding surrounding sexuality are also exemplified by two other long-term monogamous couples I interviewed, Mo (30) and Lourdes (32), as well as Ruben (29) and Sharron (28) who view occasional swinging, sex parties, and BDSM as an opportunity to "play "and explore their sexuality. I also met Mo and Lourdes through the dating app Feeld. They are a couple of ex-pats who have been together for 3 years and have been sexually dating other couples and individuals together for a year. They explicitly emphasized that they were not in an open relationship, instead describing their relationship with a term they jokingly invented: "Monogamy +, monogamy with a bonus!". While they didn't explicitly use the term *monogamish relationship*, I think their label acutely resembles it (Hamilton, et al. 2021). For them, swinging clubs and the BDSM communities have been an opportunity to meet interesting new people, try out new sexual practices, and explore their bisexuality. Mo emphasizes the importance of friendship and consent in their sexual practice. Lourdes argues that they view dating as a fun activity, which can include

sex, but can also take the form of "going out for drinks or playing laser tag". However, they find it important that everybody involved is "enthusiastically consensual", while also maintaining an open mind. Mo jokingly critiques some of the men they encountered, who were comfortable with their female partners having sex with other women while categorically rejecting engaging sexually with another man. This is also something I observed in the literature, the swinging *lifestyle* in particular is often accused of being homophobic, even sometimes by people within that community (Frank 2008: 436). So, while, these non-monogamous sexual practices question some of the mononormative norms enumerated by Kean (2018), they are also entrenched in a certain context where they keep exemplifying some of these tropes.

In Harviainen and Frank's ethnography of group sex, they argue that their participants would create "a porous magic circle" where they could "transgress in a socially, emotionally, and physically safer manner" (2018: 235). However, I believe this transgression of monogamous sex doesn't need to take place in a certain space, it must fit with a certain narrative and categorization of love and sexuality. Indeed, in their statistical study of swinging Kimberly and Hans argue that although swingers might maintain friends between sexual partners, "the emphasis on sexual experiences and pleasure rather than emotional bonding with others, (…) may be key for allowing swingers to maintain satisfaction in their primary relationship." (2017: 279). Naomi explains that she likes to go on one-night stands, while Alex typically keeps seeing his casual partners for months or even years and will build somewhat of a friendship with many of them. Yet, as opposed to some open relationships, Naomi and Alex explain that they don't have explicit rules about their open relationship. For example, they don't have a rule again developing romantic feelings "because that wouldn't work anyway". They both insist that they have never really felt jealous or been tempted romantically by their causal partners. However, they are aware that this balance is fragile, but as Alex emphasized, this is the case in any marriage, where romantic feelings for others could always develop, "it's not about sex, it would be the same if you have a nice coworker". This awareness of people practicing CNM is something that Sheff also emphasizes "Compulsory monogamy demands that the precarious and fragile nature of monogamy remain invisible and seeks to limit both the ability to imagine an alternative" (2020: 889).

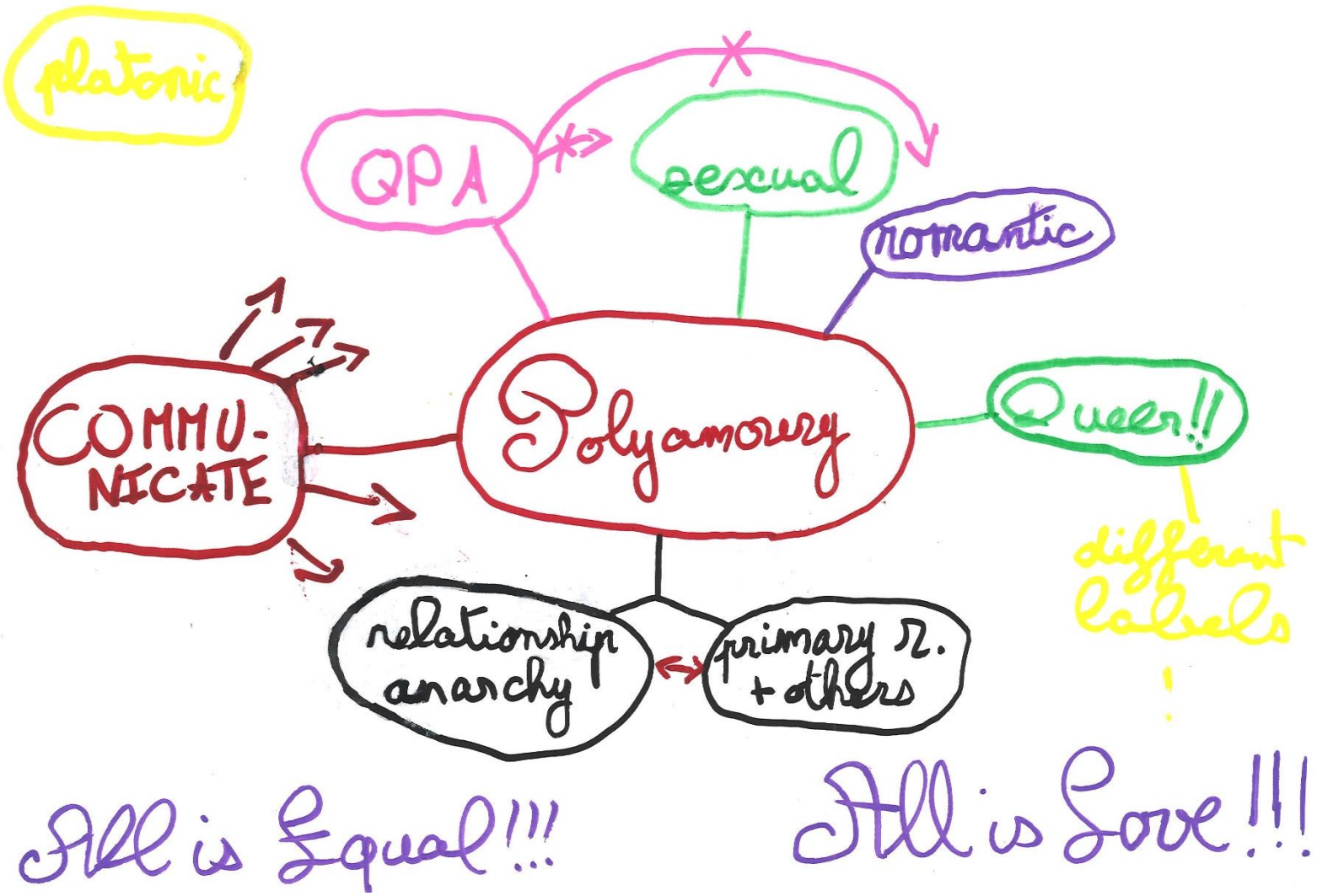
I would sometimes ask my participants why they decided to get married, and often asking this question felt somewhat native and frivolous. They explained that they loved each other very much and wanted to share their lives, but as a polyamorous person and a child of divorce, I have certain assumptions about marriage, and I often struggle to understand why people get married to relate in these ways. As Alex and Naomi told me about their lives, their connection seemed genuine, built on their shared sense of humor and their collaboration in raising their daughter. For them non-monogamy was not a new way of shaping their lives, instead, they viewed it as a hobby, which is why they didn't feel the need to *come out* about it to their

families and friends. They explain that while most of their family members know about it, it's not something they regularly share, especially when it comes to their professional circles.

This tension and overlap between the *deployment of alliances* and the *deployment of sexualities* is also something I thought about when I heard that Lourdes and Mo got married a few months after our interview. During our meeting, they explained that they educated themselves on the various forms of relationality such as open relationships, swinging, and polyamory, mainly through podcasts and TikTok influencers. They argued that they weren't opposed to polyamory and that they would consider if other people entered their lives in a significant way. Yet, they deliberately chose this sort of in-between relationship, in which they are married and present to the outside world as monogamous, to take advantage of the convenient structure surrounding monogamy, while still enjoying the playfulness of non-monogamous sexuality. This is something that surprised me at first, through my own biased assumptions that polyamory is somehow superior and that the people practicing the other forms of CNM had just not yet gone through the process of unlearning the societal norms of monogamy. As we continued conversing, they also revealed that they both came from very conservative backgrounds, Catholic Spanish, and Sudanese Muslim and that this conventional form of relationality was unfortunately also key in staying on good terms with their families. Mo explained that for him it was not worth it for them to peruse this publicly, because they knew their families would not change their worldviews on these issues.

In this section, we thus considered two different kinds of marriages that allow extradyadic sexual exploration, which is characterized by a playful approach to sexuality through the vocabulary of kink and select spaces and moments like sex clubs and dating scenarios. These couples exemplify the tensions between the wider societal structure of monogamous society and the practice of experimental nonexclusive intimacy is also reflected by Frank (2008). She argues that in a lot of ways the swingers and other closeted forms of CNM might be the "new gays' since "many lifestylers are critical of 'stereotypical' heteronormative ideals but may not challenge them publicly for fear of losing their jobs, children, or social networks" (Frank 2008: 448). Throughout these two last subsections, I looked at different forms of sexually non-monogamous open relationships. First, I showed that for young people first practicing open relationships, happens in the context of the *hook-up* culture where sexual entanglements are *casual* and thus not negotiated. While this is to some extent still echoed in this section, through their more extensive life experience and knowledge about sexuality through the BDSM and swinger's community, they manage to use these categorizations critically. Indeed, they frame sexuality as a form of play and in doing so remove the cultural weight put on sexual exclusivity, and they view romantic relationships more critically by acknowledging that they might end or evolve one day

Polyamory



Drawing 3 by Jade presenting polyamory as a mind map of interrelated terms and practices

One day I was scrolling through Instagram while Aymeric, my main partner, was making breakfast. I landed on a video from @polyphiliablog. In this video, she talked about the relational label 'comet partners' which she defined as an" occasional lover who passes through one's life semi-regularly."

"-This might be what we are at this point," I said, as I showed it to him.

We have gone through many relationship titles at that point. I used to call him a friend for as long as I could get away with, then people started to question who this friend was who would drive across the country to come and see me, and I gave in, and started calling him my boyfriend for the sake of convenience. As we grew more aware of polyamory, we started referring to ourselves as each other's main partners. However, over the years, our lives started taking more diverging directions and we moved halfway across the globe from each other. This category now also seemed increasingly artificial.

"-I don't know. I feel like we are more best friends than lovers…" he replied. "It sounds cute though, I could see you as my little comet."

(From my self-reflective fieldnotes)

In the previous section, we learned that the swinging or BDSM community has a specialized language about sexual practices which helps individuals view non-monogamous sexuality as play and experimentation instead of a forbidden transgression of the flesh. Polyamory is also rooted in a specific discourse, but these linguistic tools go beyond sexual practices and allow polyamorous people to dissect previously untold feelings, behaviors, and forms of relationality into a complex web of categorization that turns into its own worldview and philosophy.

In this section, I will argue that this increasingly specialized vocabulary is used as a theoretical crutch to help polyamorous people experience multiple and boundless forms of relationality and love. Thereafter, I will argue that this worldview becomes its own cultural and political niche, and for some diehard polyamorists, it takes the shape of an identity that applies to aspects of life far beyond sexuality.

However, first I will question what communication entails in the context of polyamory. Can we really communicate about these feelings, social phenomena, and forms of relationalities if the society we inhabit doesn't have words for them?

The Vocabulary of Love

In the first section of this analysis, I mentioned how many of my polyamorous participants initially tried more or less ethical forms of non-monogamy but struggled to explain and rationalize it in the mononormative world. Sheff argues that there are three different reactions to discovering the possibility of polyamory, "people are generally either blasé, delighted, or terrified" (2020: 883). This idea of delight, which she describes as "like taking a deep breath for the first time in their lives" corresponds to the

experiences of many of my interviewees (Ibid.). For a lot of them, their romantically non-monogamous journey starts with this one word: *Polyamory*.

This was the case for Ellen (29) an American statistician, who, as I mentioned earlier, slowly opened up to the idea that one could be romantically interested in multiple people, after developing feelings for her non-monogamous casual partner. Yet, while her own worldview on relationality and intimacy was shifting, she was still confronted by others who did not agree with her, such as her ex-girlfriend, who thought polyamory was *cool* but found herself unable to practice it. This process of identifying and communicating one's values surrounding relationality and intimacy is also exemplified by Anis (39) a Moroccan banker living in Amsterdam. He married at a young age, and went through a difficult divorce during his thirties, after which he started exploring polyamory with partners who were hesitant to open up to this worldview. Eventually, Anis and Ellen met and formed a relationship, that they describe as a *game-changer relationship* where they were equally willing to learn and experiment with polyamory.

The participants who identify with the label of polyamory almost seem to view their introduction to polyamory as a slow psychologic paradigm shift that one must go through intellectually and emotionally to deconstruct the values and ideas inherited by monogamy. For example, through understanding jealousy as a projection of one's fears and insecurities rather than an inevitable character trait of someone in a relationship. For Anis and Ellen, their knowledge about polyamory was mainly expanded by polyamorous podcasts and popular self-help literature (Easton and Hardy 1997, Veaux and Rickert 2014). Anis argues that through these firsthand experiences and these practical tools, he learned to communicate more effectively. For example, during our conversation, he points out the difference between an agreement, a boundary, and a rule, which is something he learned from Veaux's book. He explains that a boundary is "anything related to my body, my mind, my space. I can set any rule I want". When it comes to negotiating the terms of a relationship, he believes there should be no rules "there is no room for them to maneuver, (..)because if the person breaks the rules, they break the whole relationship", he suggests only making agreements, because they are "always negotiable".

Polyamorous self-help literature does not only seem to play with already existing words and concepts borrowed from pseudo-psychology, but these authors also use their personal experience to create their new vocabulary about polyamory. A few years ago, as I had talked about polyamory a few times with my father, he bought Easton's *The Ethical Slut*. I skipped through it inattentively, mostly because of the amusing name, as I was naively convinced that I already knew everything there was to know. Over the course of my research, while I still have not gotten around to reading one of these influential self-help books, I was constantly gifted terms, concepts, and ideas by my participants. Juliette sent articles, Herbert showed me Veaux's famous non-monogamy mind map (Appendix 1), and Anis introduced me to the 'relationship

anarchy smorgasbord (Appendix 2). Eventually, I got to googling and allowed the internet to provide me with a richer polyamorous vocabulary, which ended up contributing to furthering my knowledge in my own relationships as shown in the introductory vignette. Similarly, to some of my participants, my information came from popular polyamory influencers such as Leanne (23) and her educational polyamory account, @polyphiliablog. Despite the fact she has only been polyamorous for 6 years and is also still figuring it out herself, the rising popularity of this topic has propelled her to the forefront of the mainstream polyamorous discussion. Through her, I discovered a range of terms referring to the diverse types of relationality and practices like a *meta-amour* meaning partner of a partner, or *puppy pile poly*, where everyone is physically or romantically involved in some way and implies a shared sleeping space. There are also terms for phenomena that often go unspoken in the mononormative world. The shameful conversation around protection during intercourse is replaced with either a *condom commitment* or a *fluid bond.* But this can also touch upon wider mononormative and heteronormative societal aspects with concepts such as *couple privilege* which claims that dyadic couples are more secure and convenient emotionally but also legally and financially, or *the one penis policy* which critiques the tendency of men to accept their female partner's non-monogamous practices as long as they only interact with other women.

Although the new polyamorous discourse surrounding love, relationality, and sexuality seems increasingly structured I wonder to what extent these discursive tools relate to the everyday practice of relationality and intimacy. According to Swidler, these classifications "often remain fluid, waiting to be filled and made real by the relationships they help to create" (2001: 183). This somewhat corresponds to the process of self-identification Foucault (1978) observed with homosexuality after centuries of marginalization from the normative discourse. Indeed, polyamorous people themselves seem to be the authorities on the poly narrative through their lived experiences of relationships on the chiasm of romantic love, sex, and friendship.

Some of my interviewees describe deeply intimate friendships with people with whom they don't have a sexual relationship. Indeed, Juliette has a gay best friend whom she considers a soulmate: "we realized 10 years ago or so that we are more than friends, (…) we're like an old married couple, but there is no romance, there is no sex". Juliette wanted to honor the specialness of their bond, so she found the term *joyfriend,* in a polyamory Facebook group, to designate him. This is also exemplified by Jade (18) who explains she is in a *queerplatonic relationship*, (This is explored more extensively in my film (Legein 2022: 19:39-22:59)). As a lesbian trans person, she interconnects polyamory with concepts from the LGBTQ + community. Derived from the asexual and aromantic communities that she is well acquainted with, she explains that this form of relationship can include practices like cuddling, kissing, and having sex, but aren't inherently

sexual or romantic. For her, this form of intense platonic inclination, usually between queer-identifying individuals, is "the purest form of love."

Anis also recounts the story of one of his "very good friends with benefits" with whom sexuality, friendship, and romance intersected. He explains that they started "developing feelings for each other," yet they both decided they didn't want to change the nature of their interactions: "I explained to her how I see love and feelings and stuff, and she got it. And then we became friends with benefits who have feelings for each other. But we're not boyfriend and girlfriends at all." Both Jade and Anis ascribe to a new branch of polyamory called *relationship anarchy*. Anis critiques polyamory's expectation for conventional romance and describes relationship anarchy through the holistic metaphor of a garden, claiming that it allows any seed of a connection to grow organically "maybe it's going to be like a nice little flower. And that's it. And sometimes it's going to become a huge tree that takes half of the garden."

People thus take these terms, and reshape them to their liking, or choose to intentionally omit them to weave their own meanings on love, relationality, and sexuality. Nonetheless, some recurring values seem to emerge from this fluid classification. Indeed, while polyamory is typically defined by the multiplicity of romantic relationships, most of my polyamorous interviewees seem to reject, not only the mononormative trope of the "passionate/romantic ideal of 'one true love'.", but the notion of *romantic love* as a whole (Kean 2016:458). They seem to link romantic love, with a broader view of love as a multifaceted feeling and entanglement comparable to friendship and familial love, which also challenges Kean's mononormative trope on the existence of "a clear, coherent, and sustainable distinction between the category's 'friend' and 'lover'." (Ibid.). Indeed, when asked about romantic love, Herbert for example explains that he didn't see himself in the conventional representation of romance as a "rose petals and candlelit dinner". He instead compared it to friendship. Similarly, both Rhys (24) and Anis explain the multiplicity of love in polyamory through friendship and familial love "Oh, no, you can't love many people, but you can have many friends that you love? You can have brothers and sisters? If you have a new brother, are you going to love the other one less?". Additionally, there is an emphasis on self-actualization and self-love also observed by Klesse as he explains polyamory is based on "a set of interrelated values, such as honesty, self-knowledge, self-possession, integrity…" (Klesse 2014: 89). Klesse uses Jeffrey Ringer (2001)'s concept of "relational ideologies" as "a set of normative assumptions that frame and regulate relationship practices in particular ways." to explain the emphasis on love, commitment and friendship in the polyamorous discourse (2006: 578). Over the course, if this section I have therefore emphasized that polyamory is characterized by its generation of a new vocabulary of CNM with an underlying narrative of moral values which present love as holistic and all-encompassing.

The Relationship Escalator

The polyamorous concepts I have explored in the previous section might remain an interesting set of life hacks, or a philosophy on love for some, however, nine of my participants actively identify as polyamorous. Richie and Baker argue that "the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships and emotion can enable alternative ways of being."(2006: 596). Indeed, most of them take pride in their polyamorous status, as it has become a part of their identity in a similar way sexual orientation has. While many of my participants insist that they view polyamory more as a choice than an innate characteristic, Anis for example compares his discovery of polyamory to "the moment where the gay guy is in San Francisco and sees guys kissing". Yet regardless if they believe polyamory is a fixed relational orientation or more of a community of like-minded people with a shared ideological worldview, for the experienced polyamorists; CNM has come to play a key part in their sense of selves and in the restructuring of their lives away from the normative relational model.

One of the main concepts that I kept coming across in my field was the term *relationships elevator*. I was first told about this idea by Herbert (55), who defined it with the Dutch saying "huisje boomptje beestje" (House, tree, pet). The relationship escalator refers to the arbitrary social norm surrounding the steps romantic relationships are supposed to go through, such as moving in together and raising a family together. Sheff also argues that one of the main ways consensual non-monogamists resist mononormativity is through its challenging of the "heterosexual nuclear family model" (2020: 888) which Foucault (1978) also mentions with the *deployment of alliances*. In this section, I will use this idea to show how different polyamorous people reject these societal expectations of monogamous cohabitation and co-parenting and instead create a new sense of identity and morality for themselves in the polyamorous lifestyle and community.

Indeed, seven out of my twenty-four interviewees agree with the philosophy of polyamory, yet most of them are in dyadic configuration. While this is sometimes due to the lack of suitable additional partners, Silvia (25) and Jazmine (26) emphasize the structural, financial, and emotional convenience of monogamy over polyamory. Indeed, the practice of CNM also remains intrinsically linked to social class and cultural context (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 754). For Tommaso, Anis, Ellen, and myself, CNM can also be a way of maintaining some form of relationship despite physical distance and different career aspirations. Yet others like the Montreal-based influencer couple Tara (49) and Andre (49), explain that the flexibility of their jobs, as a dating coach and a psychologist specializing in gender and sexuality, allows them to have partners all over the world.

Herbert (55) whom I met through *Pluk de Liefde*, first started exploring the idea of polyamory with his wife throughout his marriage. Now he has been identifying with the term *solo poly* since his divorce 20 years ago. This subcategory of polyamory means that he has multiple parallel relationships but that he prefers to live on his own. One of his partners also lives in Leiden, the other one in Goirle, while the third lives in Germany. For Herbert, it is thus not only a spatial redistribution of social ties but also a redistribution of his time and energy. He explains that he spent every other weekend with Anke and each of the two other weekends in the month with each other partner. He explains that not every polyamorous person has such a set schedule, this organization remained from when he used to have another girlfriend, but it has now successfully integrated into everyone's habits and work schedules. He met most of them through various polyamorous dating sites, except for Anke, his partner of two years who he met through this hobby of geocaching. While Herbert likes the idea of *kitchen table polyamory*, where everyone gets along and can come to enjoy a meal around the kitchen table, Anke expressed she prefers not to cross paths with his other partners. She explains that she identifies as monogamous but is highly accepting of his polyamorous practices and engagement in polyamory activism. When they invited me over for dinner, I asked them why they didn't live together. They jokingly explained that they both really enjoyed coming over to each other's houses, but they also valued having their own space.

At first, I couldn't help but feel somewhat sad about this, as he was the same age as my parents and was living alone with no kids. But the two of them did seem happy together when they looked at each other and giggled like teens. When I talked with him more, I realized this is part of my own assumption that people can't be happy living on their own. He is a very social person with loads of hobbies and takes part in all sorts of events and activities, lots of which were related to the world of polyamory. He for example invited me to a comedy show about polyamory, Kirsten van Teijn's: "(S)experiment." Herbert typically organizes Leiden-based *polyborrels* once a month where newcomers can come to get informed about it and regulars can discuss their polyamorous ideas and issues around a glass of wine. For him, the Dutch polyamorous community, both online through Facebook groups and forums, and these local events are part of his everyday social life. Not only for dating, but because according to him polyamory attracts interesting, curious, and intelligent people. This small local polyamorous network of friends, lovers, and acquaintances is also described by Anis in Sweden, by Olaf during his college years in Nijmegen, and by Juliette in Madrid and Barcelona.

Herbert introduced me to Juliette (52), an American ex-pat with whom he went on a few dates back in the day, and who also used to organize polyamory meetups as well. Juliette, who is also a major part of my documentary (Legein 2022: 25:24-31:17), explains that when she married her now husband, with whom she had cheated in her first marriage, she wanted to find an alternative to the conventional exclusive

marriage. Yet, after years of polyamorous dating, she still expresses she struggled to overcome the relationship escalator. For a long time, she kept thinking she needed another man to be fulfilled. Yet ironically enough it turned out that it was her husband who found another partner, Laurel, with whom they decided to raise a child. Now, the four of them live together in a big old house by the side of a canal in the center of Leiden. Their doorbell is ornated with their four different American-sounding family names. Their creaky staircase spirals up to their 5 individual bedrooms. Juliette explains that beyond the negative societal outlook on CNM, being a polyamorous household also offers some legal and institutional challenges. She, for example, has no legal guardianship over her daughter. While this fact immediately made me anxious, she explained that she had come to terms with this reality and trusted that if things were to end with her husband and her *meta-amour*, they would still allow her to be in contact with the child she raised.

She also explains that the process of buying a house was quite difficult, she claims that they succeeded in convincing the banks mainly because they have a medical editing and translating business together. Juliette explains that both she and Laurel have additional partners who don't live with them. I also knew they had another roommate in this house, a longtime friend of Laurel, called Barry, who is an uncle figure to their daughter. So, I once again naively asked, why these two boyfriends didn't move in with them. Juliette replied that she believes roommate compatibility doesn't always coincide with romantic compatibility, she argues that with this group "the vibe was just right". And that was something I really felt when I came over to their house for dinner. This group of *weirdos* as they call themselves, formed together a small microcosm, a tiny community where everyone works together and takes care of each other. Including their twelve-year-old daughter who keeps stealing Barry's band shirts, but who is forgiven because he believes she styles them much better than him. While it might have been an ordinary evening for them, seeing them cooking and joking together, gave me a sense of glowing sense of calm in my own polyamorous journey. It was touching to witness that this is a real thing, families like this really exist.

For Juliette, polyamory has thus impacted the course of her life in a very real way, from becoming a mother to living and working with her friends and partners: "I kept thinking I was lucky, but it kept happening, and now I think that maybe we're doing something right here". She explains that even after so many years, after hosting various polyamory events, and groups, and participating in countless interviews and two documentaries she still cares about spreading the word about this philosophy and lifestyle. She explains that they very well could try and live their lives "happy and hidden" but since she has the privilege of being able to *come out* safely and comfortably, she goes through the effort of sharing the real normal life of a polyamorous household by inviting the whole neighborhood to their house, for example, to show they are not "a sex-crazy cult or something".

As my discussions with polyamorous identifying individuals continued, and I learned about their multifaceted and fluid approaches to love, family, and friendship; sexuality increasingly took a less prominent role in the conversation. With some of my participants, such as Herbert, the subject didn't even really come up. I often felt strange asking people about their sex lives if they didn't start mentioning it themselves. While non-monogamists might typically be more sexually open, their sexual preferences or practices are not inherently different or more adventurous than anyone else's. For a lot of my polyamorous participants, sexuality is an integral part of their interpersonal experiences, they viewed it as a way to further a connection through shared embodied experiences. However, for some of my participants, like Juliette, sexuality is more of an afterthought: "At first I thought non-monogamy was about sex fiends, swingers, people… just that were not like me". She explains that she identifies as demi-sexual, which is a sexual orientation on the asexuality spectrum in which people need to have a prolonged emotional connection to be sexually attracted to someone. Scherrer argues that polyamory often becomes a more feasible option for people on the asexuality spectrum since most people might find it difficult to maintain a sexless monogamous romantic relationship (2010: 157). While Scherrer argues the assumption of sex is also a consequence of compulsory monogamy, based on my participants, it seems like sexuality is still the main component of polyamorous dating for many people, but it is often not put at the forefront.

Olaf (28) explains that while "lots of dating I do have a very sexual component to it" he doesn't want to be perceived as "only wanting to date for the sex or sex being something superficial ". Andre also explains that while he first came into non-monogamy thinking about "touching other people physically", he slowly came to realize "it could be so much more". Olaf believes that while there are a lot of non-monogamous people who are very sexual, this sex positivity might shed a negative light on polyamory. It might make it harder to legitimate polyamory as a valid and respected relationship style and identity to the outside world. This tension is also emphasized by Klesse "rather than to deconstruct exclusive assumptions at the heart of promiscuity discourses, many polyamorists deploy an argumentative strategy that aims to demonstrate that the promiscuity allegation is not applicable to them. "(577: 2006). He argues that this form of othering echoes a similar phenomenon in the LGBTQ+ community, identified by Smith (1994), in which he argues that there is a discrepant discourse between the "respectable" homosexuals who try to conform to the existing heteronormative structure while condemning the more radical activism of the "dangerous queer" who challenge the status quo. In this section I have thus argued that polyamory, born from relationship self-help books and a wide and fluid vocabulary, has become more than a theoretical philosophy and more than a practiced behind closed doors, it has come to impact the way people structure their lives, how they identify and how they justify their moral choices to others.

Conclusion

I started this thesis by contextualizing monogamy and the various forms of non-monogamy both in history and contemporary western culture as well as introducing the existing academic discussion about these unconventional forms of relationality. To understand the various forms of CNM (Consensual Non-Monogamy) and their underlying conceptualizations of sexuality and love, I used my positionality as a non-monogamous person as a starting point to conduct several experimental in-depth interviews which I analyzed using Foucault's theory on sexuality, and the concept of mononormativity derived from queer theory. In my empirical chapters, I have gone in-depth into the different ways CNM was practiced in my field and analyzed how these could be linked to people's values and perceptions about love, intimacy, romance, sexuality, and relationality. In this final section, I will link these findings back to Foucault and to the wide academic discussion on CNM. So, while Foucault barely dealt with non-monogamy in his *History of Sexuality* (1978), I believe my findings exemplify several of his ideas. As we live in a society that is supposedly increasingly sexually liberated and rejects the institution of marriage, polymorphous and mobile sexualities continue emerging. While his work refers to various deviant sexual practices this can also be applied to unconventional forms of relationality and the communities and discourses attached to them. However, these expanding forms of sexuality and relationality exist alongside the persisting structural deployment of alliances, an underlying mononormative framework that people practicing CNM either absorb or reject.

In the first part of this analysis, I recounted the stories of people who are experimenting with non-monogamy relationality through non-exclusive sexuality. These categories ranging from non-relationships to open relationships are characterized by a lack of specialized language, cohesive labels, or worldviews. Young people in these relationships reject some of the traditional views mononormative of coupledom like the belief that sex signifies commitment and romantic engagement (Kean 2016: 458). However, while these participants were technically practicing non-monogamy, they might be wanting monogamy, polyamory, or purely casual encounters out of these relationships. The underlying beliefs on love relationality and sexuality are not clearly discussed and they stumble blindly in a representational but also discursive vacuum as there is also no concrete literature about open relationships. This somewhat echoes what Foucault says when he argues that the West's medical sciences' research into sexuality was characterized by a" stubborn will to nonknowledge" (1978: 55). As these interviewees try to create a place for themselves somewhere between conventional dyadic relationships and casual dating they keep getting swept away by the structural

and cultural assumptions of mononormativity, which frames the pursuit of sexuality for its own sake as immature and temporary, and categorially inferior to romantic pursuits which must be committed and serious (Kean 2018: 458).

This is also somewhat exemplified in the next section of this analysis where sexual CNM is maintained in marriages and long-term relationships, however, these participants are more critical and self-aware of the cultural construction of their view on love and sexuality. I believed this was partly caused by the swinging and BDSM communities which helped generate a conception of sexuality as play as opposed to proof of commitment. While the idea of a playful and open-minded view on sexual practices might seem to echo *ars erotica*, these sexually open but romantically monogamous relationships nonetheless still seem to be highly dependent on the conventional economic, legal, and practical conjugal structure characterized by the deployment of alliances. Marriage is thus still used to legitimate their relationships, their cohabitation, and their co-parenting. While they reflected critically upon these institutions and claim to take advantage of their convenience, their practice of CNM remains discreet and hidden from the outside world. These forms of sexual CNM very literally exemplify Foucault's *scientia sexualis*, non-monogamous sexuality is removed from life and love, as it is medicalized and categorized into a game of collecting fetishes and sexual experiences. This reflects Foucault's view of a bourgeois society where the "too rigid, too general, barriers against sexuality" has resulted in "a whole perverse outbreak and a long pathology of the sexual instinct" where unconventional sexuality is viewed as wrong, but it is still widely indulged in (Foucault 1978: 47).

While some like Alex and Naomi view their CNM as an occasional hobby and reject and criticize "lifestyle swingers," polyamorous practices seem to have become not only a philosophy and a narrative on love and relationality but also a label and identity that is presented almost like a sexual orientation. In the second part of the analysis, I dealt with polyamory, first as a body of knowledge and a community that uses its own specific language to characterize and communicate different feelings, relations, and social phenomena. Thereafter, I showed that for some of my polyamorous participants these new categorizations contributed to changing how they live their lives, making the values of relationality, intimacy, and romance behind polyamory into a community and an identity. While my polyamorous participants seemed to actively resist the deployment of alliances in their ways of living outside of the monogamous conjugal framework, their classifying approach to love and sexuality still largely reflects Foucault's *scientia sexualis* and deployment of sexuality.

Indeed, in my analysis, I have argued that this new third relational option is still affected by the mononormative framework that they are resisting, by presenting their way of loving, as dissociated from sexual practice. Indeed, while they reject the majority of Kean's (2018) mononormative tropes there is still

some assumption that sexuality should not be taken too lightly and should be associated with romance and commitment. This is also echoed by Klesse as he defines polyamory as a "relational ideology" (2006: 578). Polyamory thus has a political and moral underbelly which explains how polyamory tries to present itself as *responsible* or *ethical* non-monogamy as opposed to the supposedly amoral promiscuity of other forms of CMN. While many polyamorous people see polyamory as a critical tool to diversify and fluidify the views on intimacy and relationality, it might also maintain an underlying rigidity in maintaining the *right way* of practicing CNM. Polyamory has to be considered differently than sexual orientation because of its "potentially universal appeal." (Sheff 2020: 889). Sheff explains that the most menacing aspect of polyamory for people who reject it is that "most people in long-term relationships (…) have had the experience of being attracted to someone else besides their partner." (Ibid.). While not everyone has the capacity or desire to be queer, anyone could potentially be polyamorous. The polyamorous discourse thus also tends to present itself as not only ethical but also as natural. Indeed, Willis (2019) argues this community creates its own new "polynormativity" with its own norms and underlying power structures.

The potentially universal appeal of polyamory can cause these labels and narratives to become "modes of specification of individuals," frozen classifications that are essentialized and naturalized, in the same way, monogamy, heterosexuality, and normative sexuality were rationalized as obvious and righteous (Foucault 1978: 47). Many authors critique the essentialization of polyamory because it means the label of polyamory can be used without the ethical values and knowledge associated which can reproduce or even accentuate existing power dynamics. Indeed, Barker and Langdridge question" whether people need to be aware that they are doing something radical and challenging to the dominant ideology in order to be understood as participating in radical ways of living" (2010: 755). This is also exemplified by De Graeve's comparative study of openly non-monogamous men and *cheating* men, in which she comes to the harrowing conclusion that regardless of their tendencies towards discretion or openness "the moral reasoning used by many of the men was deeply intertwined with monogamist and gendered ideas on care and commitment", such as the "stereotypically masculine sexual scripts that construct men's needs for promiscuous sex as 'natural'." (2019: 855). While I have not focused o the gendered harm CNM can cause throughout this article, it is more widely explored with my interviewee Silvia (25) in my film, *Multi Love* (Legein 2022: 14:29-19:34). This naturalization and essentialization of polyamory can also come into play in other power relations such as class, race, religion, sexual orientation, and disability (Barker and Langdridge 2010: 755). This is, of course, a limitation I witnessed in my research as some of the participants who were from religiously or ethnically conservation backgrounds were less willing to participate in the research, particularly for the film, because if they weren't in a position to *come out* about their CNM. I would even argue that despite the historical association with the LGBTQ+ movement, I found it particularly difficult to find queer perspectives on CNM as they might be timid in sharing this aspect of their lives because of their systemic

sexualization. Polyamory seems to overwhelmingly be the worry of upper-middle-class white people in Europe and the United States. The current theory and practice of polyamory might fail to address the intersectional experiences of non-monogamous minorities, like in the dissociation of polygamy from the non-monogamous discourse we observed in the introduction (Willey 2006: 615).

Yet, despite these essentializing tendencies in our ways of knowing, representing, and understanding non-monogamy, I believe some of these ideas and practices might have potential in becoming a revolutionary form of *ars erotica.* Foucault argues that "the *ars erotica* did not disappear altogether" from our civilization, he believes that in the possession and ecstasy of the union with God in Christian confession, which very much echoes my own practical approach to this research, there might be "multiplied, intensified intrinsic pleasures" (1978: 70). He explains that *ars erotica* is "not in the lyricism of orgasm and the good feelings of bio-energy", but in "the profusion of secret fantasies and the dearly paid right to whisper them to whoever is able to hear them; in short, the formidable pleasure of analysis "(Ibid.: 71). Klesse also believes polyamory isn't really about "rigid categorization or typologisation", its value lies in "its endorsement of the fluidity and unpredictability of emotions and erotic desire" (2014: 92). Polyamory is often compared to bisexuality and gender non-conformity, as an embodied, practical, and emotional ways of knowing about sexuality and relationality, beyond the gender binary, beyond utility and morality. Indeed, in Callis' (2009) rereading of Foucault through the lens of bisexuality, she explains that the ambiguous position of bisexuality caused it to never really be medicalized and essentialized into an identity like same-sex attraction. Quoting Foucault, she claims "the category of bisexuality seems to have been spared the rigors of this 'never-ending demand for truth'" (Callis 2009: 225). This is echoed in Anderlini D'Onofrio in which she uses a feminist ecological epistemology to present polyamory and bisexuality as a relational model for a philosophy of abundance, claiming that "stability of erotic awareness and emotional sustainability frees the imagination from needless fears and create emotional and ecological abundance" (2009: 152).

Therefore, non-monogamy through its embodied experimentation with sexuality and relationality, but also its variety of overlapping and contrasting discourses and values about sex, love, romance, and intimacy thus has the potential to be truly transformative, however, to do so our approach should not only be *consensual* but also manifold, fluid, and critical.

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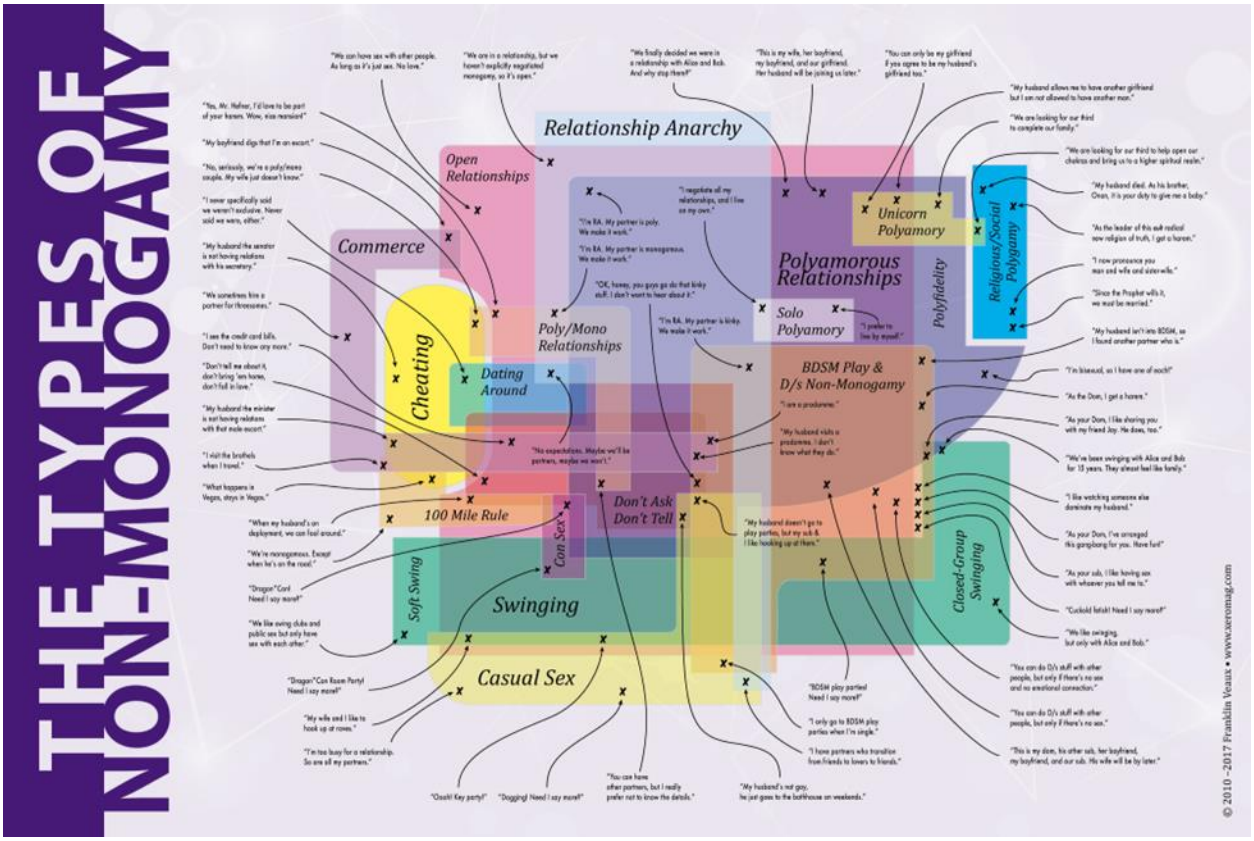
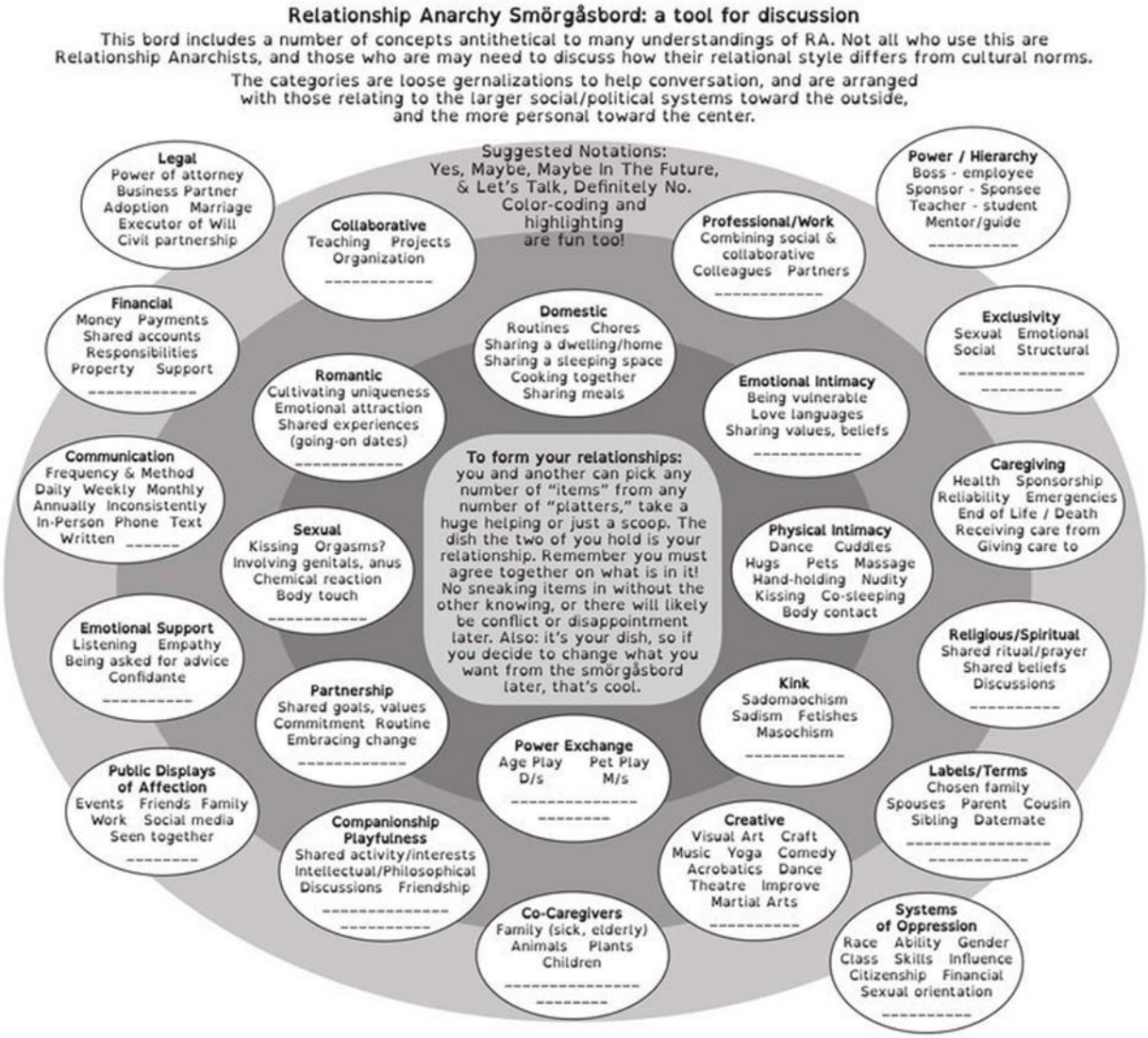
Appendices

Appendix 1



Appendix 2


Relationship Anarchy Smörgåsbord: a tool for discussion
This bord includes a number of concepts antithetical to many understandings of RA. Not all who use this are Relationship Anarchists, and those who are may need to discuss how their relational style differs from cultural norms.
The categories are loose gernalizations to help conversation, and are arranged with those relating to the larger social/political systems toward the outside, and the more personal toward the center.
Suggested Notations: Yes, Maybe, Maybe In The Future, & Let's Talk, Definitely No. Color-coding and highlighting are fun too!
To form your relationships: you and another can pick any number of "items" from any number of "platters," take a huge helping or just a scoop. The dish the two of you hold is your relationship. Remember you must agree together on what is in it! No sneaking items in without the other knowing, or there will likely be conflict or disappointment later. Also: it's your dish, so if you decide to change what you want from the smörgåsbord later, that's cool.
Legal
Power of attorney
Business Partner
Adoption Marriage
Executor of Will
Civil partnership
Collaborative
Teaching Projects
Organization
Professional/Work
Combining social & collaborative
Colleagues Partners
Power / Hierarchy
Boss - employee
Sponsor - Sponsee
Teacher - student
Mentor/guide
Financial
Money Payments
Shared accounts
Responsibilities
Property Support
Domestic
Routines Chores
Sharing a dwelling/home
Sharing a sleeping space
Cooking together
Sharing meals
Exclusivity
Sexual Emotional
Social Structural
Romantic
Cultivating uniqueness
Emotional attraction
Shared experiences
(going-on dates)
Emotional Intimacy
Being vulnerable
Love languages
Sharing values, beliefs
Communication
Frequency & Method
Daily Weekly Monthly
Annually Inconsistently
In-Person Phone Text
Written
Caregiving
Health Sponsorship
Reliability Emergencies
End of Life / Death
Receiving care from
Giving care to
Sexual
Kissing Orgasms?
Involving genitals, anus
Chemical reaction
Body touch
Physical Intimacy
Dance Cuddles
Hugs Pets Massage
Hand-holding Nudity
Kissing Co-sleeping
Body contact
Emotional Support
Listening Empathy
Being asked for advice
Confidante
Religious/Spiritual
Shared ritual/prayer
Shared beliefs
Discussions
Partnership
Shared goals, values
Commitment Routine
Embracing change
Kink
Sadomaochism
Sadism Fetishes
Masochism
Power Exchange
Age Play Pet Play
D/s M/s
Public Displays of Affection
Events Friends Family
Work Social media
Seen together
Labels/Terms
Chosen family
Spouses Parent Cousin
Sibling Datemate
Companionship Playfulness
Shared activity/interests
Intellectual/Philosophical
Discussions Friendship
Creative
Visual Art Craft
Music Yoga Comedy
Acrobatics Dance
Theatre Improve
Martial Arts
Co-Caregivers
Family (sick, elderly)
Animals Plants
Children
Systems of Oppression
Race Ability Gender
Class Skills Influence
Citizenship Financial
Sexual orientation
Originated by Lyrica Lawrence & Heather Orr of Vancouver Polyamory in December 2016 (v1). Updated by Maxx Hill with the guidance of the Relationship Anarchy, Polyamory, and Solo Polyamory Facebook Groups: April (v2, v3) & September 2018 (v4), & January 2019. This is Version 5.
Please share. Translations into any language are welcome. Contact Maxx for editable file:
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