

NOTIONS OF LOVE IN POLYAMORY—ELEMENTS IN A DISCOURSE ON MULTIPLE LOVING

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INTRODUCTION

Polyamory circumscribes a relationship philosophy or an approach to intimacy and sexuality that is based on the belief that it is worthwhile and valid to have more than one loving or erotic relationship. The term combines word elements derived from the Greek (poly) and Latin (amory) languages and thus literally translates as “many loves”. The concept has circulated for several decades in social networks which are interested in developing alternatives to monogamous couple and family relationships (Anapol 2010; Lano and Parry 1995a; Munson and Stelboum 1999a; Klesse 2006). Polyamory endorses an ethical approach, according to which all participants in a relationship are aware of the (potentially) non-monogamous character of their mutual bond(s). In this regard, polyamory aims to challenge the common “double standard” at the heart of what Pepper Mint (2004) calls the monogamy/cheating system: the dominant cultural arrangement, according to which people are expected to identify with the value of exclusivity, even if affairs are so common that they can be considered to be an institutionalised part of the intimate and sexual landscape (cf. Druckerman 2007).

It is primarily due to the emphasis on honesty and consensus that polyamory is frequently referred to as a “responsible practice of non-monogamy” (Anapol 1997; Lano and Parry 1995b; Klesse 2006). Most publications suggest that polyamory promotes a distinctive set of values. As a consensual approach to non-monogamy, polyamory promotes an ethics based on honesty, respectful negotiation and decision making, integrity, reciprocity and equality (Anapol 2010:65–86; Barker and Langdridge 2011). In previous publications, I have described polyamory as one particular discourse on non-monogamy (Klesse 2006; 2007a). Its most distinctive characteristic is its up-front endorsement of love. The conflation of polyamory with a practice of love is a salient feature of most publications on polyamory. For example, Lano and Parry translate the term as “more loves than one”. They propagate polyamory as “a generic term intended to cover all forms of responsible non-monogamy”, because it “helps to emphasise that there is more than just sex at the issue in non-monogamy” (all quotes, Lano and Parry 1995b:v).

Despite the centrality of love in the interpretation of polyamory, there are few analytical accounts of what kind of love is advocated in polyamory.¹ In this article, I will explore polyamory as a “discourse on love”, rather than as a “discourse on non-monogamy”.² This will enable me to compare the notion of love advanced in the discussion of polyamory with other conceptualisations of love, namely romantic love. Positing polyamory as a specific discourse on love denaturalises love by framing it as a socially constructed set of emotions, with particular histories and specific, culturally bounded archives (cf. Ahmed 2004; Moon 2008; Jackson 2010). At the same time, I am aware that any attempt to define “poly love” is inherently problematic. The whole debate about polyamory has been driven by a concern with the creation of a less prescriptive emotional and sexual culture. A commitment to diversity is a salient feature of the polyamory debates (Schroedter and Vetter 2010). I therefore consider my analysis as an attempt at approximation. I will limit myself to discerning salient “elements” within a non-cohesive discourse on love.³

The archive for my discourse-analytical study consists of the following sources. Firstly, I will draw upon a critical reading of the major popular publications on polyamory (primarily) in the English language. As I have argued elsewhere, the major bulk of published literature on polyamory falls into the genre of popular advice literature (Klesse 2007d). Most of this work has been written by authors who are themselves quite close to, if not even active members of, polyamory communities. Some of these texts could be placed on the borderline between advice and activist

¹ Schroedter and Vetter’s book (2010) is a rare exception. They present an impressive historical genealogy of polyamory as a love style. However, they fall short of providing a detailed analysis of the specific features of contemporary poly love.

² The definition of polyamory as simply a particular approach to non-monogamy is also not able to incorporate perspectives which consider *intentional* monogamy (Anapol 1997; 2010) or asexuality (Scherrer 2010) as valid choices *within* polyamory.

³ My approach has been inspired by Roland Barthes’ (1978) subtle analysis in “Lovers’ Discourse: Fragments”. For Barthes, the discourse of love cannot be systematised. Zygmunt Bauman (2003), too, presents a largely non-systematic analysis with multiple entry points.

literature. For example, *The Ethical Slut* by Easton and Liszt (1997) is frequently referred to as the “Bible of Polyamory” (Klesse 2007a). Because of the popularity of many of these publications among polyamory practitioners, I think it is possible to analyse them next to more explicitly “activist” texts or personal experience stories (e.g. some contributions to Lano and Parry 1995a) as parts of a multi-faceted discourse on polyamory.⁴ In the case of polyamory literature, the boundaries between genres are frequently blurred. For example, some of the early publications on polyamory in more explicitly academic outlets, too, contain a significant number of “activist” or experience-based writings (cf. Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004d). More thorough sociological research and theory has only started to appear over the last few years, again, with many authors having personally close links with polyamory communities (cf. Klesse 2007d; Barker and Langdrige 2011). While I treat the first set of publications (i.e. polyamory guide books and manifestos, FAQ texts, personal experience narratives, etc.) primarily as sources within my heterogeneous archive for the study of the discourse on polyamory, I draw upon recent research publications (in addition to social, cultural and critical theories) primarily as guidance and inspiration for my sociological *contextualisation* of polyamory. I will also utilise interview data collected as part of my 1997-2003 research into gay male and bisexual consensual non-monogamous relationships in the UK (Klesse 2007a). This study was designed around a combination of qualitative methods, namely interviews, focus groups, documentary research, participant-observation and discourse analysis. I conducted forty-four interviews with people with experiences in non-monogamous relationships. Most of my interview partners resided in the south-east of England, primarily in London. Smaller numbers lived in (or around) Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Glasgow and Edinburgh. One half of the research participants identified as gay male or strongly related to gay male cultural contexts. The other half consisted of bi-identified men and women (in roughly equal numbers) or people who strongly related to bisexual cultural contexts. Both parts of the sample contained cis-gendered people⁵ (the majority) and transgendered people (few). Most of the bi-identified research participants positively referred to polyamory. Many considered themselves to be part of both the bisexual and polyamorous communities. Although they articulated their views from a particular (bi poly) perspective, they usually reflected extensively on the wider debates on polyamory. In these personal interview narratives, they reflect upon their own decisions, choices, relationship trajectories and life experiences. Referring to polyamory, they cite, alternate or negotiate elements of wider discourses on polyamory they are familiar with. In my view, these personal narratives are part of both the construction and reproduction of a discourse on poly love (cf. Howarth 2000; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000).

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the discursive specifics of psychological advice literature on non-monogamy and polyamory see Klesse 2007c; Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006; see also Pallotta-Chiarolli 2004; Noël 2006; Petrella 2007. For a methodological discussion of heterogeneity as a feature of archives, see Halberstam (1998).

⁵ The term cis-gendered relates to people who neither contest, nor wish to alter the sex which was ascribed to them at birth.

My discussion falls into the following parts. First I will provide a brief sociological contextualisation of the phenomenon of polyamory. I will then discuss salient features of the discourse on poly love by drawing on examples from both the literature and my own research. In the last part of the paper, I will locate polyamory in the larger context of the history of love and emotions.

POLYAMORY—IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND PRACTICES

The concept of polyamory was developed in debates around alternative approaches to relationships. According to Anapol, the word was coined by Morning Glory and Oberon Zell, the founders of the neo-pagan Church of All Worlds to create an alternative to the term “responsible non-monogamy” in 1990 (1997:5; 2010:1).⁶ The term initially spread in a primarily spiritualistic counter-cultural milieu in the United States (cf. Anapol 2010; Aviram 2010; Kaldera 2005; Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004c). Some researchers suggest that this history continues to shape the cultural and political orientation of many polyamory communities today (Aviram 2010).

Polyamory has been an attractive concept for many people outside of neo-pagan communities, because it envisions alternatives to couple-based monogamy. The critique of monogamy was a hot topic in many progressive movements since the 1960s, including socialist, anarchist, feminist, lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender, BDSM and queer forms of activism (Adam 2010; Easton and Liszt 1997; Barker and Ritchie 2007; Jackson and Scott 2004; Pieper and Bauer 2005; Schroedter and Vetter 2010, Anapol 2010; Heckert 2010b; Bauer 2010). The debate on polyamory had some resonance in all these movement contexts. My interview partner Pal, for example, who has committed himself to an overtly non-religious, queer-inspired, bi- and kink-assertive sex-radical political agenda, explained his preference for the term polyamory with the fact that, in contradistinction to the term non-monogamy, polyamory is not based on negation.

Pal: Breaking it down into being multiple loves, rather than using “non-monogamous”, which worked negatively, what you are not, rather what you are. It’s not a word about what you are; [...] it’s more a sort of non-label.

Today the discourse on polyamory maps a broad and diversified cultural terrain. Polyamory has an appeal to people who are close to lesbian, gay male, bisexual, queer, transgender, queer-feminist, BDSM, anarchist or other progressive tendencies within the “new left”, as well as ecological and spiritual, religious or new age movements (based in, for example, neo-Tantrism, neo-paganism, Wiccan religions, Christianity or western adaptations of Hinduism or Buddhism).

⁶ There are also claims which suggest that variants of the term have been around throughout the 1960s. Alan (2007), who discusses competing claims on the origin of the term, suggests that this claim is based on a mix-up of the terms “polyamory” and “polyfidelity”. The latter is said to have a much longer history. Alan’s 2007 text confirms the thesis that the word “polyamorous” first appeared in print in Oberon Zell’s article “A Bouquet of Lovers” in spring 1990. See also The Ravenhearts (n.d) for a version of this historical narrative. However, subsequent research by Alan (2010) brought up evidence for earlier circulations of the term, ranging back to 1953.

In the USA, there are expansive polyamorous communities in most major cities (Anapol 2010). Jessica Bennett (2009) suggests in an article in *Newsweek* that there are now more than half a million openly polyamorous families in the United States. Aviram (2010:87) stresses the high degree of cultural and political organisation among polyamorous people in the San Francisco Bay Area. This infrastructure includes activist organisations, regular workshops and conferences, publications and social gatherings (cf. Mint 2009). Loraine Hutchins (1996) talks of the existence of poly movement in the USA as early as 1996. So far there is not a lot of detailed research on polyamorous communities available.

Elisabeth Sheff (2005:8; 2006:624), who conducted a seven-year-long ethnographic research project within a west-coast US poly community, characterises mainstream poly communities in the region as follows: Members are overwhelmingly white, college educated, claim a middle- or upper-middle class status, have professional jobs (often in computers or counseling/therapy). Most of her respondents were in their mid-thirties to late fifties. Pepper Mint (2009) claims that there are few regular participants in San Francisco (i.e., in their teens, twenties or early thirties). Other research, however, represents a wider age range. Wosick-Correa's (2010) 343 poly-identified research participants fell in the age range from 18 to 67, with 76% being aged between 18 and 45. Survey data collected on USA polyamory communities affirms the educated nature and advanced class-position and ethnically/racially exclusive nature of polyamory communities (Weber 2002, Wosick-Correa 2010), an image which is reproduced in most publications on polyamory (cf. Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006; Noël 2006).

While polyamory communities have blossomed for decades in the USA (cf. Munson and Stelboun 1999a; Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004c), polyamory is still quite unknown in Europe.⁷ The social organisation of polyamorous communities is not very advanced in most European countries. Referring to the state of poly culture and politics in Germany, Schroedter and Vetter (2010) prefer to talk of a subculture, rather than a social movement. The poly community has no political voice, they argue, and becomes only visible once journalists undertake the effort to go out and search for it (2010:142 and 159). Yet there are social groups in larger cities (Von Gantenbrink 2011). The situation in the UK is similar.

Pal, who put a significant amount of time into activism around polyamory when I interviewed him in 1999 and 2000, questioned whether it would even make sense to talk of a UK polyamorous community. Yet the existence of a community would be the pre-condition for a social movement.

Pal: The people, who are doing it, just don't know other people that are. [...] Generally there's a fairly visible gay community, lots of places, so you can find it,

⁷ When I started my own research into gay male and bisexual non-monogamies in 1997, I had not known about the existence of the term "polyamory". Although I had been in non-monogamous relationships with partners of different genders for most of my adult life in Germany and the UK, I only encountered the concept when I did more systematic research into non-monogamy. Cath, one of the research participants in my study, suggested that there are many more people "out there" whom she would consider to be polyamorous, but who do not have access to this term.

if you looked. And there isn't that for poly at all. [...] It's not even [worthwhile] doing a thing, even [...] starting having a sort of activism without a sort of community. [laughing] I don't think you have a community, if no one knows each other.

Things have progressed significantly in the last few years. There are social poly groups in at least three UK cities (London, Manchester and Cambridge). Poly-interested people are connected via various networking sites, e-mail lists and newsgroups (Bi.Org 2010). The moderator of several UK-based poly web groups suggested in 2007 that at least 1000 people were part of this on-line community. In the year 2006, the first UK Poly Day was organised in London and attracted more than 200 people (Gill 2007). Poly Day has now established itself as a regular occasion for the UK poly community to come together. The annual UK Bisexual Conventions (BiCons) stage workshops and debates on polyamory as a regular feature. Poly-identified bisexuals use these events to have meetings specifically for the bi poly community (Klesse 2007a). It is not surprising that polyamory meetings take place at bisexual conventions and gatherings. Marianne suggests that the UK polyamory community overlaps strongly with other communities.

Marianne: In the UK there's a strong overlap with the S/M community and the bisexual community. If you're into S/M and you're bisexual and you're poly, you're likely to just keep bumping into the same people at all the events. I don't know why. I think [...] it's partly because it's quite a small community and it's mainly on-line people. [...] I mean there are also a lot of pagans, a lot of [...] people, who like Science Fiction. [...] It's quite funny. There's like a set of criteria almost. Are you into S/M? Are you bisexual? Are you into Science Fiction? Are you a Pagan? And the amount of people, who fit in all of those, is quite surprising.

According to Marianne, the UK polyamory is located at the conjuncture of diverse subcultures, including bisexual and S/M scenes, neo-pagans and the science fiction fan community.⁸ Other research participants had been part of the commune movement (Rubin 2001).⁹ The common references to neo-paganism, bisexuality, science fiction

⁸ It is important to note that, of course, not all polyamorous people are bisexual. Some US-based research mentions the prevalence of homophobia and biphobia in particular among straight-identified male polyamory practitioners (Sheff 2006). In general, polyamory appeals to people of various sexual identities, including heterosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians and (according to anecdotal evidence) a rather small number gay men. Research indicates that non-monogamous relationships are very common among gay men. However, there are rather few direct references to polyamory as a concept or identity in gay male culture (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 1996; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001; Adam 2010; Klesse 2007a). Some authors see a particularly strong affinity between bisexuality and polyamory (cf. Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004c, 2009). Bi-identified people make up a significant portion of polyamorous activist networks and communities in some countries, such as, for example, in the UK and the USA (Klesse 2007a; Mint 2004). Without question, polyamory creates a space for expressing desire for people of different genders or irrespective of gender, i.e. kinds of desire which are often labelled "bisexual". This may be one of the reasons why many bi-identified people are drawn to polyamory.

⁹ The confluence of various marginalised and counter-cultural identities in Marianne's ac-

fan culture, and geek culture in descriptions of the poly community by my UK respondents resonate with US accounts (Anapol 2010; Aviram 2010; Weber 2002; Wosick-Correa 2010). In both countries, poly cultures are furthermore predominantly white and middle class (Sheff 2006; Noël 2006; Wosick-Correa 2010). Yet there seem also to be differences: Some analysis suggests that poly advocates in Europe often take a more politicised stance, whereas the spiritualistic currents are more strongly developed in the USA (Anapol 2010; Bernhard 2009).

As an umbrella term, polyamory encompasses a whole range of relationship practices. Open relationships, open marriages, intimate networks, group marriages, triads and quads are the descriptive terms for polyamorous relationship arrangements offered by a range of authors (Munson and Stelboun 1999b; Labriola 1999; Anapol 2010). Yet these labels do not exhaust the full range of polyamorous possibilities. Moreover, for many polyamory does not manifest itself in a particular relationship form, but consists in a dedication to a set of values and the cultivation of a particular inner approach to intimacy (Anapol 1997; 2010).¹⁰ Only the emphasis that it is more than just sex which grounds a polyamorous relationship is common to all descriptions of polyamory. At times, this “more than sex” is captured in references to intimacy. Taormino (2008:71) claims that polyamorous relationships are born out of the desire for “maintaining multiple *significant, intimate* relationships simultaneously”. Mostly, however, the “more than sex” is given the name of love: “Polyamory means 'loving more than one.' This love may be sexual, emotional, spiritual, or any combination thereof, according to the desires and agreements of the individuals involved” (alt. polyamory 1997). In the following, I will explore in closer detail what kinds of love are evoked and celebrated in polyamory.

ELEMENTS OF A DISCOURSE ON POLY LOVE

Although polyamory cannot be adequately theorised as a singular or closed discourse, it is possible to discern salient themes across the entirety of the terrain of its discursive enunciation. These themes or elements, as I call them, are part of a wider repertoire of fragmented tropes on the issue of poly love. They do not form a

count is striking. There are various explanations between the cross-over between consensual non-monogamy and other identities. Barker and Langdrige (2011:761) talk of a recent proliferation of research into such cross-overs, for example between polyamory and bisexuality, transgender, asexuality and BDSM (cf. Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004c; 2009; Bauer 2010; Richards 2010; Scherrer 2010). I do not have space to theorise these links in detail here. However, it is worthwhile to consider two major general explanations which have been offered for this situation. One rests on the assumption that people who have brought up the imagination and energy to defy, for example, heteronormativity, find it easier to question compulsory monogamy. Another explanation highlights shared cultural values between communities, for example the stress on communication and negotiation in both polyamory and BDSM (cf. Bauer 2010).

¹⁰ Reciprocity is certainly central to this set of values. Depending on the relationship context, this reciprocity may be enacted in different forms and according to different degrees of intensity between the different people who are part of a particular polyamorous constellation. Scales of reciprocity may range from abstract acknowledgment, to mutually shared recognition or mutually shared bonds of trust, commitment, friendship, love, intimacy or sex.

necessary part of every account of polyamorous love. At times, they may even contradict each other. Yet each of these elements can be mobilised, on its own or in combination with others, to describe the distinctive qualities of poly love.

Various analysts have undertaken the task to elucidate the socio-psychological dimensions of love by looking at some of the integral elements of its articulation. Erich Fromm (1971) believed that only love could provide some soothing of the existential feelings of anxiety and isolation at the heart of the modern human experience. However, love will only be able to bridge the separation between self and others if it is marked by a variety of qualities. These qualities include a *proactive orientation* towards other human beings and the capacity for (unconditional) *giving*. Fromm then breaks love down into further elements, which, according to his view, are common to all forms of love: *care, responsibility, respect and knowledge*.¹¹

It could be seen as a shortcoming of Fromm's "theory of love" that it posits love as a holistic and (potentially) universalistic capacity. Yet his discussion also advances historicising perspectives. The existential isolation of the individual, for example, is described as the effect of a historical process, i.e. the increasing separation of human life from nature and a divine cosmology. Moreover, Fromm suggests that love risks disintegration under the commodity logic of capitalistic consumer society (cf. Bauman 2003; Illouz 2007). However, if people develop love as an emotional response to changing social and economic conditions, then love itself is subject to a process of continuous transformation. This is the kernel of a social constructionist understanding of love and emotions (Jackson 2010).

Monogamy, the couple relationship and the model of the core family have been shaped by the cultural ideals bound up with romantic love. The cultural codes around romantic love were first elaborated in English romantic novels during the 18th century and were then further developed in literary traditions on the European continent. According to Karl Lenz (1998:267-272), the literary ideal of romantic love encompassed the following characteristics: (1) the unity of sexual passion and affectionate emotionality; (2) the unity of love and marriage; (3) the integration of parenthood; (4) the values of commitment and faithfulness; (5) the intensification of a sense of individuality and uniqueness; (6) a promise of unique happiness; (7) a new ideal of cross-gender mutuality and gender equality (which implied a more "androgynous" tendency). Even if all these elements can be identified in romantic prose of the time, many of them, and in particular the ones which imply a transformation of gender roles, according to Lenz, did not have any significant impact on common practices of love for a very long time to come.

An ideological postulate of more equitable partnership arrangements solidified in discourses around companionate marriage in the 1920s and subsequent decades

¹¹ Fromm distinguishes various forms of love differentiated by the love object: "Brotherly Love", "Motherly Love", "Fatherly Love", "Erotic Love", "Self-Love" and the "Love of God". "Sisterly Love" is strangely absent from Fromm's discussion. Although Fromm differentiates between various forms of love, he suggests that love is ultimately grounded in a unified orientation towards the world as such: "Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an *attitude*, an *orientation of character* which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not towards one "object" of love" (1971:38).

(Cancian 1987). Yet it is questionable to what extent these cultural imaginaries of harmonious domesticity did really aim to foster the values of female integrity and autonomy. Finch and Summerfield (1999) argue that motherhood remained central to the ideal of femininity and that single women (and in particular single mothers) were frequently pathologised. According to their analysis, the promotion of companionate marriage was primarily driven by a concern with falling birth rates.

Anthony Giddens (1992) argues that the conditions of late modernity have created a situation in which the promise of gender equity may finally come true. Romantic love, he argues, may have had an egalitarian strain, but it was always hampered by de facto inequalities. He sees contemporary Western societies at a turning point. Now is the moment in which romantic love finally gives way to a new cultural ideal of "confluent love". Confluent love stands for a more contingent form of love in which "in principal" equal partners negotiate their wishes and desires. Giddens' analysis has been rightly criticised by feminists and other critics who showed that his claim of gender equality cannot be sustained in the light of current empirical research into heterosexual gender relations. Moreover, it presents a euphemistic analysis of the economic, class, gender and sexual relations of contemporary western societies (Jamieson 1999; Bell and Binnie 2000; Klesse 2007b).

While sociologists like Giddens see romantic love on the decline, others argue that romantic love has its heyday in the period of late modernity. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), who pursue a slightly different version of individualisation theory than Giddens, argue that in increasingly secularised societies romantic love has taken the place of religion in many people's lives.¹² Karl Lenz (1998) assumes the middle ground. He argues that elements of the old romantic paradigm currently coexist with newer ones. The novel tendencies include a heightened emphasis on self-actualisation and communication, a growing influence of therapeutic ideas (cf. Rose 1999) and a continuation of de-gendering processes (Cancian 1987).¹³ However, which name we ever decide to give to this so-called new paradigm of love, the symbolism of love as such has not ceased to provide a powerful stimulus for human erotic and intimate imagination.

Schroedter and Vetter (2010) place the emergence of poly love discourses in the historical context of an on-going transformation of economic and cultural relations and the continuous struggle around sexual and cultural hegemony. The late 19th century and the early 20th century witnessed changes in the representation of heterosexual intimacy, which Steven Seidman (1991) refers to as the "sexualisation of love" and the "eroticisation of sex", a development which involved a profound redefinition of the relation between love, sexuality and marriage. Reciprocity and mutuality emerged as a paradigm of modern love in western societies (Collins 2003).

¹² See Beck et al. (1995) for a discussion of some of the differences between these theoretical approaches.

¹³ I am skeptical in particular of this latter claim. Research into heterosexual relationships indicates the persistence of profoundly gendered patterns of intimacy and sexuality (Holland et al. 1998; Gunnarson 2010; cf. Jónasdóttir 1994).

Sexual liberationist and counter-cultural currents within a broad range of social movements after WW II undermined the normative expectation of monogamy (Pieper and Bauer 2005). This is when the discourse on polyamory in a more narrow sense took its starting point. Evidence suggests that variants of the term polyamory first appeared in the 1950s (Alan 2010) and solidified on the subsequent decades. Pepper Mint (2010) suggests that the older generation of poly-identified people in the USA (more specifically in San Francisco) came of age in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The term has then gained increasing popularity over the last two decades (Ritchie and Barker 2006).

Polyamory advocates believe that polyamory can resolve a lot of the contradictions in intimate relationships in the current historical conjuncture (Anapol 2010; Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2009). But what are the distinctive features of poly love? In the following, I will analyse salient themes in or basic elements of the discourse of poly love.

LOVE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR EROTICISM/SEXUALITY

References to eroticism/sexuality are implicit in most discussions of polyamory. This is evident in the common usage of polyamory as an umbrella term for “responsible non-monogamy”. Schroedter and Vetter (2010) see in most discussions of polyamory references to romantic versions of love.¹⁴ Eroticism has been an integral part of most conceptualisations of romantic love (Lenz 1998). At the same time, there are positions within poly communities, according to which poly relationships do not have to be sexual at all (cf. Klesse 2007a). There is a space in the discourse of poly love for the exploration of non-sexual forms of intimate partnership or loving friendship. From this perspective, polyamory may also be an interesting issue for people who identify as asexual (Scherrer 2010). In principle, polyamory welcomes erotic and sexual involvements with multiple partners. At the same time, there is a strong emphasis that these multiple involvements should be of a “loving kind”. This explains the controversial or marginal status of “casual sex” in many polyamory communities (Klesse 2006; 2007a). Marianne, a research participant in my study, considered her disinterest in “casual sex” as a direct out-flow of her polyamorous orientation. She saw casual sex (whether with strangers, acquaintances or friends) primarily as a feature of non-monogamy. In contradistinction, polyamory would be realised in a person’s commitment to a limited number of emotional or loving relationships. “I guess polyamory’s more about love and non-monogamy’s more about sex really, because I mean there’s different ways of doing non-monogamy.” The implication is that in polyamory you do not have sex without love, although you may love somebody with whom you do not intend to have sex. Consequently, love appears as the defining feature of polyamorous desire. A similar point is made by Anapol, only from an explicitly spiritualistic point of view. In her “hybrid” concept “sexuallove”, love, eroticism and spirituality merge to bring about true polyamory (1997; 2010). The assumption that sex should be an expression of love is also at the heart of the quite common dismissal of swinging as repulsive, because it allegedly lacks emotionality and intimacy (Klesse 2006;

¹⁴ Schroedter and Vetter (2010:27) suggest that it is highly unlikely to encounter, for example, a description of a mother as polyamorous because she loves both her lover and her child.

Ritchie 2010; McDonald 2010; cf. Heckert 2010a).¹⁵ Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio's (2009:104–128) spiritualistic, eco-feminist proposal of a “new politics of love” takes a more sex-positive stance by explicitly embracing the “alternative styles of love” in LGBTQ, BDSM, swinging, polyamorous and non-monogamous communities. In her work, the boundaries between love, sexuality and eroticism are transposed in an endorsement of the *ars erotica*, a political rejection of modernist interpretations of sexuality (via a Foucauldian critique of normativity), and an incorporation of “sex” into a profoundly eroticised spiritual-scientific cosmology. From this point of view, all love always contains an erotic (if not sexual) element. Here, too, poly sex becomes indistinguishable from poly love, although the significance of sex is not diminished in this conflation.

POLY LOVE IS NON-EXCLUSIVE, UNLIMITED AND OVERABUNDANT

Polyamorous love is non-exclusive and potentially unlimited. This is obvious in the out-right rejection of compulsory monogamy at the heart of polyamory. Anapol's definition in her book “Polyamory—The New Love without Limits” puts that quite explicitly:

Polyamory: A lovestyle which arises from the understanding that love cannot be forced to flow, or not flow, in any particular direction: Polyamory emphasizes consciously choosing how many partners one wishes to engage with rather than accepting social norms which dictate loving only one person at a time (1997:179).

Polyamory is non-exclusive by being open to multiple partnerships. It is without limits by rejecting limiting conventions. This does not mean that all poly-identified people have multiple relationships. Many may have only one partner or even no partner at all. Yet in polyamory love is construed as an active agent which has a potential to grow eternally. For example, Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt construe love as a potentially limitless resource in their challenge of what they call the “starvation economy” of monogamous romanticism.

Many people believe, explicitly or implicitly, that romantic love, intimacy and connection are finite capabilities of which there is never enough to go around, and that if you give some to one person, you must be taking some away from another (1997:35).

They then continue:

Our belief is that the human capacity for sex and love and intimacy is far greater than most people think—possibly infinite—and that having a lot of satisfying connection simply makes it possible for you to have a lot more (1997:36).

¹⁵ Deborah Anapol, who in the past has drawn rather rigid lines between swinging and polyamory, is more inclined to consider similarities in the approaches between swingers and poly-identified people in her most recent publication (2010:13). See also Frank and DeLamater (2010) for a deconstruction of the boundaries between swinging, polyamory and other non-monogamies.

The potential overabundance of polyamory is also celebrated in the concept of “compersion”, a poly term for the warm feeling and happiness induced by experiencing a beloved partner enjoying the relationship with another lover/partner of theirs. The more recent creation of the emotion word “frubbly” aims to capture similar feelings (Richtie and Barker 2006:595). Many polyamorous people acknowledge that there are limits to polyamory. Yet they tend to identify these limits on the level of practicalities (such as time management) and not on the level of an emotional capacity for loving.

POLY LOVE IS BASED ON FREEDOM

Some of my interview partners suggested that polyamory was primarily about freedom. Andy who had several relationships of various degrees of intensity at the time of the interview explained:

Andy: To me it's about freedom mainly, [about] not having to be just with one person or for it even to be a sexual thing. There's different ways of looking at relationships. I don't see... although I have a boyfriend, I don't think that we have an open relationship. It's just one of my relationships, although it's very, very important to me.

The theme of freedom is also mobilised by authors who place polyamory in a historical lineage with the “free love” philosophy of the late 1960s and early 1970s hippie movement (cf. Easton and Liszt 1997; Pieper and Bauer 2005; Schroedter and Vetter 2010). Some poly activists are more reluctant to claim this legacy, due to the limitations imposed by the heteronormative and sexist ideologies which were salient in the “free love” discourse. In this context, we should not forget, however, that feminist traditions have brought about a vital critique of monogamy, too. Feminist critiques of compulsory monogamy aimed at broadening the space for female erotic autonomy which for many ultimately included the freedom to have multiple partners (Gregory 1983; Jackson and Scott 2004; Jackson 2010). Such political beliefs have also shaped the writing of feminist authors on polyamory (cf. Noël 2006:610–613; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2004). Yet while there are certainly similarities between older feminist traditions of critiquing monogamy and contemporary polyamory, there are also differences. In contradistinction to the primarily political rejection of monogamy in 1970s feminist discourse, contemporary poly literature often lacks a structural analysis of power or appeals to collective action. Liberal notions of choice are most prominent (Klesse 2007a; Noël 2006; Wilkinson 2010).

POLY LOVE IS REALISED IN COMMITMENT

Polyamory endorses commitment. Many people would argue that the answer to the question whether a person is non-monogamous or polyamorous can ultimately be decided by knowing whether that person has a general interest in taking up a longer-standing commitment with a new lover. Polyamory is based on a strong appreciation of long-term relationships.

Andy: I tend to prefer long relationships. People talk to me about non-monogamy, polyamory and... the question I get—one of the criticisms I've had is that people think it's just like one night stands or it's just like easy sex all the time. But to me it isn't. To me I prefer long term relationships, whether they're exclusive or non-exclusive. I like relationships that last a long time. I hope, like the ones that are happening at the moment do. In ten years time, if you spoke to me in ten years time, it would be good if I said "well I've been seeing someone for fifteen years now, and I've been seeing these two people for ten years." I'd like that.

Yet the notion of commitment in polyamory is not fully exhausted in the value of long-term intimacy. Commitment is also realised in the active effort to make a relationship "work" (Petrella 2007). The readiness to work towards the resolution of conflicts and the emphasis on communication are all demonstrations of a deep commitment to the relationships in question. Polyamorous relationship guides often contain whole chapters of advice on how to come to agreements, if conflicts arise between partners (e.g. Easton and Liszt 1997:189–204; cf. Klesse 2007c).¹⁶ In poly love, commitment seems to find its ultimate manifestation in agreement (on freely chosen rules) (cf. Wosik-Correa 2010). Of course, agreements are only helpful if the partners also honour them and treat each other with integrity (Anapol 2010:80–82). However, agreements and rules always impose constrictions. This is why it is difficult to see all aspects of polyamory from a perspective of "freedom". At times, poly love can even look like the very opposite of "freedom".

HONESTY IS THE BEDROCK OF POLY LOVE AND INTIMACY

Honesty is described as a pre-condition for an ethical approach to polyamory in virtually all guide books and manifestos on polyamory (cf. Klesse 2007a; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2004). Many describe honesty as *the core value* in polyamory communities.

Tony: Well, there's a sort of a mantra amongst what you could call the polyamory community. And that's honesty, honesty, honesty! You've got to be honest about everything and say how you feel about it. But there's little you can do because they'll know anyway.

Honesty is the *sine qua non* of polyamorous practice. It is the precondition for an active consensus which is supposed to hold poly arrangements together (Wosik-Correa 2010). It is the starting point for establishing a relationship culture in which the permanent re-negotiation of boundaries becomes possible. Yet honesty is more than a necessary element in a conversational process. It is an icon for a high degree of interpersonal intimacy, which is based on the assumption that there should be no secrets and no barriers between partners. Tony alludes to this

¹⁶ My own study demonstrated that conflicts about the terms and conditions of non-monogamy do in fact surface in the everyday dealings within polyamorous relationships. I present an in-depth analysis of the power dimensions and dynamics of such conflicts and negotiations in chapter six of my book *The Spectre of Promiscuity* (2007a).

quality of his relationships, when he suggests that his partners would always already know anyway. If the dissolution of boundaries in polyamorous intimacy is finally realised, honesty, its original precondition, is not necessary anymore. Lynn Jamieson (1998) has described this vision of intimacy as “disclosing intimacy”. Disclosure is described as a major route for enabling mutual intimate knowledge and closeness. It is mainly this commitment to honesty and communication, which allows polyamory to challenge the hegemonic cheating/monogamy system (Mint 2004).

POLY LOVE MEANS DEDICATION

Polyamory envisions an intersubjective orientation, which reaches out to the whole person. It does not allow convention to dictate any limits on intimacy. Each important relationship (and not only sexual ones) should get the chance to develop its full potential (Easton and Liszt 1997). Some of my interview partners described polyamory as a profoundly friendship-centred relationship philosophy. The polyamorous person is dedicated to their beloved partners *and* friends. In fact, in many polyamorous settings the boundaries between friendship-, lover-, or partner-relations may get blurred (Murray 1995). The notion of radical intimacy promoted in polyamory transcends the categorical boundaries between status-defined relationships. For Cath, polyamory contains the promise “that people, who are not sexually close, housemates, close friends, get the whole thing, all the way up and all the way down”. Within polyamory, she suggests, friendships are taken seriously and can demand as much affection, attention and consideration as sexual relationships.¹⁷ Cath, who has been only in relationships with women previous to her entering her current relationship with a male bisexual partner, continues to praise the power of female friendships. According to her experience, closeness and intimacy are most intense in female friendships and sexual relationships. For some polyamorous women, poly love is most intensely realised in the encounter between women. Such accounts recapture the long history of hailing women’s friendship in lesbian and bisexual feminism (Faderman 1985; Smith-Rosenberg 1975; Rothblum 1999). This endorsement of close female relationships can be seen as a further specifically feminist strand in polyamory (Barker and Ritchie 2007).

POLY LOVE IS WORK

There is a strong emphasis on negotiation in polyamorous relationship culture. In her study of polyamory relationship manuals, Petrella (2007) points out that the conceptualisation of relationships as “work” recurs in virtually all polyamory guide books. According to Petrella, the emphasis on work (around negotiation) echoes an

¹⁷ The rejection of a hierarchical order which prioritises erotic relationships (or “partnerships”) at the expense of non-erotic relationships (or “friendships”) has also been referred to as “relationship anarchy” (see the statements by Andie Nordgren in Anapol 2010:205–207 and Barker and Langdrige 2011). On the interrelationship between anarchism and polyamory, see also Heckert (2010a; 2010b).

ascetic Protestant work ethics. From a (Foucauldian) governmentality perspective, Petrella interprets this polyamorous “work ethics” as a strategy of (self) responsabilisation: “Your relationship will (only) work if you work on it—and if you work on yourself at the same time” (for example, by learning how to manage your jealousy, etc.). Moreover, by demonstrating that they are undertaking all this labour for the sake of maintaining enormously complex and emotionally demanding relationships, poly folks are able to prove their dedication, both to their partners and to their “lovestyle”. This way, Petrella argues, polyamory advocates manage to represent a higher ethics which supercedes the banal hedonism of simple pleasure-seeking (cf. Klesse 2007c).

In her polemical discussion of the cultural politics of love and adultery Laura Kipnis (1998; 2003), too, assumes the stance that relationships are work. Adultery can therefore be understood as a specific way to resist the work regime of maintaining long-term romantic relationships in everyday routines of intimacy. However, these mundane acts of resistance and these temporary escape routes are not options for those who subscribe to the model of poly love. This is because polyamory fully believes in the ethical foundations of the love = work equation.

POLY LOVE IS REALISED IN CARE FOR THE OTHER

Looking at the centrality of an ethos of negotiation in polyamory culture we can identify one further element of poly love discourses. Love is realised in the care for the other. A multitude of polyamorous relationship guides instruct readers on how to make sure that their partners are emotionally safe in multiple relationship settings. These discussions focus on the need to recognise individual differences and to practice trusting, non-manipulative and non-aggressive styles of conversation. The attempts to safeguard the emotional comfort and safety of all participants can to large extent be subsumed to what Lynn Jamieson (1998) calls “disclosing intimacy”, i.e. an intimacy which is established in what and how people say things to each other. Yet, according to Jamieson, this is a limiting view. Of even greater importance than “disclosing intimacy” is “caring intimacy” which is about acts of material and social support in everyday life. Of course, poly love (like any love) is also lived through this dimension of caring intimacy. However, publications on polyamory usually do not have a great deal to say on these issues. This can be seen a serious flaw, which stems from the fact that there is not sufficient awareness on the implication of social divisions (such as class, race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality) within polyamorous communities (Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006; Noël 2006). For example, some feminist research participants have deplored the persistence of a profoundly gendered division of labour in polyamorous families, an issue which does not find a lot of attention in popular writing on polyamory. At the same time, it could be argued that polyamorous love discourse is less prescriptive on the “caring dimension of intimacy”, because it wants to embrace relationships of very different shapes and degrees of closeness. The details of levels of responsibility and obligation are

therefore not self-evident and need to be negotiated in a joint process with respective partners, just as it is the case in other kinship formations (cf. Finch and Mason 1991; 1993).

POLY LOVE IS TRANSCENDENT (ALTRUISTIC, THE LOVE OF THE WORLD, THE LOVE OF GOD)

In the accounts of some of my interview partners, polyamorous love has also been cast in specifically religious terms (cf. Goss 2004). For example, Marianne reconciles her Christian beliefs with her polyamorous practice through a re-interpretation of the Christian obligation to love one another:

Marianne: You see, I reconcile being poly with Christianity in that Jesus said we should love one another, and that's what I do. I love lots of people, and I fall in love with lots of people. And that's what's important to me. And I know people who are sexual with lots of people, and they see it as an extension of their love. It's just a way of expressing love.

Other proponents of polyamory define love in more spiritualistic terms. Diverse new age and religious discourses have left their imprint on contemporary polyamory cultures. According to Anderlini-D'Onofrio, the following are among the most important ones: New Age spirituality, new Paganism and Wiccan religions (2004a; 2009). Tantra practices provide another powerful magnet (Schroedter and Vetter 2010). In some publications, Anderlini-D'Onofrio claims that there is an affiliation of polyamory (and bisexuality) with pre-modern or "primitive" cultures, inspired by the alleged lack of sexual differentiation (along the homo/hetero divide) in these cultures: "There erotic love is often part of a pantheistic concept of the sacred which calls for gentler, contemplative, and more 'feminine' relationships with nature" (2004b:3). Such endorsements of "primitivism" reveals the extent to which poly love discourses (like other love discourses, too) deploy heavily exoticising and/or profoundly racialised concepts (Povinelli 2006; Willey 2006). This tendency is also evident in the enormous popularity of a spiritualistic brand of Orientalism in many polyamorous communities (cf. Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse 2006; Noël 2006). In her newest book, *Gaia and the New Politics of Love*, Anderlini-D'Onofrio (2009) discusses polyamory as a part of a new life-affirming, peaceful, eco-feminist practice of love which transcends all dichotomies and will help to save the planet from ultimate destruction. All these examples show that in some accounts of polyamory, poly love transcends the dimension of intersubjective humanism and expands into the realm of holistic spiritualism. In these discourses, poly love is transcendent and evokes the notion of the sacred. In some versions, polyamory gets symbolically inflated to an extent that it is said to carry "evolutionist" qualities, healing powers or even the potential to "save the world". Poly love thus becomes a rallying point for anarcho-primitivist, radical eco-feminist or queer-spiritualistic politics (cf. Merrick 1999).

CONCLUSION

Love is central to the definition of polyamory. Polyamory presents a distinctive discourse on love in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The discourse of poly love is constructed around a range of themes and values, an analysis of which can help us to understand the kinds of emotionality and intimacy which are envisioned by poly advocates and practitioners. In this chapter, I have analysed some salient features of the debates on poly love. These “elements” in a discourse of poly love form part of a larger repertoire of meanings which is available to people to develop their own understandings of polyamory as an intimate aesthetics or erotic practice. These elements can appear in various combinations and not all of them have to be present in every poly narrative.

Even if most of these elements seem to correspond well with each other in most poly discourses, they may also appear as contradictory in others. The discourse on poly love is eclectic. It collects tropes from romantic love discourses, humanist psychology, feminist ethics, queer family ideologies, sexual liberationism and diverse forms of spiritualism and religion. At least with regard to the nature of its discursive formation, it can be argued that poly love is ultimately “promiscuous”.¹⁸ By embracing the possibility of multiple partnerships, polyamory challenges the hegemony of the core couple as the only valid script for erotic and intimate relationships. Polyamory embraces a diversity of relationship styles. Consequently, the discourse on poly love undermines the cultural regime of compulsory monogamy. However, it does not necessarily challenge the idea of romantic love, which has been instrumental to the strategies which hold in place the values of monogamy and the long-term couple. My analysis suggests that at least some aspects of romantic love discourses have been absorbed into the notion of poly love. This is evidenced in the emphasis on the close interrelation between love, intimacy, affection and sexual desire in polyamory (Wilkinson 2010). The strong value placed on commitment and long-term bonds, too, can be interpreted as a re-working of themes derived from older romantic love discourses. The demand for faithfulness has given way to an endorsement of the principle of negotiation. There is no automatic expectation to be sexually faithful to one’s partner(s) and if some notion of “faithfulness” has survived, it has been re-fashioned as “emotional faithfulness” (cf. Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001; Wosik-Correa 2010). Like the discourses on romantic love, poly love discourses value individuality. The moment of individuation is enhanced through an endorsement of self-actualisation. Ideas on poly love further reinforce the common expectation that personal happiness can ultimately be found in loving, intimate partnership(s). To the extent that local polyamorous communities welcome lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender and queer poly-identified people in their spaces and networks

¹⁸ I say this tongue-in-cheek. I am well aware that many poly advocates would hate nothing more than seeing polyamory dragged in the proximity of “promiscuity”. Promiscuity does not have a very good reputation. It is therefore better to be avoided, even on the metaphorical level. I assume that this is also why Deric Shannon and Abbey Willis (2010) prefer the metaphor “theoretical polyamory” over the probably much more common one of “theoretical promiscuity” in their propagation of an un-orthodox (anarchist) theoretical eclecticism.

(which is not always the case) (cf. Sheff 2006), it could be argued that conceptualisations of poly love have overcome aspects of the heteronormative dimension of romantic love. Yet other aspects of the romantic legacy are often reinforced, as evidenced in the tendency among many poly advocates to exclude more pleasure or sex-focussed forms of non-monogamy from the understanding of polyamory *proper* (Klesse 2006; Ritchie 2010). Of course, such dismissals have always been subject to contestation (like any attempt to come up with prescriptive ideas on how to practice polyamory in the right way) (Aviram 2009). However, it could be argued that wherever such practices of “othering” take place they usually find strong support in the endorsement of love as the ultimate value of erotic intimacy. Discourses on poly love are therefore quite ambivalent regarding their potential for critically transcending contemporary love culture.

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