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Explorations in feminist participant-led research: Conducting focus group discussions with polyamorous women

Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker

Abstract

This paper addresses the methodology used in research centring on a group of polyamorous women. It outlines the methodological processes of participant led research and highlights some key ethical and epistemological considerations. The research centred on a focus group discussion. Participants were involved in every stage of the research and the researcher / researched relationship was understood as one of collaboration. Participants had ownership of the research process in terms of generating discussion questions, facilitating the focus group discussion, and analysing the transcript. Their reflections on this process are also incorporated in this article. The paper focuses in particular on issues of accountability in participant led research and on reflexivity when researchers are part of the group they are researching.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Feminist research, Focus group discussions, Polyamory, Reflexivity.

Introduction

In this paper we discuss the methodology we employed in participant-led qualitative research on the experiences of polyamorous women. The initial phase of the research and the one that forms the basis of our discussion in this paper centred on a focus group discussion with eight women, including ourselves. The overall aim of the research was to examine issues of female sexuality in non-monogamous relationships. This paper, however, will focus on our research methodology, reflecting on our experience of conducting the research and exploring the potentials of using participant-led methods within a qualitative, feminist framework. We discuss the processes of participant-led research and the key ethical and epistemological considerations this type

of research raises. The paper focuses in particular on the feminist potential of participant-led research (Wilkinson, 1999) and the importance of reflexivity when researchers are part of the participant group they are researching (Etherington, 2004). In reflecting on our methodology in depth and inviting dialogue with others we hope to be in line with the goals of feminist psychologist Michelle Fine (1992) who argued: 'If feminist researchers do not take critical, activist and open stances in our own work, then we collude in reproducing social silences through the social sciences' (p.206).

Polyamory

Polyamory (or 'poly' as it is frequently shortened to) is a relationship philosophy that recognises 'people's capacity to share and multiply their love in honest and consensual ways' (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, quoted in Eadie, 2004: 165). Some authors have suggested that polyamory might be a broadly feminist way of conducting relationships, empowering women to move away from the oppressive regime of compulsory heterosexual monogamy (e.g. Robinson, 1997; Jackson and Scott, 2004).

Plummer (1995) says that we all tell stories about ourselves: narratives about who we are and how we came to be that way that we repeat to ourselves and others to make sense of our lives and to present ourselves in certain ways. Plummer argues that today 'sex' has become the 'big story' with people presenting tales of their sexual behaviour and identity (such as the non-heterosexual 'coming out' story) in a range of different ways. Plummer claims that sexual stories have gained an unusual power and prominence in recent years, with certain stories having 'their time' to be heard. Weeks (1998) calls this the 'moment' at which a particular sexual story begins to be told publicly, suggesting that these stories begin to improve recognition, respect and rights for the story-tellers. For Weeks this creates a new type of intimate or sexual citizen.

Polyamory might be read as an emerging sexual story given its recent prominence in the press (articles in *The Telegraph*, Jenkins, 2004 and *The Big Issue*, Rubach, 2004) and the developing interest in polyamory in academic theory and research on relationships and sexuality (for example the recent call for papers for a special issue of the journal *Sexualities*). The research that we present here forms part of this 'moment' of sexual story telling. As reflexive researchers we are both what Plummer terms sexual

'story-tellers' and story 'coaxers', both of whom are vital for the successful telling of a sexual story, along with an audience to read or consume the stories. We are 'story-tellers' because we are people who produce our own sexual stories in our personal and academic lives. We are also 'coaxers' because we are people who possess the power to provoke stories from people, as researchers interviewing people in polyamorous communities and as writers bringing these stories to academic and non-academic audiences. It is the implications of these dual roles that we hope to reflect on as we attempt to commit what Lambevski calls 'an act of ethnographic honesty' (1999: 399).

Locating our research within feminist qualitative psychology

Feminist research has driven important methodological shifts in the field of psychological and social science research (Stanley and Wise, 1993), and the feminist potentials of various methods have particularly been explored within qualitative research (Burman, 1994). However, Burman and others caution that there is no intrinsically feminist method, but that whether or not a study is feminist relates to its aims and what it achieves. Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) argue, 'what makes research "feminist" is not the methods as such, but the framework within which they are located, and the particular ways in which they are deployed' (p.46). Also, the issue is complicated by the fact that there are multiple 'feminisms' rather than one clear feminist position. Harding (1986) distinguished three feminist approaches to the study of gender, which Percy (1998) maps out as the main possibilities for feminist psychology: feminist empiricist, feminist standpoint and feminist constructivist approaches. Feminist empiricists seek to correct the exclusion of women in research by conducting further research using the same methods as existing research. Feminist standpoint researchers assume that women are essentially different from men and should be studied separately in their own right. Our approach is closest to the feminist constructivist perspective, since we see gender and femininities as socially constructed and are interested in how women construct their identities as women, and as feminists, within the context of polyamorous relationships.

Much previous feminist writing on polyamory has fallen within a Marxist feminist approach in its assertions that monogamy 'privileges the interests of both men and capitalism' (Robinson, 1997, p.144) and is a restrictive state with women being

degraded and reduced to servants, slaves to men's lusts, and instruments for the production of children (Munsen and Stelboum, 1999). There are also constructionist arguments in this literature about the ways in which gendered power dynamics in monogamy operate to constrain women's development of independent identities through the social constructions of romantic love and jealousy, which ensure that heterosexual women become emotionally and financially dependent on men (Robinson, 1997). Our research builds on this past writing, and the critiques of monogamy put forward by feminist psychologists Jackson and Scott (2004), to study how polyamorous women construct their own identities.

Since Ann Oakley's interviews with women in the 1980s (e.g. Oakley, 1981), feminist researchers have advocated dissolving the lines between the researcher and the researched through establishing rapport and seeking to reduce power differences. However, it has been acknowledged that difference in class, age, culture etc. as well, as the power inherent in being the one asking the questions and writing up the research, make it unlikely that such hierarchies can ever be completely negated. We attempted to reduce power differences between ourselves and the other participants by involving them in the process of academic production at every stage from setting questions to writing up the analysis. We also participated in the research ourselves, viewing the research process as one of collaboration with our participants (Etherington, 2004), and telling our own stories alongside them. In this way we aimed to reflexively engage with our own involvement in the process of producing the research, which Burman (1994) argues is a vital part of feminist qualitative methodology. In our positioning of ourselves as participants and our participants as researchers, we link our research to feminist studies using participant observation (e.g. Järviluoma, 2000), autoethnography (where the researcher's story itself becomes the material for analysis e.g. Etherington, 2004), and memory work (where groups of women analyse their memories of experiences, e.g. Haug, 1987; Crawford *et al.*, 1992). Etherington (2004) argues that a research methodology that incorporates the researcher as a participant 'legitimises and encourages the inclusion of the researcher's self and culture, as an ethical and politically sound approach' (p.141). In our case we attempted collaborative research with ourselves as

participants in the context of focus group discussions, our reasons for this choice are outlined below.

We also see our research as part of broader political agenda to create social change and empower women (Maher, 1999). We are using it to attempt to raise awareness of the needs of polyamorous women, and their rights and responsibilities as emerging sexual citizens (Weeks, 1998). Like most feminist researchers we aim to increase visibility of women's experiences, in an area in which, our participants agreed, much of the focus of popular understanding is on the benefits and drawbacks for men rather than women.

Researching from the inside

What do we as researchers gain from researching the communities that we ourselves belong to? Several things: Practically it gives us easy access to participants since we subscribe to many of the same e-lists, and on-line communities. Being members of the same social networks as our participants means that we are well versed in the language used by them, which helps conversation flow easily in our discussions and is essential in research on sexuality (Frith, 2000).

Participants are more likely to trust us because we know them personally, indeed, we are friends with many of our participants. In this particular group Pearl has a sibling relationship with one participant (Joanne is Pearl's younger sister), Gabrielle and Pearl are life partners, as are Laura and Joanne, who are both also seeing Jane. Katherine is dating Gabrielle. There are metamour relationships between some participants¹ (Helen and Beth are both Pearl's metamours and Katherine and Beth also share a partner). We were aware of the possible complications of working with such a closely networked group, but felt that the potential for participants to challenge each other based on shared knowledge was a useful dynamic (Kitzinger, 1994) as we discuss further below. Clearly there are ethical issues when we research those who form part of our own social (and sexual) networks, but Bolton (1995) suggests that researchers in the field of sexuality should ask themselves:

¹ Metamour refers to the partner of a partner. In this case, Pearl is dating D who is also the partner of Helen and, at the time of the group, of Beth which makes Helen and Beth both Pearl's metamour

[w]hat right do we have to enquire into the sex lives of Others, whether in our own culture or in some exotic distant realm, if we insist on our own right to privacy, to remain silent about our own intimate lives? (161)

Being part of polyamorous communities ourselves also opens up new possibilities for research. Focus group research has been advocated in the area of sexuality, particularly for ‘exploratory research in areas where little is know’ (Frith, 2000: 291) and for research with groups where the views expressed are in opposition to the mainstream (Basch 1987). We suggest that the processes and methods of participant-led focus group research, where participants are viewed as collaborators rather than subjects (Etherington, 2004) would be difficult for someone who wasn’t a member of the research community to undertake. In addition the fact that we share political commitments and agendas with our participants (in terms of recognition and rights) means we can be more easily accountable to them. Much has been written about the tensions inherent in negotiating a ‘simultaneously insider-outsider perspective’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 112) and we add to this work in our reflections on the dual roles of story coaxers and tellers (e.g. Barker, 2004a).

Some have advocated the position that feminist researchers should only speak for themselves and not for Others, whilst some have pointed out the difficulty of defining exactly who we and our community actually are. In some senses we have to acknowledge that we are always representing Others even when we share a great deal with our participants; claiming otherwise may render invisible important differences in experiences rooted in differences in class, culture, sexuality, etc. (see Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996, for a detailed consideration of this issue). Linked to this, Denzin and Lincon (2000) highlight the potential ‘crisis of representation’ that reflexive researchers might encounter when struggling to locate their own stories alongside those of their participants. We recognise that it is tempting for us to want to portray polyamory in a way that fits with our own understandings and legitimates our views and practices. For example, one common stereotype of polyamory is that it is about people having casual sex with one another. Many in polyamorous communities, including ourselves at times,

counter this by emphasising committed and family bonds between polyamorous people (Barker, 2004b). However, such emphasis may marginalise those who do see a place for purely sexual relationships within polyamory. It is very tempting for us to look for voices in our research that counter stereotypes that we perceive to be negative or unfounded, but we try to think reflexively about such potential biases and their implications. As this paper will highlight, the nature of the methodology we employ attempts to give some control of the research to our participants, so they are able to (and indeed did) challenge our and each others' positions.

Ethical dilemmas

As our first study using this methodology, several ethical dilemmas were raised which we continue to consider in our ongoing research. One major issue is the tension between our aim at participant-ownership and the need to protect participants with some degree of anonymity. Initially, several of the focus group participants, including ourselves, preferred not to be anonymous for political reasons. Many of us wanted to be 'out' about our polyamory. However, there was a flood of interest about polyamory in the media in Spring 2005, following presentation of a later phase of our research (Ritchie and Barker, 2005), which caused us to re-evaluate our position on anonymity. Previously, we had used the first names of participants who preferred that in our papers, and pseudonyms for those who wished to remain anonymous. However, members of the press proved persistent in tracking down people in our lives and we did not want to risk any of our participants experiencing similar troubles: we decided to anonymise everyone, including ourselves, and to alter any features which might render us easily identifiable.

Also, prior to this issue being raised, we considered publishing under the names of all those involved in the research, a strategy employed by other feminist psychologists such as Gillies *et al.* (2004). However, despite their collaboration in the research, none of the participants but ourselves particularly wanted to have their names attached to academic papers. We recognise that this leaves us with the problem that we wanted our research to be owned by our participants, but it is copyright to only the two of us who are academics. This is why we have chosen to use the term 'participant-led' rather than 'participant-owned' throughout the paper. We continue to address this issue in

discussions with participants and some subsequent publications may include others (under their pseudonyms or real names) and/or be aimed at more activist/community journals rather than academic ones.

Regarding other ethical issues, we set out standard ethical and confidentiality practices as advocated by the British Psychological Society Code of Conduct (Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants, 2004) in our initial contact with participants. These were elaborated at the beginning of the discussion by participants who formulated their own ground rules based around them. In particular, there was an openness about the potential for discomfort around levels of disclosure (e.g. about mutual partners' sexual practices) and it was agreed that this would be monitored carefully and that anyone could pause the discussion if this became an issue. In subsequent discussions participants have devised a hand-signal to ensure that such pauses happen immediately if necessary. An extract from the transcript covering ground rules is included later in the paper.

In the rest of the paper we outline our process of conducting participant-led research, before concluding with some of our own and our participants' reflections on the experience.

The Research Process

Approaching participants

The internet was central to our research methodology, since it relied on ongoing interaction with our participants. On-line discussion forums offered the ideal environment for such collaboration. We approached our participants on-line, discussed potential topics with them, and analysed the transcript through on-line communications. O'Brien Libutti claims 'the Internet has transformed the research terrain for qualitative researchers' (1999: 77). It played a crucial role in our ability to put the research firmly into the (touch typing) hands of our participants. This simply would not have been possible without these virtual spaces.

Initially we posted an open invitation to participate to polyamorous women on an on-line journal site, setting out the aims of the research:

What we'd like to do is a very participant-owned piece of research where a group of us decide what questions are relevant (around gender and poly), we brainstorm our list of questions on line, then meet up and have a taped 2 hour discussion around them. We will transcribe the discussion and send it to everyone and we can, again online, analyse it in terms of what themes emerge and what we want to say in the final report. (Initial post, 11/2/04)

We were clear about our objectives in our invitation: to present papers at the British Psychological Society Psychology Of Women Section Annual Conference in July 2004 and to publish the research in an academic journal. We had a number of positive responses to this post, for example Jane commented:

I'm certainly interested, & would be able to find the time assuming the evening bit is scheduled reasonably well in advance :-). (But hey, this is a *poly* discussion thing, we all have Nightmare Scheduling Hell...!) (On-line comment, 12/2/04)

A few weeks later we made a filtered post (on the on-line journal site) to the women who had responded and began to work out possible dates for the focus group. As Jane predicted, organising an event that involved a number of women, all of whom have multiple partners and complex diaries, and a number of whom are also raising children, was something of a 'nightmare' to say the least!

Basch (1987) suggests that in a focus group discussion where participants are homogenous (e.g. from similar backgrounds and with similar agendas), they can provide support for other members when expressing views salient to that group but not to mainstream culture. However, contrary to this, Kitzinger (1994) has found that heterogeneous groups produce a more varied dialogue and are more likely to result in extended discussions because of participants' differing views on the subjects under consideration. In constructing our group we attempted to balance these positions, by ensuring some basic homogeneity (all female, all polyamorous, all bisexual [except Gabrielle] all involved in the same social networks) but also some important differences

in terms of experiences of polyamory and relationship structures / philosophies. We eventually put together a group that Beth felt was comprised of 'a reasonable range of ages and experiences' being made up as it was of participants who ranged in age from early 20s to mid 40s and from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Participants had been involved in the polyamorous community for between 18 months and 16 years.

Developing questions

Once a group of eight participants had been agreed on and 'scheduling hell' negotiated, we began to formulate a list of questions for the focus group discussion. Schlesinger et al. suggest that focus groups are a good way of allowing participants to 'determine their own agendas' (1992: 28-9) and we took this a stage further by asking our participants to generate their own questions before the group discussion. In filtered posts to the on-line community we asked participants to suggest possible areas for discussion. A number of key themes emerged during this stage, notably the link between polyamory and feminism - as Jane said:

I'm thinking about how poly ties in with feminism (in that I think, offhand, that the majority of the people I know who would describe themselves as feminist are also poly - & I do *have* monogamous straight friends!).
(On-line comment, 8/3/04)

We organised the ideas raised through these on-line discussions and drew up a loose framework of questions. The questions divided into four key sections:

- **Polyamory and Femininity:** Joanne suggested that 'there's a tendency to assume that the things we say make a good poly person, organisation and that sort of stuff, are more naturally *female* traits' (On-line comment, 16/3/04) and asked what the group thought of that idea.
- **Polyamory and Gender:** Laura was 'interested in whether the genders experience jealousy differently and have different coping strategies'. (On-line comment, 9/3/04)

- **Polyamory and Feminism:** As Jane suggests above there was considerable interest in exploring the ‘links between being poly and feminist’. (On-line comment, 8/3/04)
- **Polyamory and Female Sexuality:** Gabrielle asked for ‘some discussion around the different ways we can do poly as bi / lesbian women’. (On-line comment 8/3/04)

The list of topics was posted to the group for comment, and a number of additional questions added to each section. In the group itself we also allowed time at the end for more free-flow discussion and for participants to raise any issues that they felt had not been covered.

The focus group discussion

We arranged for the focus group discussion to take place at one of the participant’s partner’s homes. The informal setting worked well, Beth commented:

I really enjoyed just chatting over cups of tea / hot chocolate / glasses of juice. I don’t think that it would have worked so well for me in a pub or club – there was something about the semi-domesticity of it that was relaxing. (Reflection post, 5/4/04)

In line with our desires to reduce researcher / participant hierarchies we asked for a participant to moderate the focus group. Joanne agreed to take on this role and after a briefing from us at the start of the discussion, she facilitated the drawing up of the groups’ ‘guidelines for privacy’ as advocated by Frith (2000: 284) covering issues of confidentiality and disclosure. She also set out basic ground rules for the discussion:

As far as ground rules... I suppose try not to talk over anyone, right? Um, you know, if you’ve started talking I think you should be allowed to finish what you’re saying. And if you don’t feel like that’s happening then try and catch my attention and I’ll try and, you know. I’ll try and keep track

of who's talking and who's waiting. We don't want to get stuck on one question. So I'll try and move onto the next question. If we get to the end and you want to come back to a question and we've got time that's okay. Um, try to keep the name calling and the hair pulling to a minimum!

(FG, 4/4/04)

Communication

Frith's exploration of focus group methodology cites the ability of participants to 'contradict, disagree and challenge one another' (2000: 288) as one of the method's major strengths. The comment from Katherine below (which is taken from her reflections on the experience of participating in the group) emphasises the supportive way in which our participants handled this issue:

What I got out of it was a feeling of mutual support - not that we all agreed with each other necessarily, but that whatever I said would be listened to and not shot down or immediately contradicted in an aggressive way. (On-line comment, 5/4/05)

Several times in the discussion participants checked out their understanding of positions adopted by other participants. In this example, Laura asked Gabrielle for confirmation about what she had said about the way in which polyamory had allowed her to 'radically rework... relationships with men' as a lesbian:

Laura: Shall we recap? ... You [Gabrielle] said that part of the sexual *politics* of the polyamorous *community* means that you could have relationships with men as a lesbian that you couldn't maybe have elsewhere? ... Or have I just got that completely wrong?

Gabrielle: That I can have ... I can give the same kind of status to a non-sexual relationship with a man as I can to a sexual relationship with a woman, but that the way that the poly community seems to work, or the way poly works for me, *allows* me to kind of develop those relationships

to similar levels of intensity, whether or not they're sexual, and I guess that does in terms of freeing me as a lesbian, is enable me to have those kind of intense relationships with men, which are then *not* sexual but are, kind of at a level of intensity that are equal to, or that I can ascribe a similar level of status to? Or I can say 'this is a really important relationship to me'. And it's something I haven't been able to do outside poly in the lesbian community.

Frith suggests that such questioning might 'result in the provision of more detailed information, and is not necessarily experienced as hostile or unpleasant' (2000, 287). She also claims that this type of interaction between participants is often ignored in the analysis of transcripts, and argues that we should in fact privilege examples of participant interaction: 'through the interplay between participants researchers are able to get a sense of the contested nature of particular issues' (Frith, 2000: 291). In our research we have attempted to explore this interplay, focusing on the areas of contest and debate in the group, and offering examples of communication between our participants such as that given above.

Analysis

We transcribed the taped discussion using a fairly simple code to convey basic speech patterns (e.g. bold for loud, italics for emphasis) that would be easy to understand and then sent the transcript out to all of the participants with some guidelines about how to begin working with it. We employed a thematic analysis method as described by Langdrige (2004) that we thought our participants would all be able to use easily. We followed up the themes identified by the group and then posted a draft paper to the on-line community for comment. Several participants took this opportunity to reflect on what they had said, often suggesting ways of making their position clearer. As the research moved towards presentation we continued to ask participants to reflect on the development of the papers and several have added their ideas to ours in the writing up stages. Banister *et al.* (1994) state that researchers should recognise that publications can

change the way that the group being studied is seen by society, and as such we should try to remain accountable to participants throughout the research process.

Key themes that participants identified in the analytic process cohered around polyamory as potentially feminist and the possible benefits to women in contrast with stereotypes about polyamory benefiting men. These will be considered in depth in future publications based on the analysis. Interestingly, although the focus of the discussion was on polyamory, another major issue that emerged in participant reflections was the amount of time spent in the group talking about women's experiences more generally. We spent some time discussing the gendered division of labour within domestic and workplace environments, and participants highlighted the importance of class as well as gender differences in these spheres. As Robinson (1997) concludes: '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).

We feel that one of the main limitations of this research 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. However, this was out of line with our broadly feminist constructionist approach, outlined earlier, and, from the analysis offered by participants, it seems that many of them did identify with, or draw on, this perspective, for example, Laura explained her feminism thus: 'I think you can hate traditional constructs of masculinity rather than men themselves'. We intend, in future research, to explore the potentials of more explicitly constructionist techniques of group analysis such as that employed by Gillies *et al.* (2004).

Reflections on the research

In the days following the focus group discussion, a number of participants reflected on their experiences in the on-line forum. There was particular emphasis on the nature of women only space. For example, Beth wrote:

I said to [my male partners] afterwards that the best word I could come up with for it was that it felt "conspiratorial", but that's not quite right because

it suggests something a little bit sinister, and this wasn't. My next try was that it felt like the slightly guilty pleasure of "getting away with something". What it is we were getting away with, I have no idea. (E-mail, 3/5/04)

Feminist researchers such as Wilkinson (1999) have made comparisons between focus group discussions and the consciousness raising groups of second wave feminists in the 1970s. Indeed, Joanne's comment that the 'feminism discussion thingy was dead good and led to lots more debating at home in the evening' (on-line post 5/4/04) seems to suggest that the group discussion did help to stimulate further reflection amongst the participants on the relationship between feminist politics and their own sexual practices.

Beth ended her response to the transcript with a request for further discussion groups (something a number of participants suggested at the end of the focus group):

I really enjoyed the experience of just sitting in a room with lots of women and talking. I'd like to do a lot more of that. I'd like to do one about employment as well as the SM [sadoomasochism] one. (E-mail, 3/5/04)

The participants have continued to reflect on the process of being involved in the research as it progressed, for example Jane commented 'reading through the transcript was really interesting, and I really enjoyed thinking it through and putting my ideas together' (E-mail, 11/5/04).

Since this first group we have run a similar discussion with women talking about sadoomasochism, since so many of the participants expressed interest in this. One of our participants, Laura, has recently set up her own series of women-only discussion groups focusing on issues of feminism and body image, which we attend purely as participants. We are also following up Katherine's suggestion that we run a comparable focus group with men to see what similarities and/or differences emerge in their understandings of the relationship between gender politics and polyamory. This is in line with Burman's (1994) concern that feminist psychology not confirm women's victim status by ignoring masculinity and relationships and alliances between women and men.

Conclusions

The research presented here was our first foray into participant-led methodologies and as such it raised more questions than it answered. We have continued to reflect on our research practices. The focus group discussions we have conducted since this one have benefited from lessons learnt here and we have experimented with ways of giving participants more control over the process, for example by running groups on topics that they (rather than we) suggest, or by following up the unexpected issues that emerge in groups (Frith, 2000: 278). In our most recent research project on feminism and women who engage in SM (sadomasochistic) sex practices, the issue of self-harm emerged in the group discussion and the participants were keen to follow this up in the analysis. We are currently writing a separate paper devoted to this issue (Barker and Ritchie, in prep).

In relation to ‘accountability’, Banister et al. (1994) claim that research can be ‘for’ the research community, for the researcher (in terms of their areas of personal interest and career development), or for the participants themselves. We hope that our research is ‘for’ all three of these groups. In telling these narratives of feminist polyamorous women we hope to be researching ‘for’ the polyamorous community, countering some of the prejudices those within the community encounter from academic and non academic audiences. We are clearly researching an area of great personal significance, and, as polyamorous women ourselves, our research speaks not only of our academic interests, but also of our own life choices. Fundamentally, however, in its exploration of participant-led focus groups and researcher reflexivity, in our desire to recognise our dual roles as story tellers and coaxers, is the hope that this research is ‘for’ our participants:

by using reflexivity in research we close the illusory gap between researchers and researched... By viewing our relationship with participants as one of consultancy and collaboration we encourage a sense of power, involvement and agency (Etherington, 2004: 32)

We hope we have made clear the ways in which this research exercise personally benefited the participants themselves: their desire to set up ongoing discussion groups is, we suggest, evidence of the value of creating space in which women can talk freely, or as Beth puts it to enjoy the 'slightly guilty pleasure of "getting away with something"' without men.

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