

Suspended Transitions and Affective Orderings: From troubled Monogamy to Liminal  
Polyamory

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Abstract

Monogamy is the norm for romantic and intimate relationships in contemporary western societies. Having other sexual and affective interactions alongside a monogamous relationship is acknowledged and informally accepted. Instead of a unilateral and/or covert non-monogamy, polyamory promises a ‘consensual, ethical, and responsible non-monogamy’. The personal transformation of normative cultural frameworks is exemplary of the experience of ‘becoming polyamorous’. This paper explores such occasions using Victor Turner’s notion of liminality in order to depict the phenomenon of ‘liminal hotspots’. Focussing on a specific and exemplary case illustrating the first stages of a polyamorous relationship, the paper explores the reordering of social formations. In this case, ‘becoming polyamorous’ is expressed through a process of suspended transition where categories can be described as both/and monogamous/polyamorous and neither/nor monogamous/polyamorous. An alternative reading would move from the metaphor of ‘suspended transition’ to the notion of ‘monogamous/polyamorous orderings’ that are actualised in specific occasions.

*Keywords:* polyamory, monogamy, liminality, liminal hotspot, affect, affective ordering.

### **Polyamory and ‘Affective Orderings’**

*The problem was in me. Even though I was clear that I was in love with my wife, even though she knew I wanted to be with her all my life, I could not stop thinking about the other person, to feel that something was missing, to see her and feel alive, complete. I am aware that I am in love with her too. I have said that the problem was in me, because I felt terrible. I felt I was betraying my wife for falling in love with someone else. I was confused and did not understand how I could have feelings for two people at once. My traditional monogamous schema said that I did not really love my wife if I had feelings for my ex-lover. It was at that time, while being anxious, that I started to look for information on polyamory. (John on an online forum, November 2011)*

Polyamory refers to alternative forms of relationships characterised as consensual, ethical and responsible non-monogamy (Lano & Parry, 1995). Being openly involved in polyamorous relationships is often associated with negative stereotypes such as ‘untrustworthy partners and dysfunctional parents’ (Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse, 2006). Non-monogamous relationships are considered too complicated to contemplate and there is not much legal recognition for people involved in polyamorous relationships (Barker, 2013). Although monogamy constitutes the social and cultural norm for romantic and intimate relationships in contemporary western societies it is common to have non-consensual and covert non-monogamy. Non-monogamy was central to the sexual liberationist movement and the commune movements of the 60s and 70s (Abrams & McCulloch, 1976). Yet, it was only in the 2000s that this area received further academic interest (Rubin, 2001), and in 2004 consensual non-monogamy emerged as a topic of research (Duncombe et al., 2004). Recently, in Catalonia, polyamory has become a political banner for groups seeking legal recognition to alternative forms of family.

The opening excerpt illustrates the troubles derived from the transformation of personal intimacy in the late twentieth century (Bauman, 2003) and acknowledges the presence of a traditional form of intimacy ('My traditional monogamous schema'). It highlights forms of involvement that follow structured social patterns in long-term intimate relationships within institutionalised family relations, defined roles and clear social conventions. Considering 'ordering as an ongoing precarious achievement through which affect is continually (re)contextualized' (Anderson, 2014, p. 164), monogamy could be understood as a specific 'ordering' of material (i.e., housing, economy...) and semiotic elements (i.e., meanings associated with the relationships, expectations...) constituting a network with 'emergent' properties (i.e., subjective, affective and emotional states). This is an affective ordering based on mutual togetherness and defined emotional patterns performed in ritualised events (such as family gatherings, celebrations...).

Monogamy and polyamory are two extremes within a spectrum of emergent orderings all of which subvert established norms and diversify the landscape of available patterns of intimate relationships. Co-habitation is one example of an emergent affective ordering that has undermined the traditional norm of romantic love and marriage, and has now become widely accepted in many western countries. In this context, Leslie and Morgan have pointed out that 'the three newer discourses of compatibility, intimacy and soulmates privilege communication, negotiation, mutual support and cooperative learning over euphoric feelings of being "in love" and the individualistic pursuit of pleasure, in order to achieve profound life, or "soul" tasks' (Leslie & Morgan, 2011, p. 20). In different ways, cohabitation and polyamory are exemplary of recent forms of affective orderings that are based on mutual consensus

and where sexuality is disconnected from reproduction, constituting a communicative code, a medium of self-realisation and expression of intimacy (Giddens, 1992).

Insomuch as cohabitation and polyamory move to the social and institutional arena, the role of children, patchwork families and other forms of partnership are open for public debate and political hopes. While cohabitation was originally considered a transitional period towards a long-term relationship commitment that would be sealed by marriage, fluid and transitional relationships have progressively become ends in themselves without defined normative prescriptions. Yet, polyamory also questions established narratives of romantic love, as it opens up the exclusivity of relationships that would normally be limited to a single partner. .

It could be argued that any relationship is in continuous transformation. Nevertheless, polyamory so far lacks a clear interactional framework and it faces constant social examination and disapproval. Practicing polyamory under contemporary conditions inevitably engenders a number of intense and troubled emotional situations. Engaging in such relationships leaves participants adrift with regard to social responsibilities and demands, as there are no established frameworks to guide their interactions. For this reason, participants in polyamorous relationships develop multiple and often divergent narratives of the self, and relational commitments are open to renegotiation as there is not a clear predefined and detailed model. This is particularly relevant when children are involved, as where the defined role of parents might be considered unstable in cohabitation, positions grow particularly uncertain in polyamorous relationships. More importantly, in comparison with other forms of relationships, polyamory poses a challenge to common relational expectations, as it redefines one of the basic principles in current narratives of 'romantic love':

exclusivity. The norm of exclusivity would still be considered to lie at the heart of common marriage and cohabitation arrangements.

, This paper explores the difficulties of entering into a polyamorous relationship. The example considered in this article comes from a six-year ethnographic research project among the Catalonian polyamorous group (REFERENCE PLEASE – ENCISO?PUJOL? who did this work?). Just as described in other research (Noël, 2006), the polyamory community in Catalonia is white, middle-class, able-bodied and educated. Along with the field notes and extracts of virtual interactions, the empirical material includes interviews, narratives and reflections from polyamorous workshops and a virtual ethnography of social networks (Facebook, forums and the polyamorous email list). The polyamorous email list started on July 2004 with about 1,148 Spanish speakers, mainly from Spain, some from Latin America and a few from not-Spanish speaking countries. The most common topics in the list include welcoming, informal and formal meetings, theoretical and practical discussions mainly about gender, relationships, alternative sexual practices, alternative pornography and the presentation and discussion of personal issues. Within this last category we have selected an email conversation that took place in the period from the end of October 2011 to January 2012 that illustrates a common paradoxical dynamic in the experience of polyamorous relationships, i.e. not finding a solution for one's personal situation in either the monogamous or polyamorous ordering. We selected the excerpts that hint at pivotal occasions where the personal affective orderings, and the experience of these orderings, are in flux. The excerpts depict the reported lived experience of a man from central Spain, as he meanders amongst monogamous and polyamorous orderings. The name 'John' is a pseudonym. Unless otherwise stated, the excerpts originate from an email

exchange on November 2011.

### **Troubled Orderings**

‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial’ (Turner, 1977, p. 95).

Polyamorous relationships develop in the context of monogamous relationships (Klesse, 2012). Starting a polyamorous relationship involves the movement from a context with clear social norms to a sphere of loose and indeterminate arrangements. John’s highly emotional narrative illustrates his ‘betwixt and between’ position when moving from a fractured monogamy to a suspended/not-yet-there polyamorous ordering. The narrative starts by stating his paradoxical experience of the monogamous framework, when feeling romantic love for two women at the same time.

*My name is John. I'm from [...]. I'm married to an amazing woman, and we have a monogamous relationship. We have [...] children. About one year ago, I started feeling attracted to a married woman with children. We were both aware that our ‘official’ relationships had deteriorated, or were in the process of deteriorating.*

By defining the relationship as ‘monogamous’, John is contextualising the relation within a frame that delimits the potential complexities of his personal relationships via social conventions that regulate conduct and experience. He is stating, at the same time, the current difficulties of maintaining his monogamous relationship (‘deterioration’), a statement that could be read as a justification for a feeling that the ‘promise given in marriage’ has been betrayed. A set of emotions are presented to depict the contrast between the ‘official’ and the ‘unofficial’ relationship, a contrast that points to the semiotic and material orderings that frame his actions. The reference

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to social structure is present in the initial excerpt where he talks about ‘*My monogamous traditional schema*’, connecting the overall social- with his own subjective monogamous ordering.

We use the notion of ‘orderings’ to avoid metaphor of internal/external affects/spaces. Further, it allows the exploration of phenomena that reproduce fractally in different local/global, cultural, interpersonal and/or subjective occasions. These are oscillating semiotic-material orderings that produce intensities of affect which manifest in emotional discourses (Massumi, 2002). The following illustrates that John is caught in an ordering that occurs within the ‘life-crisis ritual’ (Gennep, 1960; Thomassen, 2012, p. 693; Turner, 1988) and is played out in the secrecy of the unfaithful relationship.

*We fell in love and started a relationship for 6 months. It did not work. We felt terrible about what we were doing, deceit, betrayal, guilt... In the end my wife found out.*

This excerpt expresses the depth of unsettled experience felt when breaking with the monogamous ordering, even though at this point it is still a private experience. The love affair, even while secret, is haunted by the normative expectations of the respective lovers’ ‘official relationship’. This is an ordering that ‘phantasmatically’ (Butler, 1993, pp. 93, 131) defines what is expected by the participants in the relationship and how their partners should feel about the situation. While highly personal and subjective, the whole situation is also institutionally framed via family roles and the social positions of these roles, stressing the manifold levels at which the monogamous ordering operates. John describes the situation, after his wife found out, in the following terms:

*We spent eight months of hell. Now, we begin to see the way out of the tunnel. At least we have some things clear: I know that I am madly in love with her [wife], and so is she [wife]; that I would never do anything to hurt our relationship again; and that we have to work hard at our relationship, because it was (and still is) very much damaged. But there is a will, love and enthusiasm to work things out. So far, nothing new. This is typical of many conventional monogamous relationships.*

By defining the situation as ‘nothing new’, John is narrating the monogamous norm: cheating, finding out, having a bad time and getting back together. This neatly reflects how such transgressions of the norm are implied within the monogamous ordering; they are what generates the emotions phantasmatically experienced by John when secretly cheating on his wife. ‘Having an affair’ is located within the normative realm, and ‘having a secret affair’ or ‘having an affair in another space (like on holidays)’ has progressively been accepted within monogamy, along with the related emotional states (e.g. doubt, guilt, confusion). In this sense ‘having an affair’ confirms the monogamous ordering, especially if it is a ‘secret affair’, as ‘hiding from the norm’ or ‘breaking the norm’ affirms the existence of such a norm. Nothing is more ‘monogamous’ than transgressing monogamy, and there is no greater ‘demonstration of love’ than returning and once more giving up all others for the loved one. When the affair has become public, the monogamous semantics suggests that there is ‘something wrong’ and a crisis needs to be managed (Brown, 2001). There is the danger that the relationship could break up and trust needs to be rebuilt. The situation usually concludes with the dishonest partner being forgiven and the monogamous vow of dyadic exclusivity being restored, in some cases with the help of psychotherapy (i.e., Glass, 2002). The monogamous affective ordering includes cultural practices and understandings of gender, relationships and family. It implicitly creates a divide



between the 'us' ('those who are part of the couple') and the 'other' (those outside and potentially threatening the couple). An ordering organised around the obligation/liability of following the monogamous social norm and the exclusion of the desire that the norm prohibits. Under the monogamous ordering, having another intimate relationship is often characterised in terms of 'guilt'. The norm that John breaks is twofold: firstly, he does not tell the partner something concerning the relationship; secondly, he has another relationship. The situation is often referred to as 'painful', expressing the personal and social evaluation of having transgressed limits of monogamy. John is constrained by the social norm of monogamy, with the discourses of monogamy, faithfulness and honesty. We could read his journey as a transition back to the same ordering ("monogamous" to "monogamous") via infidelity. So far the episode follows modern semantics of love based on individual fulfilment of love underpinned by personal desires and individual decisions (Luhmann, 2008), and these emotions work within a social system where these feelings are exclusive to exclusive dyadic relationships. At the same time, considering love as a form of communication constitutes a new semiotic[[?]] that conflicts with the norm of exclusivity, a new semantics[semiotic] that troubles the monogamous ordering.

### **Liminal Hotspot**

The excerpt at the beginning of this paper displays uneasiness, pain, confusion and disorientation and refers to a situation where John is loving his wife and at the same time has feelings for another woman. This description conforms with the experiential character of liminal situations. These are characterised by uncertainty, malleability and transformation of subjectivity, situations where the person is 'born again' (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 148). The emotions of 'love', 'fulfilment', 'happiness' or

'security' promised by the monogamous ordering have turned into 'deceit', 'betrayal', 'guilt', 'resignation' and 'frustration'. These emotions use the same monogamous [semiotics?] in a context where representations of love and relational expectations are in transformation (Illouz, 1998). In John's narrative, these emotions ('deceit', 'betrayal') are present despite the 'other' relationship not being present (in 'working things out' with his wife John has promised not to see his lover again). Herein this 'other relationship' becomes an underlying virtual presence, a virtual paradox that suspends his monogamous ordering, making it impossible: John cannot have a 'proper' relationship with his wife while having feelings for another person. But he cannot stop having feeling for the other person. John is confronted with a paradox as he has moved out of monogamy and struggles to return to the monogamous ordering. This is a suspended transition where he is unable to return to monogamy while still being in a monogamous relationship. John deparadoxifies (Luhmann, 1988) this uneasiness by searching for-, and then framing his experience under a new ordering, another semantics, a re-ordering of the suspended emotions (Stenner & Moreno, 2013, p. 243). This is how he describes his situation after finding information about polyamory:

*I began to understand things, to understand myself, to accept myself. I understood, in the end, that loving two people is possible. I have chosen to be honest with my wife and tell her how I feel. I must accept my feelings for the two. How much pain have I caused by my words, how bad have I felt... Yet I have been liberated. Finally I was able to feel truly faithful to myself and my feelings for the two people.*

Polyamory appears as the potential ordering that could accommodate an experience that is impossible within monogamy. By this movement he manages to

overcome the paradox of 'loving two people at the same time'. By telling his wife, John becomes, again, performatively entangled in a transition, but now it is one between the delineated frame of monogamy and the uncertain potential of polyamory, a transition summoning different layers of material and discursive orderings. In this sense, the act of telling a partner about the existence of another true love relationship, in itself destabilises the monogamous ordering, engendering a situation where different outcomes might be possible. The destabilisation accounts for the highly emotional and ceremonial nature of the act of 'telling your partner' in this context, as it signals the suspension of the foundational monogamous rule of love being exclusive to one partner, and the opening of a polyamorous ordering where 'true' love can be felt towards more than one person at a time. The experience of 'telling your partner' this, is the first step in 'coming out' (Williams & Prior, 2015). The excerpt, as do other experiences of 'coming out' (Corrigan et al., 2013), stresses the 'liberating' effect the polyamorous frame is experienced to have, as it allows John to deparadoxify his situation and opens up a possible future where 'he can love two people at the same time'. At the same time, he acknowledges the 'pain' inflicted on others by his move away from the established orderings. This is a reminder that, as John is aware, he has no control over the manner in which his transition towards a polyamorous ordering is experienced by either of his partners. Herein the situation is moving towards a 'public liminality' (Thomassen, 2012, p. 693; Turner, 1988) where the personal crisis shifts from the secrecy of the bedroom to the public and thus transformative arena of polyamory. In this sense polyamory resolves the anxieties generated by the dictate of 'romantic love' which governs traditional western intimate relationships and necessitates covert and thereby dishonest interactions where more than one partner is involved. Nevertheless, as outlined in the

introduction, the polyamorous ordering is far from being an established or safe solution

*Things are not simple. My wife is scared to death with the situation. She has asked me not to talk to my ex-lover. Obviously I'm satisfying her need although this is very painful. I am aware that my ex-lover is having a really bad time, and it hurts me not to be there for her. It hurts me to see she is having a bad time as much as it hurts me to see the pain that I cause, pain to my wife with all this.*

. While John has made a start, explained his position to his partners, and thus is in the process of 'becoming polyamorous', this excerpt highlights the undecidability of his current position. Rather than a smooth shift into polyamory he finds himself stuck in transit, and painfully so. John is also dangling in a neither/nor space - he neither has his monogamous relationship working properly nor can he enjoy his relationship polyamorously . By declaring his double love to his wife he has irrevocably left the monogamous haven but he finds there is no polyamorous shore to arrive at. Moreover, given the strength of feelings and confusion on all sides, John realises the situation is unlikely to resolve itself soon. f. There are different affective states associated with this configuration, for example, 'frustration'. Polyamory is a way forward for John's situation, deparadoxifying the 'troubled monogamy' ordering for him. Nevertheless, despite the fact that he has tried to explain polyamory to his wife and entice her into a new ordering, he has not managed to do this . This elicits an emotion that we could associate with 'resignation': despite polyamory being an alternative for John and the fact that he can define himself as polyamorous, he has to postpone living it. Polyamory is not an immediate solution but a potentiality. At the same time, by being able to accept that 'he is polyamorous', he can deparadoxify, for himself, being in love with two women at the same time and he can begin to imagine a potentially better future. John is

within an suspended emotional transition where affects from both orderings intermingle . Despite all the pain, this is described as ‘liberation’, as an opening where, although he cannot live polyamorously, he can express polyamory, and can thus assign positive emotions to his double love (sincerity/loyalty to both instead of betrayal/guilt against both) regardless of what his wife or lover might think/say about it. This continuous process of ‘being-in-liminality’, caught in a permanently ambiguous and transitional situation, has the characteristics of of a ‘liminal hotspot’ (Greco& Stenner; Motzkau & Clinch this volume). This is clearly expressed in the following excerpt:

*I fantasise about the idea that there will be a day when I will be able to be together with both of them and hold their hands as a sign of my love, without feeling bad about myself, or feel bad about them. Today it is an impossible fantasy. But at least, I have found solace and a way to feel good, at peace with myself, with the possibility to honestly express my love for both of them. Without denying it, without lying to myself, or any of us.*

Although John has deparadoxified the possibility of loving two people at the same time, he is confronted with a new paradox. Even if polyamory is an alternative for John and he can define himself as polyamorous and he can picture himself walking holding both hands (the wife’s and the lover’s), this is a portrayal that has to be postponed. Polyamory is not presented as an immediate solution but as a yearned for possibility. This is an occasion of transition, a troubled transition and, at the same time, a process of becoming. John is trapped in a troubled and suspended transition where he cannot return to the familiar and taken-for-granted rules of monogamy; neither can he easily move to the promised lands of polyamory. He is now stuck in-between two paradoxical situations, in what could be described as a ‘liminal hotspot’. Nevertheless, this liminal situation, despite and because of its unpredictability and sheer potentiality,

constitutes an affective assemblage that is described with the emotions of ‘solace’ and ‘peace’. In this particular liminal hotspot, affective transformations are described both in negative and in positive terms. The unfinished character of polyamorous relationships is a common narrative within the polyamorous community:

*Response to John P1: It is very difficult, I know. It's complicated, I know. There is pain and, I think, there will be pain till all of us understand that love is not possession; love is such a broad concept that it is not possible and it should not be closed; that I can love and feel for two people. [...] Well, John, I wish you well, meaning that I wish you can feel your love for who you want, live it and, above all, express it freely, naturally and amicably. For me, much of romantic love is based on friendship. If we are friends, we understand, agree, give space, do not judge, we do not demand.*

It could be argued that polyamory is located within a liminal space where complication and pain cannot be avoided without a general transformation of our subjectivity. It is a potential ordering that we can only approach once orderings have shifted enough to ensure ‘love’ includes, of necessity, ‘friendship’ and ‘companionship’. Polyamory, as the excerpt suggests, constitutes an affective ordering that could be read as relational ‘environmentalism’ where ‘individual rights are valued, but also constrained by obligations to be negotiable in consideration of the rights and wellbeing of other interested “systems”’ (Leslie & Morgan, 2011, p. 21). This is a later answer to John’s case:

*Answer P9: (...) My experience is the following: I was married for about 12 years (...). I fell in love with another man and he fell in love with me too. I told my husband because the discomfort that the situation made me feel was unbearable. At first, I tried to leave the other relationship but I could not. Then, my husband suggested to me that I should try for a while being with the other man, so I could choose between the two... When I*

*thought that it was going to be impossible for me to choose, polyamory appeared!!! Suddenly I realised that I'm not the only one that feels love in this way, and I see it clearly now... Happy and joyful, I told my husband, and... oh surprise!! He did not get it... Well, he understood it but he did not share it... He has accepted it now, but only for me. In all this time (more than two years now) we talk, cry, laugh... We have been through situations of jealousy, of reproach, of mutual incomprehension, and also really good moments!! I learned a lot about myself. I have also learned things I do not like so much, things that are difficult to accept... It turned out that I have read books, I have email conversations in this group, and I'm not the only one feeling this bad!!! To cheer you up, I must tell you that there have been totally different moments. I now feel the queen of the world!!! I have been thinking that happiness is that I do not change myself for any other... I have learned to appreciate life in another way, to seize the moments of happiness that are offered to me. Nevertheless, there will always be situations to worry about... (January, 2012)*

This is an excerpt that describes an experience similar to John's. Infidelity opens a paradox within the monogamous ordering, and leads to an unbearable emotional situation. The monogamous grammar suggests that one should choose between one of the two partners. Polyamory offers a possible future ordering that could resolve the troubles of the current situation. After two years, she has gone through different emotional states; a passage of learning, pain and enjoyment that would be consistent with a Turnerian version of liminality. Although Turner himself warns about the separation between process and structure (Turner, 1977, p. 65), we could find some similarities when considering the oppositions that Turner draws between liminality and the status system (Turner, 1969, pp. 106-107). Nevertheless, instead of talking about a 'transition between delimited structures', we can see imprecise orderings that are never

wholly fulfilled, also accepting that the polyamorous ordering is somehow less stable than monogamy. At the same time, the above excerpt acts as an indication of an emergent ceremony by suggesting the different stages she may go through before arriving at the polyamorous level. It also starts with the paradox of being in love with two people at the same time and the consequent paralysis resulting from the paradox. The resolution of the paradox involves the definition of a different ordering (polyamory) opposed to the ordering holding the paradox. Finally, we have a pattern shift where the paradox dissolves. Despite the similarities between both cases, and considering that polyamorous experiences live in a liminal space where there is no clear set of cultural norms suggesting the demeanour and adequate emotional responses in polyamorous contexts (Ritchie & Barker, 2006), we could draw a difference between John's experience and that of the last excerpt. In John's case, although he resolved the monogamous paradox via the ceremony of 'telling his partner', he is still in a second paradox where 'he is polyamorous' and 'not practising it'. He is far from the potential ordering that has been politically defined by the polyamorous community. Although he is outwardly 'performing' monogamy, he is 'no longer' within monogamy (as his wife knows he is not), but he is also 'not yet' polyamorous. The paradox of 'feeling polyamorous' 'without practicing it' is resolved in a 'future discursive ordering' (where the polyamorous relationship would be possible) confronted with a present semiotic-material ordering (the present affective situation). This constitutes what could be considered a 'liminal hotspot' where social categories are 'both/and' and 'neither/nor', where affect is associated with the indeterminacy of the ordering. The following excerpt illustrates the suspended transition in which John is located:

*I would like to find people to talk with without feeling I am being judged or crazy. I*



*wish I could find a place to relieve my feelings and feel understood. I'd like to tell you my experience and how I got to feel polyamorous, without practicing it... Life is more complicated than we believe.*

It should be noted that the initial description of the case has rhetorically made a clear-cut opposition between monogamy and polyamory and as two distinct and opposite poles. Nevertheless, the described emotional states are not pinned to a specific pole. We should be talking instead about an oscillation between different emotional states (stability - instability, pain - well being, constrained - unconstrained), emotional states that traverse monogamy and polyamory. For example, there is a movement from stability (monogamy) to instability (troubled monogamy) that moves into stability (possibility of being in love with two women), that moves again into instability (he must defer the possibility of practicing polyamory) and so on. Also, the concept of 'polyamory' is not as clearly defined as the description of the case could suggest. Its definition and practice could include, among others, the idea of 'multiple relationships', 'emotional and loving but not necessarily sexual relationships', 'friendship and sexual relationships' or 'responsible non-monogamy' (Klesse, 2006).

### **Polyamory and Liminal Hotspots**

From a political perspective, 'becoming polyamorous' could be read as a transition from fractured, unsuccessful attempts to conform with monogamous expectations, to a more sincere way of conducting multiple relationships, allowing these to be discussed openly. This transition is characterised by a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty due to the lack of established cultural norms and trusted personal positionings for polyamory practice, making it inherently paradoxical. Despite recent diversification of relationship modes (e.g. away from marriage), contemporary western

societies are still based on monogamous definitions of romantic love. These have shaped traditional arrangements around marriage, cohabitation, kinship and inheritance. In this context polyamory constitutes an 'outsider liminality', where individuals are 'set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, (...) or voluntarily setting himself apart from the behaviour of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system' (Turner, 1977, p. 233). Because they are not legally or socially recognised, polyamorous families find themselves in a 'liminal situation' where identities and social positions, and the responsibilities and demands associated with these positions, are constantly challenged and redefined. The affective re-arrangement of emotional mappings (like jealousy, for example) does not lie in individual traits or emotional states, but in the particular ordering of certain semiotic-material elements. In other words:

The wider import of this note [Spinoza] is to indicate that it is not the properties of what is encountered that are decisive in emotions, nor the qualities of the affected individual. What is at issue is the composition of an affective relationship. So euphoria and dysphoria are not the ground of any given emotion any more than musical harmony is the ground of the simultaneous tones which give rise to it. The names of the many emotions we experience are merely the names given to differently assembled euphoric or dysphoric relations, akin to chords. (Brown & Stenner, 2001, p. 95)

Polyamory is located within a social reordering where complication and pain come together with the general transformation of our subjectivity. It constitutes a potentiality that needs to be unfolded along intimate normative transformations, for example, loosening the distinction between 'love' and 'friendship'. Cohabitation constitutes another example of these transformations. Lessons learned from cohabitation suggest that this form of relationship, which was at the onset very marginal and not

accepted by the majority, has gradually become more and more accepted as a legitimate alternative to marriage. It is an illustrative example of how norms concerning partnership status can gradually be transformed. Kiernan (2001) defines the four stages of this transformation: in the first stage cohabitation was seen as a deviant or avant-garde phenomenon, in the second stage it was assessed as a prelude or probationary period to marriage, in the third stage it was accepted as an alternative to marriage and in the fourth stage the transition of cohabitation to become nearly equivalent to marriage was complete. Of course 'complete' doesn't mean that cohabitation is now a fixed structure. Rather, it should be read as having acquired an accepted status in many European countries (to the point where e.g. law and policy are changed to reflect this).

Becoming 'polyamorous' involves the transformation of the configuration of elements that constitutes oneself as 'normative monogamous', and the focus on polyamorous transformations exposes the configurations sustaining normative and transitional forms of intimate relationships. A traditional perspective could approach this transition in terms of internal emotional states enacted by specific events (for example, seeing your partner with somebody else) and the emotional training, understanding or practices that would allow one to emotionally cope with a particular emotional situation (being able to accept having a triadic relationship). While the exploration of John's cases highlights the 'suspended transition' from monogamous to polyamorous practices, it should be noted that this process goes parallel to the deeper transformation of the affective network and dispositions that constitute intimate affective relationships. The presented excerpts need to be read as examples of a certain form that is being fractally reproduced in society. Therefore, we need to consider the desirability of- and fascination for polyamory and cohabitation in our present economic

context of increasing geographical and labour mobility. This case exemplifies how liminal experiences are central in present societies and, in that sense, we could argue that we face a world of ‘permanent liminality’ (Szokolczai, 2000). Despite the normative certainty of monogamy, John’s case shows how everyday monogamy can be quite volatile and open to negotiation, and this can be read as part of the unstable landscape of post-fordist societies (Bauman, 2007). The strain of living the monogamous norm within a context of a highly volatile society facilitates the constitution of ‘becoming polyamorous’ as an emergent phenomenon taking place in our contemporary society and inscribed in the general societal reordering. The importance of non-monogamy in intimate relationships needs to be considered within the relational uncertainty of post-fordist societies, where individuals are continually obliged to negotiate their life-styles following the changeable patterns of a consumer society. Non-monogamy is central to post-fordist intimate relationships. In this context, polyamory resonates with our broader social context of ‘liquid’ or ‘reflexive’ relationships and the ‘permanent liminality’ of post-fordist conditions of life (Bauman, 2000). Polyamory constitutes a form of relationship that suggests a consensual form of non-monogamy that stabilises relationships while, at the same time, including emotional and relational novelty and uncertainty. In contrast with covert non-monogamy, polyamory follows current semantics of love as it resonates with the importance given to ‘authenticity’ in present societies (Robinson, Lopez, Ramos & Nartova-Bochaver, 2012).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The progressive flexibility and uncertainty in different aspects of social life imposed by the social mode of post-fordist economic regulation transforms traditional

forms of social aggregation into 'liminal spaces'. Nevertheless, although monogamy and polyamory take place within a society that is itself in 'constant transition', it could be argued that there are formations with different 'degrees' of liminality, like 'monogamy' and 'polyamory'. To approach the different 'levels' of liminality within societal formations, we could consider the distance from pre-existent structures and the temporal, spatial and subjective degree of such an experience (Thomassen, 2014, pp. 89-94). Affectivity would arise as an emerging property of these arrangements, and a liminal situation would become a 'hotspot' insofar as the participants do not possess the capacities to proceed towards a resolution into a novel structure. From this perspective, different levels of liminal experience within monogamous or polyamorous frames could be sustained on the basis of the temporal, spatial and subjective significance of the polyamorous movement, and the uncertainty of the polyamorous transition.

Taking a relational and process-centred ontology (Stenner, 2007), we could read polyamory and monogamy as potential orderings that are actualised in a particular semiotic-material occasion, a 'fusion of subject and object in the unified event of an experience' (Stenner, 2008, p. 94). This approach moves away from the notion of transition and considers that these potential orderings manifest in different occasions. Instead of an 'evolutionary' view from 'monogamy' to 'polyamory', we are dealing with a constant oscillation between such orderings, each expressing different levels of intensity, or agglomerative effects, of monogamy or polyamory. In our case, John is caught in unstable actualisations of these two orderings. It could be argued that each ordering embodies a particular ethical and aesthetic configuration. In his case, for example, becoming polyamorous allows John to move away from relations he feels to be governed by hypocrisy and to embrace honesty, respect and consideration. Our

analysis also shows that it can be helpful to move our focus to particular events/instants instead of taking the cultural and subjective locations of departure (monogamy) and potential arrival (polyamory) as the focus of analysis. Looking at a specific instant we can see that John is going through material-semiotic re-orderings that constitute a highly emotional paradox which needs addressing. By paying attention to the process we were able to establish that John is in the process of becoming both 'monogamous' (by having a monogamous relationship) and 'polyamorous' (by being in love with two women at the same time). In this sense, monogamy and polyamory are two potential orderings that can manifest ambiguously within the same occasion, and John's case could be read as an exemplification of both. The issue lies in the implicit understanding of temporality in Turnerian Liminality. If liminality is a transition between two stable orderings, we are framing phenomena in a linear temporal progression from a monogamous to a polyamorous ordering and, as the polyamorous ordering is deferred, our characters are caught in a 'suspended transition'. However, a process-centred ontology departs from the metaphor of temporal progression and concentrates on the manifestations of semiotic-material patterns in particular occasions, considering them as 'liminal hotspots', adding an analytic dimension that reveals transformative potentials that would otherwise remain obscured.

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