Hot bi babes and feminist families: Polyamorous women speak out

Meg Barker and Ani Ritchie

'Polyamory' refers to the open acceptance of multiple romantic/sexual relationships. Whilst it is often seen, from the outside, as fulfilling men's fantasies (representing the possibility of infidelity without guilt and having sex with more than one woman), many within the polyamorous community regard it as a more 'feminine' way of managing relationships, with much emphasis placed on the importance of open communication, the expression of emotions, and support networks. Most published writers on the topic have been women (Anapol, 1997; Easton and Liszt, 1997). Jackson and Scott (2004) and Robinson (1997) argue that it is important for heterosexual women to explore non-monogamy in order to radically re-work gendered power relationships, whilst Munsen and Stelboum (1999) propose that non-monogamy should be part of a lesbian feminist agenda. This paper presents an analysis of a focus group discussion with polyamorous women about these issues.

Keywords: feminism, focus groups, monogamy, polyamory.

Feminism and Polyamory

This paper presents the analysis of a focus-group discussion conducted with a group of polyamorous women. The research aimed to explore issues around gender in non-monogamous relationships and to explore the potentials of participant-led methods to conduct research into this aspect of women's sexuality within a qualitative, feminist framework. The process of the research and methodological considerations are discussed in a companion paper (Ritchie and Barker, 2005), therefore we will focus here on key themes emerging from the discussion.

The participants in this research were women in non-monogamous relationships. They all had more than one sexual partner, as did many of their partners, and they used the term 'polyamorous' (generally shortened to 'poly') to describe their identity. Polyamory is 'a relationship orientation that assumes that it is possible [and acceptable] to love many people and to maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships' (Urel, Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse, 2003, p.126). The term originated in the 1960s but Anapol (1997) argues that it has only become a widely used term during the last decade, following the proliferation of polyamorous websites and e-mail groups on the internet. Most definitions in the polyamorous literature

(e.g., Anapol, 1997; Easton and Liszt, 1997) emphasise the importance of open and honest relationships. In recent years there has been something of an explosion of interest in polyamory in the mass media with newspaper articles (e.g., Alexander, 2005), TV documentaries (e.g., Channel 4, 2006) and magazine articles (e.g., Newitz, 2006) on the topic, and the word seems to be passing into popular usage (Ritchie and Barker, 2006).

There has generally been very little literature on polyamory within psychology or the social sciences more broadly, as evidenced by the initial lack of response to a call for papers for a special issue on polyamory in the journal *Sexualities* (Urel, Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse, 2003). However, a second call for papers two years later was more successful and a special issue on the topic was published in December 2006 (including Ritchie and Barker, 2006). A recent book on infidelity and commitment contained two chapters on open non-monogamy (Jamieson, 2004; Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 2004) and an interdisciplinary conference on the topic took place in 2005 (Pieper and Bauer, 2005). This suggests a burgeoning academic interest in the topic.

Prior to this recent attention, the main literature consisted of a small number of papers considering non-monogamy as a feminist way of managing relationships. These will now be reviewed because they are particularly pertinent to the current research. It should be remembered, throughout this paper, that there is not one single feminist agenda but many. Most of the feminist authors mentioned here seem to be coming from a broadly socialist feminist perspective, perhaps with some elements of radical and postmodern feminist influence (Tong, 1989). Participant talk in this study suggested that they drew on a similar combination of feminisms but with some social essentialist feminist strands which will be discussed further in the analysis.

Robinson (1997), Jackson and Scott (2004) and others put non-monogamy forward as a way for heterosexual women to challenge 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1978). Robinson (1994) states that monogamy 'privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance' (p.144). This feminist critique of monogamy is based around three key points:

- Monogamy benefits men rather than women. Drawing on Engels' Marxist theories, Munsen and Stelboum (1999) argue that monogamy is a restrictive state reflective of the ownership of goods and people inherent in patriarchal capitalism, with women being degraded and reduced to servants, slaves to men's lusts, and instruments for the

production of children. Monogamous ideals are perpetuated in pervasive images and stories of romance as well as in laws and biological essentialist discourses that position women as naturally monogamous (Robinson, 1997).

- There are gendered power dynamics within monogamy which allow women little autonomy or opportunity to develop their identities because they privilege the stability of the couple over individual experiences and solitude (Askham, 1984). The social construction of jealousy ensures that women will become emotionally and financially dependent on men, and the expectation that one man will fulfil all their needs leads to women experiencing poor self esteem, fearing loss and even remaining in damaging relationships (Robinson, 1997).

- Monogamous relationships separate women from their friendships with each other (Rosa, 1994). The exclusivity of the couple relationship removes them from the networks of sisterhood that are vital for feminism.

Similar arguments have been made for lesbians as for heterosexual women. Rosa (1994) argues that if lesbian feminists are rejecting part of the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, they should reject it all rather than recreating the problems of heterosexual relationships outlined above. However, she acknowledges that lesbians may choose to be monogamous because of societal homophobia which pressurises them to be as 'normal' as possible, perhaps explaining why so many lesbians (and gay men) are currently fighting for recognition of their couple relationships (see Barker and Langdridge, 2006). Jamieson (2004) reports that non-monogamous relationships are not widespread in lesbian and gay communities. However, Heaphy *et al.*, (2004) suggest that non-monogamy is more common among non-heterosexuals than heterosexuals, and Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that 29% of lesbian couples and 65% of gay male couples had some kind of non-monogamous arrangement, compared to 15-28% of heterosexual couples.

In the 1970s, non-monogamy was presented as a potentially radical alternative to being in a couple. However, Jackson and Scott (2004) - reflecting on their own experiences - report that the critique of monogamy is barely heard today, making it very difficult to maintain a feminist non-monogamous identity. They say that, these days, non-monogamy is associated with 'a libertarian, individualistic, hedonistic pursuit of sexual variety' (p.153) and that heterosexual non-monogamous feminists are again seen as sleeping with (a battalion of) the enemy.

Research on Polyamory

There is little empirical work on non-monogamy. Jamieson (2004) conducted pilot interviews with four couples on the topic (two opposite sex couples, one female and one male same-sex couple). She argues that although sex outside marriage has become acceptable in Western society, the couple still remains the ideal with people's identities being bound up in their (monogamous) couple relationship, and sexual fidelity and exclusivity being the main ways of displaying how special and trusting the relationship is. Whilst it is clearly very common for people to have sexual relationships outside the couple (as many as 70% of married people reporting having sex outside marriage, Robinson, 1997), this still usually takes the form of 'secret infidelities' rather than any kind of open non-monogamy (Nichols, 1990, p.357-8).

Jamieson (2004) found that being in a couple was very important to her participants despite their non-monogamy. They were all in 'primary' relationships with their main partner, with other partners being 'secondary' to this. She found little political challenging of monogamy and concluded that her participants wanted the stability of the couple with some freedom for developing their identity. She argues that forms of non-monogamy not based on coupledom are far less common than couple-based forms. However, Jamieson questioned only eight people all of whom were seemingly selected *as* couples. Other research suggests couple-based forms are not the only dominant form within the UK and US communities (see Labriola, 2003; Barker, 2004). It is therefore important to broaden investigations out to those who live in other forms of non-monogamy. Participants within our focus group represented various different kinds of set-ups: Joanne and Laura were partners and part of a 'quad' (they and two others all had relationships with one another and lived in the same house). Helen lived with a primary partner and they both had relationships with others. Katherine had two husbands (one of whom she was legally married to, and one of whom she had had a commitment ceremony with) and they all had a child together. Beth lived with her three children and two of her male partners. Gabrielle and Pearl were partners and had other partners on equivalent, and other, levels during their relationship.

Jamieson argues that:

> 'the time, energy, and mental vigilance required in bringing up children would…place limits on the majority approach of giving priority to one couple relationship while having other sexual and romantic relationships that are clearly marked as less central. Young children radically diminish parents', and particularly mothers', time for leisure pursuit' (p.53).

In addition to neglecting models of non-monogamy other than the primary/secondary set-up, Jamieson is in danger of dismissing non-monogamy as simply a 'leisure pursuit' rather than as a vital and integral part of people's identities, lives, families and communities. Jamieson neglects all of the non-monogamous people who bring up children in various forms of alternative family set-ups, and her 'particularly mothers' comment does not take account of the feminist potential of non-monogamy to challenge traditional gender norms of relating and child rearing. Again, it seemed that the experiences of polyamorous people with children required further exploration. In the current research, a third of the participants had children themselves and most had a main relationship with someone who had children. One of those situations had been a lesbian set-up, and the others involved men who took either a primary or equal care-giving role.

Jamieson's conclusions about the centrality of the couple and the apolitical basis of non-monogamy did not reflect our own experiences of polyamory or those of friends in our wider polyamorous community. Also, Jamieson did not discuss in any depth the way that gendered issues were negotiated by her participants. For these reasons, we decided to conduct our discussion to explore how non-monogamous women talk about their lifestyle/identity in relation to feminist politics and gender dynamics. Also, unlike Jamieson, we took an explicitly insider perspective (Lambevski, 1999) by including ourselves in the discussion. We hope that, in addition to challenging common misperceptions and giving a voice to polyamorous women, this paper will contribute to the literature on the feminist potential of polyamory.

Data Collection

Our methodology is explained and reflected upon, in depth, in Ritchie and Barker (2005). To summarise briefly, we took a reflexive feminist approach in an attempt to minimise researcher/researched hierarchies (Etherington, 2004) and employed focus group methodology, which is recommended by Frith (2000) and Kitzinger (1994) for sex research. The focus group comprised eight women, ranging in age from early twenties to mid forties and all self-identified as bisexual except Gabrielle who identified as lesbian. Participants were approached through an on-line forum and much of the preparatory work for the discussion (for example generating discussion questions) took place on-line. The focus group itself took place in the living room of the husband of one of the participants (Katherine) and was facilitated by another of the participants (Joanne). Participants were briefed on ethical issues

of confidentiality and the freedom to withdraw themselves or their part of the transcript from the research at any time during the process of data collection and analysis. All participants were given pseudonyms.

The taped discussion was transcribed using a simple format[1] that participants could easily follow. All the participants, including ourselves, conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Langdridge, 2004). We chose this method because it is a simple technique for those unfamiliar with qualitative research to understand and employ. We compiled e-mail responses from participants and then discussed the analysis in an online forum. Participants generally agreed that two key themes emerging from the discussion were: 'preconceptions of polyamory' and 'polyamory as women-centred'. The analysis will briefly consider how participants perceived polyamory as potentially feminist, before examining these two themes in depth.

Analysis

Polyamory as Potentially Feminist

All participants but one in the discussions identified as feminists and many linked this explicitly to their polyamory. This contradicts Jamieson's (2004) conclusion that people are a-political in their reasons for being non-monogamous and suggests that some women are still making such connections despite Jackson and Scott's (2004) fear that it is difficult to identify as a non-monogamous feminist these days. In considering how polyamory might fit in with a feminist agenda, Katherine reflected the arguments of authors such as Robinson (1997) when she commented that:

> Well in the extremely obvious way that historically women were property, attached to men. Poly subverts that, unless you're doing it the wrong way.

Participants agreed that polyamorous women would not necessarily be feminist. However, Jane suggested that if people had alternative ways of looking at one thing, for example a feminist perspective, 'not just accepting the stereotypes' then they might be more likely to do things differently in other ways too. Laura made comparable arguments in relation to feminism saying 'if you've *been through* feminism […] you're much more used, perhaps, to the alternative models for society'. Having read the transcript following the discussion, Jane

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[1] Italics were used for emphasis, punctuation was added, and 'ums', 'ers' and repetitions were removed. In this report '[…]' is also used to indicate places where words have been left out for the sake of brevity.

emphasised that one of the main themes to come out of it for her was:

> The connection between poly and other 'alternative' attitudes – bisexuality, feminism, etc. The idea that thinking about and challenging one set of social structures/norms makes one more likely to challenge others. (E-mail, 11/5/04)

This seems similar to Heaphy *et al*.s' (2004) argument that non-heterosexuals may be more likely to consider openly non-monogamous arrangements because they have 'freedoms' not available to heterosexuals. They are 'constructing their relationships from scratch, without recourse to given rules and guidelines' (p.168).

Preconceptions of Polyamory: Lucky men and evil exploitative women?

After she read the discussion transcripts, Beth said that one of the main themes was about people 'coming to polyamory with preconceptions, and finding that the reality is different'. The group agreed that there is a stereotype that polyamory benefits men rather than women. All were familiar with the term 'hot bi babes' used sarcastically by polyamorous people to refer to the assumption that it is about lucky men meeting conventionally physically attractive female partners who will indulge their fantasies by being sexual with them and with each other (Matthesen, 2003). Helen began by explicitly countering this perception, saying:

> I don't think there's a stereotype that poly benefits men from anyone who *knows* anything about polyamory. I think there can be people who just hear about it and go "ooh, having lots of partners, phwoar" and then it's "yes I want some of that". Then once they've realised that it's actually work and relationships involved and it's not just having lots of sex.

It seemed that this stereotype was linked to the broader perception that men want sex with many women whilst women want a relationship with one man. As Laura said, 'I also think that men *generally* are seen as wanting more sex so, you know, if polyamory is seen about being all about sex...' Katherine agreed: 'People think […] it's the man wanting it and the woman going along with it in order to keep him happy'. Beth drew on her own experiences to challenge the stereotype:

> People will tell me that I'm actually being *exploited* by my partners even though I don't feel that at all. If anything I sometimes think I benefit *more* because I'm sort of, *centre* of a household where there's a number of men in it and I really enjoy that. I quite like being the queen bee in the middle of all that.

Beth and Katherine then mentioned another preconception they had encountered. Rather

than a perception that their male partners were lucky, other people involved in their men partner's lives viewed them as potentially exploitative. Beth said:

> When my partner introduced me to his parents and they couldn't see what he was getting out of it and they thought that I, and one of his other partners, were exploiting him, at first, until they got the hang of it.

Jane said that when she started seeing another man in addition to her long term partner, her own parents' reaction 'wasn't quite "what are you doing to [him]?" but it, they were expressing concern […] about that side of things. *His* parents don't know but I imagine they would think I was an evil whore.' Gabrielle reported that some of the people in her life also had this initial perception of Pearl when they began their relationship. Later there was a discussion of the way both these stereotypes of lucky men and exploitative women fitted into a broader common notion that women could only be entirely innocent and good or else they were 'evil incarnate'. It is very difficult for a woman to occupy any position between purely innocent and completely evil (Barker, 2002), as Katherine suggests:

> Either women are very chaste and in the home and their partners, their men can go out and do what they want coz that's alright […] or they're femme fatale whores, breaking men's hearts.

This 'virgin-whore' dichotomy is linked to the 'double standard' of sexual behaviour where sexually promiscuous women are seen very negatively as 'sluts' and severely sanctioned for their behaviour, whilst such activity is expected and tolerated amongst men. Non-monogamous women are frequently judged according to the 'dominant ideology…that women who have more than one sexual partner are 'promiscuous': slags or tarts' (Robinson, 1997, p.149) and compared to 'the safely monogamous, often married woman' (p.154). This double standard is the reason that Easton and Liszt (1997) chose to title their influential book on polyamory *The Ethical Slut*, reclaiming the word as 'a term of approval, even endearment' (p.4) and applying it to people irrespective of gender.

Returning to the stereotype that polyamory benefits men rather than women, Gabrielle reflected on how her own original perceptions of polyamory were challenged when she became involved with the polyamorous community:

> I think when I came into the group […] I had the kind of stereotype that […] Men would be in control. And I guess maybe I had a bit of a prejudice coming from the lesbian community and thinking, okay this is going to be *about*

reproducing that kind of gender stuff and I think, it *did* feel like it was much more women-centred and I guess much more, you know, there were women at the hub and *strong* women at the hub of different sets of relationships.

It is this idea of polyamory being woman-centred that we want to focus on next.

Women-centred Polyamory: Benefit or burden?

Generally people agreed with Gabrielle's comment that women were 'at the hub' in this polyamorous community. They identified two main explanations for this: (i) the organisational skills necessary to manage multiple relationships, and (ii) the importance of communication in polyamorous relationships. The discussions of these explanations took similar forms. In each case, participants first suggested that polyamory might be women-centred because 'feminine' skills (in organisation or communication) were an advantage. Following this, the reasons why this might benefit women were put forward. Then, there was some consideration of how this could be a burden as well as a benefit, as Jane commented that 'there seemed to be an idea that polyamory is women-centred, but that this is not always for good reasons.' Finally the gender differences proposed were challenged completely[2].

In relation to organisational skills, following on from Gabrielle's statement that women were 'at the hub', Katherine continued:

Katherine: Yeah. The, impression I tend to get within the group is that the women tend to be much more, not necessarily stronger but, in control of things and…
Jane: Bossy [big laughter]
Katherine: That's the word actually yes

Helen said that part of polyamory being women-centred was due to the stereotype that women are good at organising things and multi-tasking, suggesting that their 'mothering' skills are very helpful for being polyamorous. Katherine continued this saying 'certainly the best schedulers I know are all women. You know, the men I know are not nearly as good at it.' Jane explained that women were central in the polyamorous community because they have the skills to organise their own lives and those of their partners. In relation to her

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[2] It should be remembered here that the group with the highest percentages engaging in open non-monogamy are gay men (e.g. Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) although they do not seem to frequently participate in explicit polyamorous communities. Clearly these notions of 'women at the hub' and 'the importance of feminine skills' would be unlikely to apply in such groups. This highlights the limited range of experiences within the current research which are certainly not representative of all polyamorous and non-monogamous relationships. It would be very interesting, in future, to explore how men in such relationships presented their experiences and discussed such gendered issues in open non-monogamy.

male partners she said 'I keep better track of their diaries and stuff just in my head…than they can, with [their] technical devices'. But this led into consideration that this might be a disadvantage for women rather than an advantage. Jane, Katherine, Laura and Helen agreed that their skills led to them being the one who had to prevent their partners from arranging dates which clash. As Jane said: 'I don't want to be their sodding diary secretary'. However, she reflected that 'things quite often wind up being almost to suit me coz I'm the one saying "right you sort this, this, and this out, this is what'll happen".'

Laura argued that polyamory might be women-centred because of the importance placed on communication, something women are supposed to be good at. All the polyamorous literature (e.g., Anapol, 1997; Easton and Liszt, 1997) emphasises open communication as vital for multiple relationships to function. Laura compared her woman-woman relationships to her man-woman ones to make the point that women did not have to have to try so hard to communicate because it came easily to them in a way it didn't to men:

> That's why we say [in poly] "communicate, communicate, communicate", coz I think that the interesting thing about people in male-female relationships is that they have to actually set out rules.

Both woman-woman pairings present in the group (Joanne and Laura, Pearl and Gabrielle) spoke about the easy communication of emotions in their relationships. Women in the group argued that their ability to communicate might mean that they had to do more work in their man-woman relationships. Jane said after the focus group in an email communication (11/5/04) that 'women [were] more responsible for communication sometimes between their partners as well as between partners and themselves. A facilitating role, in some ways, which can be beneficial but can definitely also be a burden'. Laura spoke about how it was difficult to get male partners to talk to her or to each other:

> I had to *plead* with him to talk about what was going on and I was like, if this was a woman we'd be processing it *endlessly.* [Laughter]
> […]
> When I was in a triad with two men, you know, the triad started and I *felt* a lot of the time that I was the intermediary between which the two men communicated […] we did have to drag it out and look at it after a few years. I really *did* feel the stereotyped woman. That was the dynamic between us […] It's just a drain, like if it's always you who does the housework.

So both organisation and communication were initially put forward as areas that women were

better at than men, potentially explaining why polyamory was more women-centred. Participants generally agreed that women's skills in these areas were due to socialisation, seeming uncomfortable with the idea of any kind of 'natural' traits. There was some joking discussion about whether it was possible to 'train' men in these areas. However, a much more common trend was for any suggestion of gender difference to eventually be challenged with counter examples. For example, Helen and Beth used the example of their (shared) male partner to dismiss the idea that no men were good at organisation.

> Helen: [He] is very good at organising. But I suppose he has to be coz he's got a more complex family arrangement […]
> Beth: He is much better at knowing in his *head* what any of us in our house are doing than I am.

As soon as we had talked about women being better at communication, Jane used her partners to demonstrate that some men did communicate well and some women did not:

> One relationship with a woman who was, much worse than that, wouldn't talk about anything at all *ever*, full stop. And, one relationship with a bloke who is, very much like me in that I want everything sorted, everything they're thinking about, out.

> After reading the focus group discussion transcript Beth (3/5/04) said:

> I think we brought up some stereotypes of our own, especially about men, but there seemed to be a sort of self-correcting mechanism where we would go a certain way down that road, and then someone would come up with a counter-example or divert the conversation back to similarities between men and women rather than differences […] It seems to me that intellectually we believe that men and women aren't really very different, but emotionally, we seem to feel a need to vent about men as a group, rather than just individuals.

Sometimes the male 'exceptions to the rule' were explained with the suggestion that 'certainly a lot of the men that we're all involved with are not stereotypically masculine men' (Katherine). Jane argued that people could identify 'masculine' and 'feminine' styles of behaving but that the separation was not as 'clear-cut as is sometimes indicated', suggesting that men could take on the more feminine styles and women the more masculine ones. Overall, the discussion seemed to mirror, somewhat, the 'discursive turn' in gender psychology research (Weatherall, 2002), as participants moved from a social essentialist feminist explanation of gender difference to a more feminist constructionist approach which proposes that men and women may both be able to draw on 'masculine' and 'feminine' ways of conducting

relationships and thus questions the taken-for-granted naturalness and inevitability of two genders.

Conclusions

There was an overall trend in the discussion for people to present stereotypes (e.g., around polyamory or gender), which were subsequently dismissed. Preconceptions about polyamory were quickly countered whilst the 'women-centred' notion of polyamory was generally accepted but the gender stereotypes this was based on were eventually queried and agreed to be problematic or at least not universal.

Interestingly, although the focus of the discussion was on polyamory, the two other major topics that participants spent a great deal of time talking about were not specific to polyamorous women, but were about women's experiences in general. We spent some time talking about the gendered division of labour within the domestic sphere and the workplace. This suggests that these issues were still very relevant to the women in the group. As Robinson (1997) concludes in relation to the feminist potential of non-monogamy: 'any revision of…relationships must be seen in the wider social context of women's inequality at work, primary responsibility for childcare and domestic work' (p.156). These discussions also included explorations of class, culture and income which are absent from the current analysis but clearly warrant much further exploration in relation to polyamory. Organisers of the annual 'polyday' event (polyday, 2006) have frequently experienced difficulties in reaching out to black and minority ethnic communities as well as a diverse range of class backgrounds. The white, middle-class bias in polyamorous communities was something that Laura reflected on in the current discussions. She also made comparisons between polyamory and the maternal networks of her own working class childhood.

Other themes touched on briefly were the possibility that women in polyamorous relationships could be less dependent on men than monogamous women, and the issue of polyamory enabling people to place friendships on an equally important level as romantic relationships. These relate back to Jackson and Scott's (2004) advocacy of non-monogamy as a feminist strategy. However, as stated earlier, Jamieson (2004) found that the non-monogamous relationships she investigated were all still very much based around the 'couple' model. Our participants challenged the idea that primary 'couples' were the only way of managing non-monogamous relationships. However, future research could fruitfully examine the ways in which polyamorous people in various set-ups may be constrained by

conventional, pervasive discourses of 'coupledom', 'faithfulness', and the relative importance of romantic love, as well as ways in which they may construct their own alternative languages and understandings to get beyond this (see Ritchie and Barker, 2006, for some further discussion of this).

Such further research requires a more explicitly constructionist approach than that employed here because it would be concerned with how people are positioned by dominant societal discourses (Burman and Parker, 1993). One of the main limitations of this study was the rather a-theoretical nature of the analysis. This seemed necessary because it had to be something easily employed by non-academic participants, hence our use of thematic rather than, say, discursive techniques. But in future we would like to explore whether it is possible to take a more feminist constructionist approach (Harding, 1986) whilst conducting participant-led research. It seems that many of the participants could engage with such an approach, for example, Laura explained her feminism thus: 'I think you can hate traditional constructs of masculinity rather than men themselves'.

Jamieson (2004) also suggests that there might be gender differences in how men and women 'want to go about negotiated non-monogamy' (p.56) and this is something that could be explored further in focus group discussions with men from the polyamorous community. In particular it would be interesting to compare the way in which all-men and mixed gender groups of participants talk about proposed gender differences in relationship skills and whether they follow the same structures as the participants in this group (proposing differences and then challenging them). Also, it would be interesting to examine whether men, like the women here, perceive polyamory to be compatible with a feminist agenda, and how they see polyamory as fitting in with their own masculinities (within heterosexual, bisexual and gay communities).

We hope that this paper adds some empirical weight to Robinson's (1997) argument that non-monogamy has something to offer feminism. As we have shown, polyamory can be experienced as women-centred, although this does bring its own tensions for those involved as they try to integrate their lifestyle with their feminist principles. However, the voices of the participants here provide an optimistic counter to Jackson and Scott's (2004) concerns, as it seems that at least some women are managing to maintain a consciously feminist non-monogamous identity.

Correspondence

Meg Barker is a senior lecturer in psychology at London South Bank University. She is the honorary secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Section of the British Psychological Society and associate editor of their journal, Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review. Her research focuses on sexual communities specifically the bisexual, polyamorous and SM communities.

Address: Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, London South Bank University, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA. Tel: 0207 8155814.
E.mail: barkermj@lsbu.ac.uk

Ani Ritchie is a senior lecturer in media and cultural studies at Southampton Solent University. She lectures on sexualities, gender representation and cultural identity. In the past she has studied women's sexual identity construction in relation to media depictions of lesbian sexuality and she now conducts qualitative research with non-heterosexual women involved in alternative sexual relationships and practices.
Address: Faculty of Media Arts and Society, Southampton Solent University. East Park Terrace, Southampton SO14 0RX. Tel: 02380 319000.
E.mail: Ani.Ritchie@solent.ac.uk

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