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Whatever happened to non-monogamies? Critical reflections on recent research and theory

Abstract

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in consensually non-monogamous relationships. This paper critically reviews current research and theory in this area, focusing particularly on polyamory, swinging, and gay open relationships. The sociohistorical context in which these forms of relating emerged is considered and discussed in order to better understand why there has been such a significant increase in scholarly work on non-monogamies at this moment. Furthermore, we categorise the extant literature into two groups, 'celebratory' and 'critical', and argue that such polarisation frequently works to reinforce partial and dichotomising understandings of the topic. Research so far has primarily concentrated on the rules and boundaries which people employ to manage such relationships and we contend that future work needs to pay more attention to diversities of meanings and practices, intersections with other identities and communities, and the troubling of dichotomous understandings¹.

Keywords: Mononormativity, non-monogamy, open relationships, polyamory, swinging.

¹ Please note that the final version of the current paper was submitted in February 2010. We apologise in advance for the exclusion of theory and research published after this date.

Whatever happened to non-monogamies? Critical reflections on recent research and theory

Nearly a decade ago, Roger Rubin's (2001) paper posed the question 'whatever happened to swingers, group marriages and communes?' He bemoaned the lack of popular and scholarly consideration of 'alternative lifestyles' since the 1960s and 70s, within which he included non-traditional family forms, multiple and open relationships. We are now in a position to answer Rubin's question: all of the above were just about to experience a massive resurgence of interest in the new millennium.

In terms of popular interest, consensual non-monogamies have become a sexual story of intense public fascination (Plummer, 1995) attracting a new burst of commentaries and debates every few months. Celebrities such as Will Smith, George Michael, Tilda Swinton and Scarlett Johanson have all been quoted as openly considering, or taking part in, forms of consensual non-monogamy, and there have been a number of confessional newspaper and magazine articles (e.g. Scott, 2008; Bernhardt, 2009) and television programmes (e.g. Friend, 2006; Channel 5, 2007) focusing on the everyday lives of people in open or multiple relationships (Ritchie, 2010). The call for such media pieces is so high that the British polyamory email list (uk-poly) alone receives almost monthly requests for participants from journalists and documentary-makers. The cultural exposure of polyamory in particular has been such that the word entered the Oxford English dictionary in 2006 and elicits over a million google hits. There have also been a number of self-help style books published on consensual non-monogamies in the last decade including a second edition of the classic *The Ethical Slut* (Easton & Hardy, 2009) and many others (e.g. Matik, 2002; Ravenscroft, 2004; Benson, 2008; Taormino, 2008).

In terms of academic interest, in 2004 the book *The State of Affairs* (Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden, 2004) included two chapters on consensual non-monogamies (polyamory, Jamieson, 2004; and gay open relationships, Heaphy, Donovan & Weeks, 2004). This was groundbreaking since consensual non-monogamies were previously excluded from most social scientific writing on non-monogamy which only considered it

in the context of secret infidelities and affairs (Rubin, 2001). This book was followed by the first international academic conference specifically focusing on polyamorous forms of relating in 2005 (Pieper & Bauer, 2005) and a special issue of this journal on the same topic in 2006 (Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse, 2006). There have been a number of postgraduate theses (e.g. Keener, 2004; Cook, 2005; Gardner, 2005), monographs (e.g. Klesse, 2007) and journal articles (e.g. de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Sheff 2005a & b; Adam, 2004, 2006) published on forms of consensual non-monogamy over the past few years, and 2010 sees the first edited collection which brings together research and theory concerning the different forms of consensual non-monogamy (Barker & Langdridge, 2010).

From being a topic on which it was comparatively easy to read every academic work, there is now an impressive body of literature branching off into ever new subdivisions and disciplines, such as law (Strassberg, 2003; Emens, 2004; Black, 2006), family and relationship therapy (LaSala, 2001; Bettinger, 2005; Shernoff, 2006; Weitzman, 2006), and social housing (Andersson, 2007). The explosion of interest is evidenced by the ever-expanding polyamory collection of resources at the Kinsey Institute which currently has a list of well over 200 theses, books and articles relating to non-monogamies (Haslam, 2009). There is also a Yahoo group devoted to discussion of research on this topic (PolyResearchers, 2009) which boasts over 250 members worldwide.

The current paper aims to present an overview of current research and theory on consensually non-monogamous forms of relating. It uses the plural 'non-monogamies' to reflect the diversity of these that exist, but the focus will be on polyamory, gay open relationships, and swinging, since these are the forms which have been studied most extensively to date. Broadly speaking, polyamory (or poly) involves having multiple relationships which may be emotionally close and/or sexual in nature (Barker, 2005a; Klesse, 2007), whereas swinging and gay open relationships involve couples openly having sexual (but generally not emotionally close) relationships with other people - either separately or as a couple (Jenks, 1998; Adam, 2006). We will return to the nuances of these distinctions and various common models later in the paper. Unfortunately, as in

so much of the existing literature, it is beyond the scope of the current paper to engage with recent anthropological research on forms of non-monogamy emerging across cultures which may have a monogamous or polygamous history (e.g. Zeitzen, 2008). We acknowledge this limitation in the current review and would urge scholars following us to develop dialogue with such research and with the extensive anthropological literature on kinship systems in monogamous and non-monogamous cultures (e.g. Paige & Paige, 1982).

We will begin this paper by summarising the sociocultural shifts which have been implicated in the increase in interest in consensual non-monogamies and the criticisms that have been levelled at monogamy (and non-consensual non-monogamy) which have led to alternatives being pursued. After this we will review some of the key writings on non-monogamies. We divide these into those which celebrate the liberating potentials of such relationships, and those which criticise them (or the ways in which they have been represented) and expound their limitations. The paper will then go on to summarise key research findings about consensually non-monogamous relationships thus far. Finally, we will explore recent developments in non-monogamies research and theory, considering some of the limitations of past research, and possible future directions which would address these, as well as cohorts which have been relatively under-researched thus far.

The trouble with mononormativity

The term mononormativity was coined by Pieper & Bauer (2005) to refer to dominant assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy, analogous to such assumptions around heterosexuality inherent in the term heteronormativity². Certainly, political, popular and psychological discourses tend to present monogamous coupledness as the only natural and/or morally correct form of human relating (Rubin, 1984). There is still no consideration of the possibility of consensual non-monogamy within mainstream psychology (see Barker, 2007) or relationship therapy (e.g. Crowe & Ridley, 2000).

2 Reasons why it is important to focus critiques on mononormativity rather than monogamy will become apparent and are similar to Cohen's (1997) concerns about the need for queer politics to focus on heteronormativity rather than devolving into an attack on 'straights' by self-appointed 'queers' who neglect the racial and classed grounds on which such critiques often stand.

Internationally best-selling relationship self-help books such as Gray's (2002) *Mars and Venus* or Fein & Schneider's (2007) *The Rules* continue to present (almost exclusively heterosexual) lifelong monogamy as the natural mode of human relating and the 'happily ever after' that everyone inevitably aspires to³ with, again, no exploration of any alternatives to coupledness.

Critiques of mononormativity have taken various forms. Some simply focus on demonstrating the historical and culturally situated nature of monogamy in order to challenge the notion that it is 'natural' or 'normal', whereas others highlight a shifting cultural milieu which seems to call for different ways of relating. Some point out the current problems with monogamous relationships, and others take a more explicitly political stance about the ways in which human beings should relate to one another. Here we will summarise some of the main arguments which have been made in these various styles of critique.

First, the literature emphasising the diversity of relationship forms counters evolutionary and biological essentialist arguments of 'natural monogamy' with statistics on the rarity of pair-bonding amongst animals (only a few dozen out of four thousand mammal species according to Barash & Lipton, 2001), and within human cultures (only 43 out of the 238 'societies' defined by Murdoch being monogamous, as cited in Rubin, 2001). Clearly such literature takes mononormativity on in its own terms (the embedded assumptions that what is 'natural' or 'normal' *is* somehow ideal and superior) rather than challenging such slippages directly (see Warner, 1999). However, it does important work in situating monogamy in its cultural and historical context and alerting us to the ethnocentrism of viewing the current prescribed Western form of relating as essential.

More explicitly social constructionist authors including Giddens (1992), Plummer (2003) and Weeks (2007) have written about recent transformations in western identities and intimacies which have greatly altered the ways in which people understand and

3 The self-help literature on consensual non-monogamy mentioned previously is still a niche market and rarely available in the relationship or personal growth sections of conventional book stores.

experience their relationships. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love* joins these authors in arguing that the nature of love is fundamentally changing. What used to be taken-for-granted now has to be discussed, justified, negotiated and agreed upon: 'Love is becoming a blank that lovers must fill in themselves' (p.5). This is similar to Giddens's (1992) notion of the 'pure relationship' which is based on choice and equality: choice of partners; whether to get married, cohabit or live together separately; egalitarianism between partners; and greater informality between adults and children (Weeks, 2007). Such authors see the major force underlying these shifts being the democratisation and individualisation of Western society. The linked recognition of 'same-sex' relationships and moves towards gender equality means that most couple relationships (whether 'same-sex' or 'opposite-sex') now involve two individuals who want to be equal and free and to pursue their own autonomous goals. For the first time 'two people falling in love find themselves both subject to the opportunities and hindrances of a biography designed by themselves' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p.62).

Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that these societal shifts have led to paradoxes and tensions in current relationships. At the same time that there is focus on individual autonomy and reaching personal goals, relationships have become the 'new religion' in increasingly secular societies and are the places that people turn to for validation, meaning and security in a world where working lives are becoming less stable. Weddings are the one industry that seem to be recession-proof and may even be replacing community as the major source of belonging and stability for young lesbian, gay and bisexual people (Heaphy, Smart & Einarsdottir, 2009). The existence of narratives of 'the one', staying together and 'happily ever after' alongside those of personal growth and change can put relationships under pressure to both remain static *and* change and adapt over the increasingly long lifespan. Such shifts have been implicated in increasingly 'disposable' relationships (Bauman, 2003), rising rates of divorce and separation (62% of parents splitting up at some stage; Lewis, 2001) and single-person households (estimated at seven million in the United Kingdom, ONS, 2006). Newspaper columnists question what new ways of doing relationships will look like in the light of these changes,

proposing that they might be the kind of singledom or serial monogamy seen in popular books like *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Fielding, 1997) and TV shows like *Sex and the City* (Bushnell, 1998).

Within sociology and psychology, some attention has also been paid to the fact that current relationships are generally monogamous in name rather than deed, non-consensual non-monogamy being a more common mode of relating (Duncombe, Harrison, Allan & Marsden, 2004) with rates of hidden infidelity in marriage estimated up to 60 or 70 per cent (Vangelisti & Gernstenberger, 2004; Robinson, 1997). Along with relationship and family breakdown, such secret infidelities (Nichols, 1990) have been linked to rates of sexually transmitted infections and strains on emotional well-being and physical health (Lehmiller, 2009). It is within this context of searches for 'new' ways of relating, and questioning whether conventional monogamy is *really* monogamous that attention has turned to consensual non-monogamies. Discourses of sexual citizenship and identity politics agendas have also increased the visibility of some forms of consensual non-monogamy (notably polyamory) as people have claimed it as an identity-label rather than a practice and have called for rights and responsibilities on the basis of this.

Alongside these shifts is the related sexualisation of society (Attwood, 2007): the move towards people identifying themselves in terms of their sexuality (Foucault, 1981) and becoming 'sexual subjects', whereby sex is central to the creation and expression of their selfhood (Giddens, 1992). Gill (2007) and others have pointed to a kind of sexual subjectification whereby people are expected to demonstrate sexual prowess and adventurousness, and agentic 'choosing' of sexiness and pleasure (often as a veneer underneath which more traditional social forces continue to operate). This has been linked to increasing rates of sexual anxiety (Tiefer, 1995), and may well also be implicated in the more sexual forms of consensual non-monogamy currently undergoing a boom in interest, such as (often web-mediated) forms of swinging and dogging⁴ (Bell, 2006). The turn towards non-monogamies of other kinds could also be linked to this

4 Dogging involves sexual activity in cars in secluded spots whereby couples and singles can watch each other having sex.

increasing sexualisation, particularly in relation to the difficult negotiations this requires of those in monogamous relationships. For example, the tension between expressing (sexual) self-identity and holding on to the idea of love as the (religious) path to validation and meaning, whilst attempting to adhere to the everyday demands of coupledness. Such tensions could explain why the dyad remains at the heart of most (but not all) forms of consensual non-monogamy (e.g. Jamieson, 2004; Finn, 2005).

Political critiques of mononormativity follow from the ways in which it can be located in a specific cultural and historical moment. Most position monogamy as inherently patriarchal and capitalist and present feminist and/or Marxist arguments for alternative ways of relating. Robinson (1994) sums up the key arguments in her statement 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). Drawing on Engels (1884), Munson and Stelboun (1999) argue that current forms monogamy came into being historically due to the need for women to care for the current and future workforce without being paid. Robinson (1997) and Mint (2010) both argue that the social construction of jealousy maintains women's emotional and financial dependence on men, and Rosa (1994) adds that monogamous relationships separate women from friendships, networks and communities through which they might engage in political activism and challenge these problematic discourses (see Barker & Ritchie, 2007, for further details). In this way such arguments relate to a wider Foucauldian perspective whereby self-monitoring and scrutiny of the couple relationship keeps people from wider critical engagement with society.

Jackson and Scott (2004) join the above authors in proposing consensual non-monogamy as an alternative to monogamy whereby people, particularly women, would be less likely to become dependent, isolated and detached from their communities. Non-monogamies are presented as potentially liberating, cooperative and empowering alternatives to the ownership, possession, and even violence which is located within traditional monogamy (Mint, 2010). Similar themes run through Kipnis' (2003) polemic, *Against Love*, although

this recognises the drawbacks and limitations of coupledness for people regardless of gender, critiquing the conformity, imposed limits and work ethic involved in modern coupledness and domesticity, and the wider power structures these serve. Lehr (1999) extends this critique to the nuclear family model, which is closely linked to the monogamous couple (an issue we will return to later when we consider research on poly-families).

There have also been a number of more recent critiques of monogamy notably informed by anarchist politics, queer theory and post-structuralism, which offer more radical challenges to concepts of static, singular selves and relationships, the prioritising of certain forms of love and intimacy, and the potential for possession and ownership of others. We will consider these in greater depth towards the end of the paper, since they suggest a rather different model of non-monogamies than that which has emerged to date.

Celebrating and critiquing non-monogamies

The academic work on consensual non-monogamies has tended to be rather polarised in the sense that it reads as overwhelmingly celebratory, or critical, of the non-monogamies which it considers. In the former category would be the feminist and/or Marxist papers mentioned above (e.g. Robinson, 1997; Jackson & Scott, 2004) which put non-monogamies forward as potentially radical ways of managing relationships. Also, most of the 'self-help' style texts on polyamory suggest that it is a superior way of relating in that it enables and requires more personal autonomy, self-awareness and responsibility, and more mutuality, equality and negotiation within relationships (e.g. Anapol, 1997; Easton & Hardy, 2009). And several articles on jealousy have celebrated ways in which non-monogamous people have constructed alternatives to the conventional understandings of, and reactions to, such emotions (e.g. Ritchie & Barker, 2006; de Visser & McDonald, 2007; Mint, 2010).

In addition some authors on lesbian, gay and bisexual non-monogamies have presented these as liberating and empowering. In *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader*, Munson and Stelbom (1999) take a similar stance to the other feminist authors above, arguing that

lesbians should embrace polyamory due to the patriarchal and heteronormative dynamics inherent in monogamous relationships. Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks (2004) argue that 'same-sex' relationships allowed their lesbian and gay participants the freedom needed to construct their relationships 'from scratch' (p.168) since, due to their place outside heteronormativity, they were already having to question societal rules around relating. This generally enabled them to be creative, free and reflexive, building egalitarian and democratic families of choice and personal networks through an ethics of trust and negotiation. Similar themes run through Ringer's (2001) consideration of gay open relationships which he locates in gay-positive and celebratory ideologies, where cultures of nurturing, non-competitive non-masculinity and/or celebratory pride in promiscuity are embraced. Some authors on bisexuality and trans (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Richards, 2010) also point to the potential of non-monogamous relationships to transcend dichotomies of sexuality and gender through enabling the same person to relate to differently gendered people in differently gendered ways.

De Visser & McDonald (2007) and Phillips (2010) offer similarly celebratory stories of swinging. This is quite unusual since swinging is often regarded as the form of consensual non-monogamy which is most heteronormative and apolitical, and remains closest to conventional coupledness. However, de Visser and McDonald (2007) point out the creative and innovative ways in which swinging couples manage jealousy (implicitly critiquing the dominant discourse that it is inevitable and the 'fault' of the objects of jealousy, Mint, 2010). Phillips (2010) goes further to argue that swinging raises fundamental challenges to the power dynamics inherent in heteronormativity through her examination of Gould's (1999) journalistic account of interviews with swingers. She presents sexual autonomy as potentially explicitly political and swinging as expanding the possibilities of what may be recognised as love or commitment.

In recent years, however, other authors have questioned the feminist, Marxist, queer and liberatory claims which have been made about non-monogamies, often pointing out the largely apolitical motivations given by people involved in such relationships themselves (e.g. Jamieson, 2004; Wilkinson, 2010). This raises the question of whether people need

to be *aware* that they are doing something radical and challenging to the dominant ideology in order to be understood as participating in radical ways of living. However, the radicalness of what is being accomplished has also been called into question. Authors from more critical perspectives have focused on demonstrating the normative discourses prevalent in non-monogamous text and talk (e.g. Noël, 2006; Willey, 2010) and the 'monogamous-style' of relating prevalent in consensually non-monogamous relationships (e.g. Finn & Malson, 2008).

Including, and since, the special issue of this journal (Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse, 2006) there has been a body of research which has analysed and strongly challenged polyamory 'self-help' texts. Such research argues that these books set up new regimes of normativity, endorsing individualism at the expense of critiquing structural power relations around race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality. They also claim that the books put forward a universalising model which ties easily with an imperialist narrative of the West as sexually and emotionally advanced and superior. Petrella (2007) focuses on the call, in such self-help texts, for self-awareness and honest communication, pointing out that this fails to appreciate the ways in which emotions and desires are socially constructed within power relations. She argues that the texts are naïve in suggesting that oppressive socialisation is something that can easily be overthrown once it is understood.

Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse (2006) point out the neglect, in polyamory texts, of intersectionality. They argue that polyamory is proposed as a universal model which could apply equally to people regardless of class, race, culture, religion, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, gender and experience of oppression. Noël's (2006) analysis of such texts agrees that they assume an audience of white, middle-class, able-bodied, educated, American people and fail to appreciate systemic intersecting oppressions in a rather simplistic identity-politics agenda. Rambukkana (2010) supports this in his analysis of the differential treatment of white polyamorists and culturally polygamous immigrants in Canada. Willey (2006, 2010) challenges the ways in which many polyamorous texts present racialised sexual others (such as Anapol's, 1997, inhabitants of 'old Hawaii') as ideals to aspire to, perpetuating essentialist notions of race and sexuality which maintain,

rather than deconstruct, mononormativity. She also points out the frequent slippage between what is 'natural' and what is 'right' highlighted previously (Willey, 2010). Like many texts reproducing mononormativity (e.g. Gray, 2002; Fein & Schneider, 2007), polyamorous texts also often suggest that behaviours which can be evidenced as a 'natural' part of human/animal behaviour are somehow morally superior.

Finn and Malson's (2008) critique draws on interview data rather than self help texts. They focus on the 'dyadic containment' which they found to be involved in the consensually non-monogamous relationships they examined, arguing that these relationships operated within a liberal humanist framework involving monogamous style regulation of time, energy and resources in ways which reinforced the primacy of the couple. Work was still done to maintain the safety, security and specialness of the private, inner domain of the relationship against perceived dangers from outside. Wilkinson (2010) similarly challenges polyamory for failing to live up to its radical potentials, pointing out the way in which it perpetuates notions that romantic love is all important (as opposed to friendship or sex-focused relationships) and reinforces other problematic hierarchies between private/public and inside/outside, in ways that are far from the queer and feminist visions of open communities and networks mentioned previously. She highlights a kind of polynormativity which has emerged analogous to the homonormativity identified by Warner (1999) and others, which reify dominant and 'damaging hierarchies of respectability' (Warner, 1999, p.74). Other authors have suggested, on the basis of interviews with polyamorous people, that such relationships have failed to rework gender dynamics in any meaningful or radical way (Sheff, 2006) and often perpetuate problematic post-feminist ideas that gender equality has been achieved and that women and men enter such relationships on an equal footing (Klesse, 2005; 2010).

Whilst these critiques are clearly valuable and point to real absences and exclusions within non-monogamy texts and practices, there are dangers inherent in a pendulum swing from largely celebratory to largely critical accounts. On a societal level, consensual non-monogamies continue to be demonised, pathologised, marginalised and subject to the

social regulation of ridicule (Barker, 2003), with no legal protections for people involved (for example, around child-care or relationship status). It is important to be cautious when critiquing and deconstructing identities and practices which occupy such a precarious position and have not yet reached any point of recognition or rights (whilst maintaining caution over the kinds of normalisation often used as a basis for these) (Barker & Landridge, 2009). People engaging in open-nonmonogamy remain abject sexual citizens, often unable to claim the relationship rights gained by monogamous couples and remain a continuing stranger in our midst (Phelan, 2001). Also, as Willey (2010) acknowledges, those of us working in these areas owe a debt of gratitude to the 'pioneering poly women' (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2004) who wrote the much-criticised 'self-help' texts. It seems important that we engage with such writers in constructive and respectful dialogue rather than damning criticism, especially given that they continue to publish the most widely read and accessible texts on this subject. Hierarchies of academic status and exclusionary language come into play here too (hooks, 1994), which are perhaps just as problematic as some of the privileges mentioned by the critics themselves and make it difficult for the activist-writers of many such texts to readily engage with the scholars who are writing about them (although see Barker, 2005b and Easton, 2010 for examples of such engagement).

Finally, many authors are beginning to recognise the limitations of strongly celebratory *or* critical analyses in capturing the complexities of non-monogamous discourse and practice. For example, Klesse's (2007) extensive study of British polyamorous people found that they drew on multiple overlapping discourses in their talk, some of which perpetuated arguably problematic hierarchies of love and sex, and worked to protect an isolated dyad, whilst others broke down such distinctions and were often explicitly sex-radical and political. Klesse (2006) concludes that polyamory is 'positioned ambiguously in the conjuncture of diverse normative and counter-normative discourses on sex and relationships' (p.579). Similarly, whilst written in the context of a broadly celebratory piece, Barker (2005a) reports that her polyamorous participants strategically employed discourses of essentialism and/or choice, and similarity and/or difference to monogamy to support various citizenship-style claims.

Such insights caution against interpreting interview data or written texts outside the context in which they are produced and remind us to attend to the actions being achieved within talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It is likely that there are multiple understandings and practices in play in consensually non-monogamous relationships, and that the same group of people (polyamorous, swinger, etc.), and even the same individual, will employ conflicting discourses and tell different stories at different points as they navigate the kinds of tensions we have outlined and work to accomplish different aims. The next section of the paper will explore, in greater depth, some of the key themes emerging from research on such groups, attending to both the consistencies *and* diversities within and between groups, relationships and individuals.

Themes in non-monogamy research

Most of the empirical research, thus far, on consensual non-monogamies has employed face-to-face interview, or occasionally survey, methods to investigate how non-monogamous people of various kinds present their relationships. Most such research has focused on one 'type' of non-monogamy - swinging, polyamory, *or* gay open relationships – rather than including different types (although some have examined different kinds of monogamous/non-monogamous relationships together, e.g. Adam, 2006; Finn, 2005; Heckert, 2005; Frank & de Lameter, 2010). The focus in research on 'same-sex' relationships has been on gay men (e.g. Worth, Reid & McMillan, 2002; LaSala, 2004, 2005; Adam, 2006) because non-monogamies have traditionally been more common in gay male than lesbian communities (despite occasional arguments that non-monogamy is a more lesbian/feminist style of relating, West, 1996; Munson & Stelboun, 1999). For example, in the 1980s Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that 65% of American gay male couples had some kind of non-monogamous arrangement, compared to 29% of lesbian couples (only just over the 15-28% they estimated for heterosexual couples). Blumstein and Schwartz do not report bisexual figures, but it seems from the research thus far that polyamorous people are predominantly bisexual (almost all those in Barker's, 2005a, survey and 51% and 54% respectively in Weber's, 2002, and Wosick-Correa's, 2010, surveys) whereas swingers are predominantly heterosexual-defining, with

bisexuality and bi-curiosity amongst a fair number of the female swingers but far fewer of the men (McDonald, 2010).

One common theme in all such research, regardless of cohort, is the comparison between consensually non-monogamous practices and monogamy and/or infidelity. This is a more apparent theme amongst swingers and polyamorous participants than amongst gay men, perhaps due to non-monogamy being the take-for-granted mode of relating in much gay culture, however, all groups make such comparisons. Mostly, these involve positioning consensual non-monogamy as superior to the sneakiness and potential destructiveness of secret infidelities engaged in by many who identify as monogamous (e.g. Phillips, 2010; Ritchie, 2010). In addition, consensual non-monogamy is frequently presented as superior to monogamy in terms of the freedoms involved and the levels of mutual consideration and ethical, open communication (e.g. Ho, 2006). One gay man in Worth, Reid & McMillan's (2002) study for example states that: 'it's ideological crap – I have no qualms whatsoever that the ideal of monogamy is that it's a self-imposed torture on your mind for the rest of your relationship and why the hell do that?' (p.245), whilst one of Barker's (2005a) participants presented non-monogamy as 'much simpler than Western conventional monogamy...[which] is all very contradictory and cruel' (p.81), explicitly contradicting the popular criticism of non-monogamy as excessively complicated. However, at times non-monogamy is also positioned as 'not that different' to monogamy in order to emphasise the normality or everydayness of it; for example some of Barker's (2005a) participants reported that it was 'about the same things: fun, friendship, sex' or 'just a family' (p.82).

Another common theme in research is the distancing of forms of non-monogamy from one another, particularly swinging and polyamory. Perhaps the focus is on these because swinging and polyamory are viewed as the two consensually non-monogamous options for heterosexual people, and there is less likelihood of such people to compare themselves against gay non-monogamy. This distinction has become so common-place that it is referred to humorously within swinging and polyamorous communities. One online web comic has the author logging on to a polyamorous discussion list and finding

1,320 messages, at which point she turns to a partner and says 'you posted "swingers ain't poly" again didn't you?' (Jacob, 2009). Frank & de Lamater's (2010) research found that both swingers and polyamorous people were quick to disown each other, with polyamorists criticising the supposed swinger focus on recreational sex, and the stereotypically gendered displays involved, whilst swingers criticise these 'conservative' attitudes towards sex of poly people, and the idea of love bonds beyond the couple. Ritchie (2010) found that news reports on polyamory quoted interviewees presenting polyamory as more meaningful than swinging and being based on love, rather than (casual) sex. Media presentations drew on class-based stereotypes of swinging as 'suburban sex parties'. However, other polyamorous people position polyamory within a more sex-positive, sex-radical discourse (see Klesse, 2006) in a way which troubles such sex/love binaries.

Following from this, some research has focused in detail on the kinds of arrangement involved within different forms of non-monogamy. Overall there seems to be more variety under the broad umbrella of 'polyamory' than within swinging or gay non-monogamy. In the latter two, arrangements are almost exclusively based around an 'emotionally exclusive' dyadic couple who may engage in sexual pursuits with other singles or couples together, separately, or both (McDonald, 2010; Phillips, 2010; Bonello, 2009; Adam, 2006; Hickson, Davies, Hunt, Weatherburn, McManus, & Coxon, 1994). As we will see shortly, much of the talk in interviews with these participants concerns how they maintain the safety and security of the couple within such arrangements. It is important to note here, however, that the sample limitations in such studies may result in a partial picture of the relational forms being practised, particularly amongst gay men, with the potential for authors to inadvertently re-produce assumptions about the kinds of relationships being adopted (Bonello, 2009). Whilst there appears to be limited uptake of a polyamorous story amongst gay men, for instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that gay men may be participating in similarly complex and varied relationship forms in greater numbers than the extant literature suggests.

In terms of polyamory, Labriola (2003) sets out various, quite different, models

including primary/secondary models whereby one partnership is regarded as the main relationship and others ancillary, triads and quads where three or four people make up the main unit, V-structures where one person is equally involved with two others, who are not themselves involved, and broader poly webs and families. These also vary in terms of whether a main unit is exclusive in some way (as in polyfidelity) or open. Some survey studies investigated the frequencies of different arrangements amongst their participants. For example, Wosick-Correa (2010) found that a third of her participants reported having each of two, three and four partners. Among Barker's (2005a) cohort, a third reported a primary/secondary relationship, another third some form of V-structure (with two or more partners), a sixth were in a triad or quad, and a smaller number identified as single or in a formalised extended or line family⁵. Such survey results highlight the importance of reflecting this diversity when presenting research on polyamory. If small-scale interview studies are carried out they need to either reflect the diversity of ways of being polyamorous or make explicit that they are focusing on people in a particular model (e.g. Jamieson's, 2004, participants were all in the primary/secondary model). Some studies also report longevity of relationships: Wosick-Correa (2010) found that a third of her polyamorous participants had been together over 10 years and between 10-20% each of under a year, one to three, three to five and five to nine years.

A great deal of the research on non-monogamies concentrates on the rules, contracts and boundaries employed by non-monogamous people in order to manage their relationships. Generally the aim of such arrangements is to ensure the stability and security of the relationships and to minimise painful emotions, notably jealousy. Again there are broad differences between the arrangements employed by swingers and those in gay open relationships, compared to polyamorous participants, although there is also some degree of overlap. Particularly common amongst gay men and swingers is employing distinctions between love and sex. Partners are often allowed to be sexual outside their main relationship but strategies are employed in an attempt to prevent emotional bonds from forming outside the primary relationship. Examples include not having sex in the

⁵ In line families the family unit continues to add new partners over time to keep the family in existence. The concept comes from fictional depictions such as Heinlein's (1961) *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Saxey, 2010)

mutual home, not sleeping over, not seeing other people more than once, or constructing the other person as a plaything (Adam, 2006; Bonello, 2009; LaSala, 2004; Finn, 2005; Visser & McDonald, 2007). Some keep certain forms of sex (e.g. genital sex, anal sex) sacred to the couple. Some prefer to keep any extra-dyadic sex separate from the couple (e.g. Finn, 2005) and employ 'don't ask, don't tell' policies (e.g. Worth, Ried & McMillan, 2002), whilst others, particularly amongst swingers, keep extra-dyadic sex 'safe' by sharing details with each other and/or being present. Some swingers and gay couples agree to only have sex with others together, as in the 'three-way or no way' arrangements reported by some of Adam's (2006) participants (see Stenner, in prep, for a theoretical exploration of the disturbing/stabilising potential of a 'third', drawing upon Finn's, 2005, data). Such rules and contracts may be explicitly negotiated, even written down, or more of a work in progress which only comes to light when boundaries are crossed.

Wosick-Correa (2010) reports on the agreements and arrangements within a large cohort of polyamorous people. She found that some drew similar lines around different kinds of activities which were, or were not, permissible. Spending the night, 'fluid-bonding'⁶, vaginal and anal penetration were some of the most restricted activities with 10-20% of people disallowing each of these. However, as with Finn's (2010) research, many participants emphasised a 'freedom-from-contract' and explicitly resisted specific rules or prescribed behaviours. Focus was instead shifted onto the importance of self-awareness and open communication to ensure and display trust, commitment and stability of the relationship. However, as in Keener (2004) and Cooks' (2005) research, it was deemed important by most to demonstrate some form of 'specialness' of the relationship. This may be done by keeping certain activities, locations or times sacred within a specific couple (or triad, quad or family). Some report this being particularly important for existing relationships during 'new relationship energy', which is when a new partner has come on the scene, analogous to the notion of the 'honeymoon period' (Iantaffi, 2010).

In the earlier part of the past decade research generally focused on couples in open or multiple relationships and how they managed, and presented, themselves. Very little

6 Engaging in penetration without using condoms.

research investigated consensually non-monogamous people in the context of their families. Indeed, Jamieson (2004) and others suggested that relationships would probably default to monogamy if and when people considered having children, rather problematically constructing non-monogamy as a 'leisure pursuit' (p.53). Since then the study of non-monogamous (almost overwhelmingly polyamorous) people with children has become a burgeoning area of research (Iantaffi, 2006), pioneered by Pallotta-Chiarolli's studies in Australia (2002, 2010) and developed by Sheff in the United States (2010). Sheff's research highlights the benefits and pitfalls of poly-parenting as experienced by her participants. Benefits included the extra emotional and practical resources of having multiple parents and role-models who emphasise open communication, whilst drawbacks included the problems of attachment following breakup (in common with many monogamous parents), and stigma due to being polyamorous. This theme is taken up by Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010) in her examination of different strategies used by poly parents with kids in school (passing as monogamous, distinguishing a school/home border, and deliberating 'polluting' mononormativity). Riggs (2010) has also explored parenting in a polyamorous context, putting forward polyamorous critiques of hierarchies and the concept of 'owning' others (adults or children), and emphasises on openness, as good models for foster families.

Another more recent development has been a proliferation of research addressing the cross-over between consensual non-monogamies and various other identities/communities, as opposed to earlier research where consensual non-monogamy itself was the whole focus. Several authors have explored the commonly observed link between polyamory and bisexuality (e.g. Rust, 1996; McLean, 2004; Anderlini-Onofrio, 2004). In addition, several authors have explored the connection between kink/BDSM communities and polyamory, suggesting that they share similar values of consensuality, communication, and safety, as well as similar transgressions of standard ways of relating (Sheff 2005, 2006, forthcoming, 2010; Wosick-Correa, 2010; Bauer, 2010). There have been investigations of non-monogamies in relation to trans (Richards, 2010) and asexuality (Scherrer, 2010): both areas where higher numbers of people seem to embrace non-monogamous relationship forms. Also, explorations have been made of the

intersections between polyamory particularly and goth, geek and pagan communities (Wilkins, 2004; Aviram, 2010), and of the possibilities and problems related to disability in a non-monogamous context (Iantaffi, 2010).

Future directions for non-monogamies theory and research

As we have already seen, there has been a recent proliferation of research on non-monogamies from disciplines across and beyond the social sciences, as well as moves towards researching diverse family forms (as well as relationships) and links between non-monogamies and other identities, communities and practices. Another current trend in the research, following the trajectory of critiques of mononormativity and polynormativity, has been a turn towards theoretical work exploring what more explicitly non-normative relationships might look like (e.g. Wilkinson, 2010; Heckert, 2010; Finn, 2010). Such work primarily draws on poststructuralism and queer theory to trouble and collapse hierarchical dichotomies, such as those outlined above, between different forms of non-monogamy, love and sex, love and friendship, inside (the relationship) and outside, private and public.

This can be taken a step further to question whether the distinction between monogamy and non-monogamy is even useful or meaningful. Frank and deLamater's (2010) anthropological research supports our own anecdotal observations as relationship therapists that the kinds of boundary negotiations described above are happening within monogamous, as well as explicitly non-monogamous, relationships. It seems that people in relationships are generally concerned with where lines are drawn on continua of sexual and emotional exclusivity⁷. For example, is it acceptable to fantasise about another person, to engage in online porn/sex, to snog someone of the 'same sex' in a nightclub, to have a one night stand a conference? Can one have an 'opposite-sex' friendship, be friends with an ex, or stay up all night talking to someone other than a partner? Some who self-define as monogamous may have looser boundaries and draw their lines further up the scales than some of those who self-define as non-monogamous. McDonald (2010)

⁷ Clearly there are also problems with the dichotomous sexual/emotional split here, but research suggests that this remains a quite omnipresent distinction within monogamies and non-monogamies alike.

suggest that, for swingers, 'monogamy and non-monogamy feed off each other and are inextricably linked' (p.72), and Finn (2010) reports 'clear convergences between monogamous and non-monogamous understandings of commitment' (p.235). Willey (2006) uses the phrase 'non/monogamy' in her work to frame monogamy and non-monogamy as 'a linked, intimate system rather than discrete binary opposites' (as cited in Rambukkana, 2010, p.242). This questioning of divisions relates to Sedgwick's (1990) distinction between minoritising and universalising gay discourses. Potentially there is more to be gained (politically and theoretically) from a non-monogamy discourse which positions these divisions and boundaries as relevant to all, across the spectrum of relationships (universalising), rather than one which sees them as an issue of active importance for only a small, relatively fixed, self-defining, non-monogamous minority (minoritising) (see Hutchins, 1998, for an early exploration of this idea in relation to polyamory). Particularly interesting groups to study from this perspective would be those who trouble the kinds of clear distinctions made previously (e.g. polyamorous gay men, Stacey, 2005, those in mixed monogamous/non-monogamous relationships, Heckert, 2005, and those who resist such categories altogether).

Along with queer theory and post-structuralism, new theoretical perspectives also draw on anarchist, Buddhist and existentialist philosophies to reimagine relationships. In particular these approaches view relationships as fluid rather than fixed, and as ever-changing and in a constant state of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1999). Such perspectives also move away from concepts of static selves, who could 'own' and articulate one clear truth of themselves to others, towards multiple subjectivities which may experience themselves and others in diverse ways (Ho, 2006; Finn, 2010; Heckert, 2010). They also shift the focus from multiple *lovers* to multiple *loves*. Lest this theoretical move seem too abstract, Wilkinson (2010) and Heckert (2010) ground it in a focus on pragmatic ethics of relationships which would involve dismantling hierarchies of romantic love over other forms, which Wilkinson lists as: 'familial love, love for friends, neighbours, community, or love of the planet' (p. 253) and to which Heckert adds self-love, drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of what such 'care of the self' might involve (Foucault, 1986). Heckert (forthcoming, 2010) and Barker (2009) further

explicate how such ethics might work in relationship practice, focusing on listening, care, appreciation of the ever-shifting and changing nature of relationships, a commitment to flexible 'boundaries' over rigid 'borders' coupled with an understanding that just because one can go anywhere, one does not have to go everywhere (Heckert, 2010, p.260). Such academic/activist writings are echoed by a number of more explicitly activist zines and websites currently emerging (e.g. Ovis, 2009; Nordgren, 2009), particularly the concept of 'relationship anarchy'⁸, which is becoming increasingly popular in Sweden especially (Levitte, 2009).

In terms of research in this area, we argue for research to focus as much on diversity of practices and experiences as it does on consistency (within a particularly group for example), and to be aware of the multiple identities and structures under the broad umbrella of non-monogamies (or even polyamories, swinging or gay open relationships). We have also highlighted reasons to be cautious of presenting an exclusively celebratory and/or critical perspective, and of generalising beyond the often relatively small groups of people studied. As researchers and writers, we need to be aware of the potential for violence in the act of representation because 'practices of telling people who they are and what they want erect a barrier between them and who (or what) they can create themselves to be' (May, 1994, p.131). For these reasons we may explicitly engage in research methodologies and philosophies which recognise multiplicities of meaning, as well as ensuring that our research is reflexive, cautious and considerate of issues of accountability to participants, and of how it may be read by the wider world (Barker, 2006). Particularly, we would suggest that research engages with relevant communities during the research process in order to avoid over-research on certain topics and populations, and to gain participant feedback on research findings prior to publication. Many working in this area come from an explicitly insider/outsider position (Ritchie & Barker, 2006) but of course this does not preclude them from privileging some accounts over others or failing to consider the full implications of their research (see Barker & Langdridge, 2009). We might engage more directly in the kinds of discussions that non-

⁸ A version of non-monogamy which explicitly emphasises non-possession of others, independence, 'demandlessness', and questioning normative societal discourses.

monogamous people are having, online or at community events, (see Ritchie & Barker, 2006; Scherrer, 2010; and Richards, 2010, use of websites, blogs and online surveys). We might also want to employ methodologies which prompt a more experiential engagement from participants such as visual methods or memory work, since these can short-circuit some of the stock representations participants give of their relationships and enable a more embodied, complex, picture to emerge (see Bowes-Catton, Barker & Richards, 2009).

In terms of content, as mentioned, existing work focuses primarily on contracts and rules in non-monogamous relationships and critical analyses of non-monogamous 'self-help' texts. Many areas remain under-researched. Particularly, there is very little dialogue between the social scientific work we have reviewed and research on the ways in which consensually non-monogamous relationships operate outside of Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States. With the significant exception of Ho's (2006) analysis of people with multiple partners in Hong Kong, the vast majority of research participants are white Westerners (Sheff, forthcoming 2010). Similarly there is little work on different cultural and religious groups within the aforementioned countries despite anecdotal evidence, for example, of groups of British Muslim women exploring the potentials of primary/secondary models in relation to pursuing both family and career (Wajid, personal communication). Montenegro's (2010) exploration of non-monogamy among ex-Mormons is a notable exception to this. Finally, on this point, following from the critiques referred to earlier, it is vital that future studies engage fully with the intersections around culture, class and race in their participants (see Sheff, forthcoming 2010, for a thorough consideration of this).

Further attention could also be paid to some of the less-researched forms of non-monogamy. Again, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a vast industry of nominally heterosexual, monogamous couples meeting singles and/or couples online and arranging one-off sex. However such practices have barely been researched apart from Bell's (2006) preliminary writings on the related practice of 'dogging'. There has been little thus far on the experiences of children from polyamorous families (see Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010;

Sheff, 2010) or about the forms of non-monogamy emerging (and common) amongst young people (Lavie-Ajayi, Jones & Russel, 2010), and how identities and practices of younger generations relate to those reflected in current research or in the previous writings of the 1960s and 70s, which Rubin (2001) discusses. As this field of study increases it seems important not to fall into some of the either/or dichotomies which have plagued queer theory of late, such as the positioning of homonormative campaigns for marital rights and child care in opposition to the 'antisocial turn' towards the embracing of stigmatizing stereotypes (Downing & Gillet, forthcoming, 2010). Clearly this is a danger because similar tensions between identity politics and queer activism, as well as normativity and transgression, operate within non-monogamous and gay/queer communities.

Finally, recent authors have playfully suggested applying a polyamorous approach to theories themselves rather than adhering rigidly to one particularly theoretical or political stance (Shannon & Willis, forthcoming 2010). One might have a primary relationship with poststructuralism, secondary relationships with existentialism and socialist feminism, occasional brief but satisfying encounters with anarchism, and the odd secretive fumble with Rogerian humanism, for example. Such a conceptualisation may well prove invaluable when trying to engage with the various theoretical approaches which have been applied to non-monogamies and offer new opportunities for advancing knowledge on this topic.

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