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**‘There aren’t words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up’:  
Constructing polyamorous languages in a culture of compulsory monogamy**

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***Abstract***

Polyamory is an emerging sexual story that troubles mononormativity: the dominant discourse of monogamy which is reproduced and perpetuated in everyday conversation and saturates mainstream media depictions. Through an analysis of online discussions, websites and self-help books, this article explores the ways in which members of polyamorous communities construct their identities through language. We argue that the potentials of polyamory are, to some extent, constrained by the conventional mononormative language of partnerships, infidelities and jealousy. However, alternative languages are emerging which offer new discursive possibilities for the development of polyamorous identities, relationships and emotions.

***Key Words*** emotion, language, mononormativity, non-monogamy, polyamory.

Polyamory is a form of non-monogamy grounded in the belief in ‘people’s capacity to share and multiply their love in honest and consensual ways’ (Anderlini-D’Onofrio in Eadie, 2004: 165). Within this broadly defined philosophy there are a diverse range of relationship structures and networks (see Labriola, 2003). In previous work we have argued that polyamory is what Plummer (1995) might term a burgeoning sexual story (Barker, 2004), attracting growing interest within academia (as evidenced by this special

issue) and in the mainstream media (for example press articles in *The Telegraph*, Jenkins 2004; and *Real Magazine*, Murphy, 2005). In this paper we explore a further development in the emergence of that story: the construction of new languages with which polyamorous people can describe their lives. Leap and Boellstorff (2004) claim that 'if there are sexual cultures then there must be sexual languages, that is, modes of describing, expressing, and interrogating the ideologies and practices relevant to the sexual culture(s)' (p. 12). In this article we discuss the ways in which some within polyamorous communities have developed languages to enable new modes of expression to account for their experiences. Fredman's work on emotion suggests that language can 'create different sorts of relationships and realities [...] can move people towards new positions, different roles and alternative ways of experiencing' (2004: 41). In the polyamorous communities we research, alternative languages seem to enable new ways of experiencing as well as expressing sexual stories.

The paper will consider three areas in which some polyamorous people have developed new languages to make sense of identities, relationships and emotions that fall outside of the dominant cultural constructions of love and relationships. For each theme we will discuss the way in which existing language fails to account for polyamorous experiences and how those in the polyamorous communities have subverted or rewritten that language. As one participant in an on-line discussion said 'there aren't words for what we do or how we feel so we have to make them up' (Damien, Livejournal: 2004). We focus on examples of words coined by some in these communities to claim identity (e.g. 'ethical slut'), define relationships (e.g. 'metamour') and describe feelings (e.g. 'frubbly').

The social constructionist approach to sexuality is grounded in the belief that our identity, desires, relationships and emotions are shaped by the culture in which we live (Weeks, 2003). We come to understand ourselves in terms of the concepts that are available to us in the time and place we live in. The language around us shapes our self-identities (Burr, 1995) and our understanding of sexual identity depends on the language of sexuality available to us. The language and everyday experience of sexuality are thus intrinsically linked (Weeks, 2003). There is a wealth of literature considering how people of non-heterosexual sexualities have developed their own languages to express their

identities and experiences and to claim community, rights and recognition. For example, Weeks (2003) argues that the emergence of the label 'gay' in the early seventies was important in terms of the public expression of homosexuality as a legitimate sexual identity. It established a clear social identity, which offered a previously unavailable sense of security and community, although such categorisation may also be seen as restricting and inhibiting (Plummer, 1980). The reclamation of the term 'queer' by some may offer a move away from fixed sexual identities (Jagose, 1997). It seems that the existing language of sexual identity may shape our experiences but that people and communities also invent, alter and reclaim language in order to fit experiences for which there is no existing language.

People are further constructed through the language of emotions that we have available to make sense of our experiences. Social constructionists such as Rosaldo (1984) have argued that the language of emotions within our cultures shape how we react in different circumstances. Vocabularies of emotion are created and handed down through cultures (Fredman, 2004) and these vocabularies give value and meaning to emotions (e.g. whether they are positive or negative, appropriate or inappropriate). Cultures create and propagate shared languages of emotions, which enable members to communicate meaningfully with one another about their experiences. The classification of emotions varies between cultures with new emotion descriptors emerging and disappearing over time. Emotions serve social functions: Harré and Parrott (1996) argue that emotions can operate as forms of social control. For example: constructing jealousy as a 'negative' emotion whilst describing it as a 'natural' response to infidelity, serves to maintain the dominance of monogamy, which in turn has been argued to maintain systems of patriarchy (Robinson, 1997). Specific to this research is the idea that our ability to describe and experience an emotion can be enabled or constrained by our cultural vocabulary (Gergen, 1999). As Swidler argues:

The larger semiotic structure – the discursive possibilities available in a given social world – constrains meaning (by constructing the categories through which people perceive themselves and others or simply by limiting what can be thought and said). (2004: 6)

Discursive possibilities thus construct but also *constrain* meaning. Butler argues: ‘We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing’ (1997: 8). As such language functions to enable (or constrain) our ability to ‘do’ or to experience. Later in this paper we will offer examples of language enabling new experiences for some polyamorous people, setting these in the context of the discursive possibilities offered by monogamous culture.

Potter and Wetherell (1987) have examined how people understand the world and themselves by drawing on cultural discourses that are available to them. They argue that there might be a number of alternatives available, often with some being more dominant and easily accessible than others. We aim to contextualise the alternative discourses of polyamory that we discuss here by exploring their (often tense) relationship to dominant discourses of monogamous relationships in mainstream cultures. We suggest that the dominant version of relationships available in Western culture is of life-long or serial monogamy with ‘the one’ perfect partner. Mainstream media are saturated with depictions of such romantic love relationships: people finding ‘Mr./Miss Right’ and staying ‘together forever’. Jealousy is constructed as the ‘natural’ response to any threat to this relationship, and relationships outside this partnership are categorised as ‘infidelities’, leading inevitably to break-up. These representations serve social functions, maintaining monogamy in a position of hegemonic dominance. The stories of love and relationships told by the media constrain stories of polyamorous lives, since the only available language is of monogamy and infidelity. Recently researchers have coined the term mononormativity to refer to this dominant discourse.<sup>1</sup>

In general, open non-monogamy is rendered invisible or pathological in mainstream representations. These representations serve to position monogamy as normative and place non-monogamy firmly in what Rubin (1984) calls the ‘outer limits’ of the discursive possibilities of sexuality. Recent press reports suggest that polyamory is seen as particularly threatening and troubling to these monogamous norms. For example many articles dismissed polyamorous relationships as childish, neurotic, and even boring in comparison to infidelity suggesting that whilst infidelity as a form of (non-consensual)

non-monogamy is possible within Western cultural discourses, open polyamory is not (e.g. Ellen *The Observer* 10/4/05).

## **Method**

Langdridge and Butt suggest that 'Web material offers a untapped textual resource for researchers concerned with the discursive construction of new sexual identities' (2004: 32), and it is therefore particularly suited to our research questions (which concentrate on the construction of new sexual stories). We focus on the ways that polyamorous people construct and negotiate their identities, practices and emotions in these on-line fora. The research presented here draws primarily on text taken from web discussion groups (such as the 'Alt.Poly' usenet newsgroup, set up in 1992), community message boards (such as LiveJournal's 'UK polyamory' community<sup>2</sup> which has 235 members and is watched by a further 199), e-mail lists (such as uk-poly, which has approximately 200 members, mainly based in the UK) and polyamory websites (e.g. alt.polyamory and bi.org/uk-poly). Working with Web material enables us to track the emergence of new words, making it possible to pinpoint the conception and use of specific terms. For example, the alt.polyamory website has a section devoted to defining the 'polyjargon [that] has evolved in the newsgroup over time' (alt.polyamory: 2003).

Systematic searches of the World Wide Web through the search engine Google using terms such as 'polyamory' generated a broad field of data (in excess of 170,000 links in March 2005), within which we searched specific newsgroups and message boards for the new terms we had identified. We paid particular attention to on-line interactions where new terms were coined, and to those where their definition and use was discussed. In addition we surveyed their 'everyday' use in on-line discussions, particularly on blogging sites such as Livejournal, again through specific search terms (eg: 'ethical slut'; 'metamour'; 'compersion'; 'frubbly'; 'wibble').

Langdridge and Butt caution: 'No claims could be made for [...] Web-based material being representative of some population' (2004: 38) and we recognise that the sample we draw on here could not be deemed representative of the many varied polyamorous

population(s). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore cross-cultural differences in attitudes towards non-monogamy. Thus we focus specifically on terminology used within some UK polyamorous communities; primarily drawing on the language of a London based social network known on-line as the 'LondonPolyBis' (London Polyamorous Bisexuals). It is also beyond the scope of this paper to explore issues of sexual orientation. Most of the LondonPolyBis identify as bisexual, but other people writing on the newsgroups and message boards identify as lesbian, gay and heterosexual. We recognise that perceptions of non-monogamy vary in different sexual cultures in the UK; for example, research suggests that non-monogamous relationships may be more accepted in some gay and lesbian communities (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). Our intention is to offer an exploration of a specific network of polyamorous people and the language they have developed online.

Working with Internet material raises questions of ethics and these issues are still being discussed by social scientists (O'Brien Libutti, 1999). Specifically there is debate over anonymity and consent. In this research we have gained permission to quote from individuals posting to closed Internet media (such as the e-mail lists and some of the Live Journal posts) but have drawn on publicly available material without gaining specific consent from the authors (for example from the Alt-Poly group). Here we do not publish any e-mail addresses and, although we have given website titles, we have given the authors pseudonyms. Quotations are therefore referenced as follows: (pseudonym, source: date). We follow Langdridge and Butt (2004) in publishing a webliography of sources at the end of this article.

## **Analysis**

This article will now explore the ways in which members of certain polyamorous communities negotiate their identities, practices and emotions on-line. In particular we focus on the role of language in setting boundaries around monogamous norms, and the various ways in which these linguistic barriers have and have not been dismantled by some polyamorous people. For each theme we begin by setting a context: outlining

dominant mononormative constructions, drawing on mainstream media discourses. We also briefly examine the most popular ‘self-help’ texts on polyamory such as *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Liszt, 1997) and *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits* (Anapol, 1997) since these laid out an initial framework for many polyamorous people and are frequently referred to on-line. We then focus on analysing new words developed by some, looking for the ‘constructivist effects’ (Stenner, 1993: 94) of these coinages. That is, what is achieved by the use of this language, and what power is there in telling a story using these terms over the previous ones?

### **Telling stories of polyamory and polyamorous identities**

The only widely available language that can account for non-monogamous relationships is that of infidelity. Depictions of non-monogamy in the media tend to be of promiscuity and adultery, as one polyamorous person says, ‘cheating seems to be the only way in which most people can understand it’ (Ernest, Livejournal: 2004). Films like *The Ice Storm* (Dir: Ang Lee, 1997) and *Unfaithful* (Dir: Adrian Lyne, 2002) serve as cautionary tales depicting the terrible outcomes of infidelity. Popular and academic psychology texts present non-monogamy only in the form of ‘secret infidelities’ (Nichols, 1990) and assume that this will lead inevitably to the break-up of a relationship (e.g. Hogg and Vaughan, 2004). This language of infidelity, adultery, unfaithfulness, affairs and cheating implies that it is wrong to have more than one romantic and/or sexual relationship and that it can only be done in the context of dishonesty and secretiveness. Many polyamorous people report feeling constrained by this language

Polyamorous self-help literature explicitly counters the likely assumption that polyamory equates to infidelity by constantly emphasising openness, honesty and ethical practices. As the alt.poly website states:

Polyamorous people do not tell partners, lovers, or prospective members of those groups that they are monogamous when in fact they are not...the words "honest",



"negotiate", "communication" and "being out" occur frequently in discussions of how polyamory usually works.

This echoes the presentation in the main self-help books on polyamory which have chapters on 'values and ethics' (Easton and Liszt, 1997) or 'the ethics of polyamory' (Anapol, 1997). Anapol's chapter includes sections on 'consensus decision making', 'honesty', 'mutual caring', 'commitment', 'integrity' and 'respect'. Easton and Liszt (1997) make the following statement: 'Ethical sluts: value consent...are honest...recognize the ramifications of our sexual choices...It is important to us to treat people well and not hurt anyone' (pp. 21-22). While Anapol (1997) says: 'Relationships based on truth, self-responsibility, and unconditional love can take many forms...I call this lovestyle *responsible nonmonogamy* or *polyamory*' (p. 3). Both authors emphasise that being openly non-monogamous does not equate to being un-committed or un-faithful. Easton and Liszt (1997) emphasise 'faithfulness', saying that this is 'about honouring your commitments and respecting your friends and lovers, about caring for their well being as well as your own' (p. 63). Anapol (1997) states that 'meaningful sex creates a lifelong bond' (p. 17) and warns that lack of commitment to one's relationships will lead to jealousy and break-up, in a rather similar fashion to the way in which popular self-help books warn of the dangers of infidelities to monogamous people (see for example the analysis offered by Potts, 1998). There are tensions here, both between the positions taken by the authors of these two key texts, and in the ways in which 'new' discourses of polyamory remain constrained by more traditional discourses of monogamy.

The term 'polyamory' provides people with an identity label, and many polyamorous people talk of polyamory as something they *are* rather than something they *do* (Barker, 2004). This emphasis on identity rather than behaviour is seen on several of the websites, for example: "'Polyamorous" is also used as a descriptive term by people who are open to more than one relationship even if they are not currently involved in more than one.' (alt.polyamory: 2003). This seems to fit the current trend, as identified by Plummer (1995), Weeks (1998), and others towards groups claiming rights and 'citizenship' on the basis of their sexual identities. Perhaps the word 'polyamory' is preferable over 'non-

monogamy' since it is a category in itself not just defined in contrast to the dominant way of doing relationships. In this sense it might be argued to undermine mononormativity. The word is often contracted to the more adaptable 'poly'. This can be used to refer to people (are they poly?), groups and events (are you coming to the poly meal?) or more broadly to the concept of polyamory (are they poly friendly?). The polyamorous community on LiveJournal lists a range of other possible labels including 'open', 'alternative', and, as we will now discuss, 'ethical slut'.

The term 'ethical slut' comes from the book of that title (Easton and Liszt, 1997). Held by some within the community as the 'bible' of polyamory, the positive reclamation of the term 'slut' by its two feminist authors can be likened to the embracing of 'queer' in gay (and increasingly also lesbian, bisexual, and trans) communities. Easton and Liszt state they are: 'Proud to reclaim the word 'slut' as a term of approval, even endearment' (1997: 4). The following on-line exchange features Catherine Liszt (writing under the pseudonym 'J.W. Hardy') explaining why they choose to use such a laden term:

Tom: Words are important. [...] I would like to throw out a challenge to this group: To coin a[n] antonym to the word "slut." That is to say, to put forward a catchy, appealing coined word, applicable to persons of either sex, that means "sexually active (good)" in the way that "slut" means "sexually active (bad)."

J.W. Hardy: Or, instead, you could do what we did in "The Ethical Slut": wear the word proudly. If you let your enemies define your words, you give them the power to hurt you. If, OTOH [on the other hand], you take those words for your own use, they can only make you stronger. (Alt-Poly: 30/10/1997)

In the book itself Easton and Liszt describe the difficulty of talking about polyamory without developing new language: 'most of the language available for us [...] has built in value judgements, just like the word 'slut' – the legacy of our sex negative history' (1997: 39).

Terms like 'slut' have conventionally been used to reinforce the double standard of sexual behaviour (where men's promiscuous behaviour is celebrated and women's is punished). The term 'ethical slut' (which is applied equally to men and women) may be

seen as a strategy of resistance, but it is a tense one. Subject lines such as ‘I’m an ethical slut’ are fairly common on Alt.Poly and other discussion groups and the term has been adapted as in the following post on the ‘Ethical Sluts’ community: ‘I have been practicing "ethical sluthood" for the past couple of years and still consider myself to be new at this’ (George, LiveJournal: August 2005). Outside of these virtual (safe) spaces, however, polyamorous people still seem constrained by this discourse, and many are still seeking more fitting terms: ‘I guess I just want a respectable label for “an independent woman with more than one lover”’ (Mel, Livejournal: Sept 2005).

### **Telling stories of polyamorous relationships**

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As well as defining who they are, those who identify as ‘ethical sluts’ or ‘poly’ require new ways of defining what they do, specifically how their relationship structures work. The dominant ways of understanding relationships do not allow for relationships between more than two people or for more than one important relationship at a time. The conventional language of relationships is the language of coupledness. We form a ‘couple’ with our ‘partner’ who may be termed our ‘other’ or ‘better’ half. Jamieson (2004) interviewed people in both same- and opposite-sex open relationships and found that they did ‘not disavow couple relationships’ and, in many cases, sought ‘recognition as couples’ (p. 35). Kitzinger and Coyle (1995) review sexual exclusivity in lesbian and gay couples and talk entirely about ‘open couple relationships’, not mentioning any other models (p. 66).

Our research suggests that primary ‘couples’ (where the couple relationship is considered primary and all other relationships are secondary to it in terms of time and commitment etc.) are not the only way of managing polyamorous relationships (Barker and Ritchie, in press). However it does seem to be the case that many polyamorous people use the primary/secondary model and some websites (eg: fvpoly) mainly assume a primary/secondary structure. This suggests that, again, it is difficult to completely escape the conventional notion that one person with whom one is romantically involved is more important than others. Easton and Liszt (1997) for example, write about the importance

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of 'reinforcing the primary-ness' of primary relationships by keeping certain activities only for one's primary partner and prioritising their needs over others' (p. 63). Some attempt to rewrite this convention can be seen in the languages of relationships developed to encompass non-hierarchical polyamory, such as polyamorous people talking of an 'inner circle' of close relationships or maintaining equal 'primary' relationships with more than one person, for example in triads (three people) and quads (four people).

Kitzinger and Coyle (1995), in their work on lesbian and gay non-monogamy, suggest that this may 'offer the opportunity for exploring the fuzzy divide between the sexual and non-sexual' (p. 68), with importance placed on non-sexual relationships, ex-lover relationships, and community in general. As a form of non-monogamy, polyamory may problematize the conventional distinctions between the categories of 'friend' and 'lover', which Burr and Butt highlight as the main culturally available categories that exert a 'terrific pull on people's behaviour and experience' (1992: 23). People are expected to have one 'lover' and anyone else should fall into the category of 'friend', with strict cultural rules around what behaviour is appropriate in a friendship. Friendships are often seen as less important than love relationships, as exemplified in common references to people being 'just' friends. Some polyamorous people spoke of wanting to counter the attitude they saw in monogamous relationships that a 'sexual relationship of two weeks is more important than a friendship of years' (Kim, Livejournal: 2004), and argued that polyamory means that sexual relationships did not automatically take priority. In polyamorous relationships the distinctions between friends and lovers may become blurred. However, again, it is not easy to completely transcend the confines of dominant language in this area. For example, we found that important non-sexual relationships are not always recognised as being equally important to sexual relationships, even amongst members of the polyamorous communities. Despite deliberate attempts to avoid this kind of thinking, for example 'I don't find the friends/partners distinction a useful one and I don't find sex a useful boundary marker' (Mary, Livejournal: March 2005), it seems difficult to avoid assumptions that non-sexual relationships will either become sexual (forcing them into the category of lovers), or will be inevitably less important than sexual relationships (forcing them into the category of friends). Some attempt to rewrite this binary can be seen in the languages of 'significant others' or 'families' of close

relationships where sexual activity might not be a defining feature, and in the construction of ‘friends with benefits’ relationships in which friendships can include sexual activity.

Another relationship that has required new languages to be coined by polyamorous people is the relationship with a partner’s partners or significant other’s other significant others (e.g. if Kath and Claire are both partners of John, what is their relationship?). In Western culture the dominant languages of relationships and secret infidelities has a range of labels that can apply to ‘the other women’ or ‘the mistress’, none of which fit with the respectful relationship between the partners of a polyamorous person which is advocated in the literature. In the on-line communities we studied there was a great deal of discussion about these relationships, and about how to describe them. In the following extract the first on-line use of the word ‘metamour’ appears in response to a question about terms for feelings.

How about 'metamory', derived from a love of loving? [Graham] on uk-poly came up with this word and a few of us from uk-poly rather like it. It works well because it also has the form metamour, which means instead of saying your partner's partner or sweetie's sweetie, you can say 'my metamour', as in "I'd like you to meet my partner, my paramour and my metamour". (Laura, Alt.Poly: April 2000)

From then on ‘metamour’ passed into common usage. As one of the original participants in the thread later commented, ‘there wasn’t a word for it but the concept got talked about a lot, so when someone coined a word it started being used everywhere very quickly’ (Damien, LiveJournal: March 2005). The term ‘paramour’ refers to the unmarried partner of a married polyamorous person, although use of the term seems limited in the UK, perhaps because of its attention to the hierarchy of relationships described above.

One member of the LondonPolyBis described the role of ‘metamour-time’ as her opportunity to bond with her partner’s other partners:

‘I think it’s how I make it feel okay, because I get a lot out of those relationships too, and it's just incredible to talk to someone else about how amazing your partner is and have them completely get it and know that they \*really\* do get it because they feel the same way about her. (Alice, Livejournal: January 2003)

Alice went on to describe how referring to the partner of her partner as a ‘metamour’ enabled her to recognise the relationship she had with him as ‘special in its own right’ (ibid) and therefore stopped her from positioning him as a threat to her.

### **Telling stories of polyamorous emotions**

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The final area we explored was the way in which describing emotions in polyamorous communities necessitated the development of a new language of feeling, specifically in relation to jealousy, which many popular and academic texts put forward as a ‘natural’ component of romantic love and/or as an evolutionarily pre-programmed response to one’s partner behaving or feeling sexually towards someone else (e.g. Brehm, Kassin and Fein, 1999).

The self-help polyamorous literature to some extent echoes these assumptions that jealousy is an inevitable response. *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Liszt, 1997) argues that ‘for many people, the biggest obstacle to free love is the emotion we call jealousy’ (p. 133) and, whilst challenging the culturally normative view that sexual territoriality is natural, seems to imply that all polyamorous people will experience jealousy. In *Love Without Limits*, Anapol (1997) argues that ‘most people are prone to jealousy because of a combination of acquired beliefs and genetically programmed reactions’ (p. 50).

Social constructionist psychologists like Stenner (1993) have challenged this notion that jealousy originates from genetic pre-programming and look for the ‘acquired beliefs’ described by Anapol above. For social constructionists, emotions such as jealousy are produced in ‘interactive space’ and have ‘cultural currency’ if they enable a shared social understanding. As we discussed earlier, the ways in which we understand and experience emotions are intrinsically linked to cultural vocabularies which can be enabling or

constraining (Gergen, 1999). Fredman (2004) offers an example of this when she describes her own experiences of rewriting the language of jealousy. Her childhood nanny termed her jealousy ‘just jea’ (p. 35), and Fredman describes the reassuring connotations of ‘just jea’ as linked to notions of ‘this will pass’ (p. 35) and thus manageable: changing the word in this way allowed her to change her experience of the emotion.

Some in the polyamorous communities we have researched have similarly rewritten the language of jealousy in order to enable new experiences of the emotion. Some of the LondonPolyBis group use ‘wibble’ or ‘wibbly’ to describe an emotion that occurs when one person feels uncomfortable or insecure about their partner’s other relationship(s), for example: ‘If I’m not feeling great about my partners other relationship, seeing them cuddly might make me feel wibbly’ (Amy, Livejournal: November 2004). Here ‘wibbling’ becomes a way of expressing anxiety and asking for reassurance, but doesn’t carry the negative connotations of jealousy (which Amy defined as ‘possessiveness’ [ibid]). Amy went on to explain ‘if I say I’m feeling wibbly about something then x will give me extra hugs’. The word ‘wibble’ is only used by a small number of people in the polyamorous communities we describe, however others use words like ‘wobble’ or ‘shaky’ to refer to similar feelings. The authors of *The Ethical Slut* describe a polyamorous couple who used the phrase ‘jelly moments’ to describe such emotions (Easton and Liszt, 1997: 151).

Another jealousy-related coinage supports Fredman’s (2004) suggestion that ‘the ways in which we distinguish and name our own emotions...can influence our actual experience of emotion as well as our emotion talk’ (p. 37). A writer on alt.polyamory here describes a new emotion descriptor: ‘I know my thinking has been improved greatly by those who coined “compersion” as an exact antonym of jealousy’ (George: 30/10/97). The Livejournal ‘Compersion’ community further defines this emotion as: ‘The feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another’ (moderators, Livejournal: 2003). However, rather like the alternatives proposed to the term jealousy itself (e.g. ‘wibble’, ‘shaky’), the polyamorous communities we have

studied have also rewritten the language of compersion. The following thread introduces the final word we will discuss in this article: 'frubbly'.

Alan: is there a word for non-jealous and non-possessive? The thesaurus lists, for contrasting words for jealous, "trusting, tolerant, understanding", none of which sounds right.

Beth: Compersive?

Cathy: <shudder> enough of us hate that word that we've come up with the alternative of "frubbly". But that specifically means "taking joy in one's partner's other partners" (Alt.polyamory: 11/12/2000)

As the <shudder> above demonstrates, many polyamorous people do not like the term given to this emotion, and in the following text one writer explains why:

I personally don't like the word compersion....it's because it somehow brings to mind the two words...compelled and coercion...so I for one am all in favour of a snuggly word (Jane, Alt-Poly 1/6/2000).

The 'snuggly' word that began to be used then is 'frubbly'. This word quickly became popular and its use on-line has spread rapidly, from its first appearance on Alt.Poly on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2000. A Google search in March 2005 generated 702 separate threads featuring the term in the context of polyamory since that date. In the following response to the question 'what's the opposite of frubbly?' posed on a community thread, Emma attempted not only to define the word but also its use:

I tend to use it as adjective 'I'm feeling frubbly about x' but also use 'frubble' as the noun - in response to a soppy comment from one partner to another for example:

partner: 'X and I had a great date last night...'

me: \*frubble\* (Livejournal: July 2004)



As with Alice's comments on the importance of her metamour relationship, Emma later described the role of 'frubbling' in her experiences of polyamorous relationships:

It's like, people expect you to feel jealous if you say your partner is on a date with someone else, but if you can say 'actually it feels good for me, I feel really frubbly' then you have a better way of explaining it than just saying 'well I don't feel jealous' (Emma, LiveJournal: July 2004).

Inventing a word for this positive reaction to a situation challenges the traditional understanding of jealousy outlined previously, and can potentially enable those in the polyamorous communities to rethink their experiences and emotions.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have argued that the identities, relationship practices and emotions of polyamorous people are not easily describable through the dominant language of monogamy. We have attempted to highlight the ways in which that language constrains those within the polyamorous communities, and to document the new words developed within those communities to more usefully account for their lives. Our intention here is to suggest that the act of rewriting the language of identity, relationships and emotion can enable alternative ways of being. If someone regards themselves as an ethical slut rather than as an adulterer; if their partner can relate to the woman they are dating as a potential metamour rather than as the 'other woman'; if they can experience and express any feelings of insecurity about this as a wibble rather than as jealousy, and if they can relate positively to the process by frubbling: this may enable them to access support and reassurance rather than ending the relationship.

Plummer positions sexual stories in a 'flow of power', and highlights the power in choosing to tell or not to tell a particular story (1995: 27-8). There is potentially power in telling stories that challenge conventional or dominant understandings (such as telling a story of frubbling rather than of jealousy, as Emma does above) but that power might also

operate to exclude or silence other stories. We risk creating a ‘hierarchy of sexual stories’ (ibid) about polyamory, in which certain narratives can be told and others remain silenced. In other sexual minority cultures certain stories have been granted more cultural currency than others: for example Plummer recognises the pressures to tell particular narratives of transsexual identities (1995: 33-34), and Parsons (2005) points to the constraining effects of this discourse. The language of polyamory we describe here represent that of a specific group of storytellers, offering a particular set of stories, which we argue might challenge mono-normative understandings of relationships and emotions. But the stories also suggest a certain degree of the ‘contestation and conflict’ which Plummer (1995: 28) cautions about; despite their apparent critique of monogamous ideals, they remain constrained by (or perhaps conform to) elements of this discourse. In addition they suggest certain stories might have more cultural currency than others; for example there are no stories of jealousy here and some polyamorous people have argued that it can be very difficult to talk of experiences of jealousy in polyamorous contexts. It is not our intention to suggest that these are the only stories of polyamory that could, or should be told.

We recognise the limitations of research such as ours that focuses solely on the textual or discursive construction of identity. Researchers such as Gillies *et al.* (2004) have questioned ‘social constructionist accounts of self and identity that tend to overlook materiality and embodiment’ (p. 99). We argue language ‘sustains the body’ (Butler, 1997: 5) and therefore issues of embodiment and language are intrinsically linked, but it has not been possible within this article to properly explore the materiality of experience and emotion. It would be interesting to access accounts of embodied experiences of the emotions we describe to see how those are or are not altered by the shifts in language, how does the embodied experience of ‘wibbling’ differ from that of ‘jealousy’?

Finally, language is constantly evolving, and the fact of our researching the language of polyamory has altered it. We presented an early version of this article at the British Psychological Society Quinquennial Conference (Ritchie and Barker, 2/04/2005). A routine press interview after the presentation resulted in a flood of newspaper coverage; in the following week there were articles about the research in most of the UK national broadsheets and tabloids (e.g. Alexander in *The Guardian* 4/4/05). Several were

published in syndicated feeds across America, India and Australia. This press coverage had a considerable impact on the subject of our research. In particular, the language we describe here is now available to a much wider audience than it was at the time of our original research. One example of this comes from a member of the LondonPolyBis who overheard people at a conference in Los Angeles discussing the word ‘frubbly’ after reading a press article on our research. ‘Frubbly’ had previously been mostly confined in its usage to the London-based network. As these new words are passed on through virtual and real life interactions they evolve and change (‘compersion’ gets rewritten as ‘frubbly’; ‘frubbly’ may well be rewritten since many dislike it). Ultimately, in this search for new language is the search for the means to tell stories of polyamory that cannot be told or read through the dominant constructions of monogamous culture.

We conclude by returning to Damien’s claim: ‘there aren’t words for how we feel or what we do so we have to make them up’. In ‘making up’ words the polyamorous communities we have considered are actively re-writing the language of love, relationships and emotion in a way that enables them to experience a better fit between spoken/written language and lived experiences. Swidler reminds us that constructed meanings and uses of language ‘often remain fluid, waiting to be filled and made real by the relationships they help to create’ (2003: 183). Sexual identity, and the language that constructs it are thus ‘less a matter of final discovery than perpetual reinvention’ (Fuss, 1991: 7).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This was coined by Robin Bauer and Marianne Pieper, the organisers of the first International Conference on Polyamory and Mononormativity held at the Research Centre for Feminist, Gender and Queer Studies at the University of Hamburg on November 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> 2005. [See Pieper and Bauer \(2006\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> Livejournal is an international open-access personal publishing (blogging) website to which members can post privately, publicly or to a limited 'friends' list. In addition there are 'communities' which members can join, where they can discuss issues on shared posts.

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