

Julia Peters 345514

Master Thesis Research Master Sociology of Culture, Media and the Arts

“The most important relationship is the one you have with yourself”. A study of polyamory through the lens of “individualization”.

Supervisors:

Stef Aupers

Samira van Bohemen

Acknowledgement

I would first of all like to thank my supervisors Stef Aupers and Samira van Bohemen for their sharp comments on this thesis at several points in the process. These were indispensable, as they always promptly teased out the sore spots. I thank Stef for putting in a considerable amount of time while he is not even officially tied to Erasmus University any longer. And Samira, who has impressed me with her academic skill and insight, is an example to look up to for aspiring young academics like myself. I sincerely hope to work together with both of them in the future.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Roos Reijbroek, David Nys, and other anonymous key individuals within the Dutch polyamory “scene” for their welcoming attitude, help with gaining access to this extensive but rather underground group, and interesting conversations about my thesis and other topics. I am obviously also very thankful to all the people who were willing to be interviewed by me. I also thank some of the people I met through this research for their friendship.

Finally, I would like to thank Kim-Jomi Fischer, who tirelessly discussed my research with me, read dozens of concept versions, and even drew out diagrams of main concepts to help himself understand what is going on, but was unknowingly helping me do the same. You might just as well have become as good a sociologist as you now are a dancer.

“The most important relationship is the one you have with yourself”: A study of polyamory through the lens of “individualization”

Julia Peters

ABSTRACT Authoritative cultural sociological theories on contemporary romantic relationships employ the grand narrative of a shift from “traditional” to “modern” societies, as a result of which relationships are now supposedly “individualized” and “fluid”. Much in the same spirit, the polyamorous philosophy, which allows individuals to be romantically involved with more than one person at a time, aims to let go of the traditional monogamous norm in order to “keep the options open” and “avoid fixation”. Based on 12 in-depth biographical interviews with polyamorists and fieldwork at non-monogamy meetings in The Netherlands, I argue that the link between individualization and polyamory is legitimate, but that 1) polyamory’s individualism is a meaningful and structured discourse rather than a random phenomenon, and 2) it is socialized within delineated social environments, namely “queer” and “holistic” culture, rather than established from scratch between idiosyncratic individuals. This paper urges current academic work on polyamory to broaden its too narrow focus on queer culture, but more chiefly, it aims to remind cultural sociologists of the fact that one cannot stop after attributing a phenomenon to “the individualization”, as it is a black box concept that needs to be further dissected.

1. Introduction

I entered the cafe around a quarter past nine, PM. At the door, a middle-aged man and woman were smoking. Both were wearing a small sticker on their chests, illustrated with a heart-shape intertwined with the infinity symbol “8”. The back of the cafe was quite crowded with about thirty to forty “everyday”-looking people, their stickers the only thing giving away that this was a separate group from others in the bar. I introduced myself to the organizer of the event and told her that I was carrying out a sociological research on the topic that defined their get-together, namely polyamory. I saw her face tighten a bit, and she told me that “the group” had increasingly been approached by journalists, and that even though some people were open about their non-monogamous lifestyle, many of them, including herself, were rather secretive about it.

Polyamorists believe ‘that it is possible [and acceptable] to love many people and to maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships’ (Sexualities, 2003, p. 126). The significance of this phenomenon did not go unnoticed by academics, nor the media. GoogleScholar shows around 2620 academic sources with the key word “polyamory”, and there has been an exponential

increase in books with this keyword since the 1990s, the birth year of the term, with a total of approximately eleven thousand books (Google Ngram Viewer). Non-monogamous relationships are among the “fringe” relationship types that have gained presence in popular media such as film, television, newspapers and magazines (Malarski, forthcoming), and where before only revolutionaries like De Beauvoir and Sartre were open about their non-monogamy, more and more A-list celebrities have their open relationship “coming out” now, too (Barker & Langdrige, 2010).

Despite this ostensible “mainstreaming” of non-monogamy, there is a degree of secrecy surrounding it which is emblematic of the societal debate that it attracts. Polyamory is met with stigmatization as a result of a tension between conservative and progressive norms, illustrated by the clash between those who call out that ‘the family is collapsing’ versus those who reply that ‘it is merely diversifying’ (Giddens & Griffiths, 2006, p.246). In the Netherlands, for instance, the reformed political party (SGP) at the time of writing placed several billboards alongside highways with texts like: ‘Adultery: the family game in which no one wins’. These are intended as a backlash to advertisements by pro-affair dating websites such as SecondLove.nl¹. The party argues that ‘faithfulness and love form the foundation of our society’ (Van der Staaij, 2015) and that, therefore, non-monogamy is debauchery and a sign of society’s moral decay. Remarkably, outside of the realm of politics, this moral condemnation of non-monogamy is also found in academic circles. The sociologist Bauman sees relationships in which people ‘seek redemption in quantity’ (2003, p. xiii) as signifying a process of weakening human bonds in general:

Partnerships are increasingly seen (...) as a kind of product for consumers: satisfaction on the spot, and if not fully satisfied, return the product to the shop or replace it with a new and improved one! You don’t, after all, stick to your car, or computer, or iPod, when better ones appear. (Bauman, 2003)

Bauman and other authoritative theoreticians on contemporary romantic relationships employ the grand narrative of a shift from “traditional” to “modern” societies, as a result of which relationships are now supposedly “individualized”, (Giddens, 1992) “chaotic” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) and “liquid” (Bauman, 2003). In order to get away from such armchair theorizations and avoid taking part in the societal debate by pondering whether polyamory is “good” or “bad”, this study considers what meanings the polyamorists themselves give to their relationships. What are their beliefs about relationships? What are their motives for choosing such relationships? Who are they? And finally, how can we interpret their practice from the idea of the

¹Comparable to the North-American dating site AshleyMadison.com

“individualization” of Western society?

2. Two souls in one breast: Love in the twenty-first century

In light of the prevailing monogamous norm, people who decide to engage in romantic and sexual relationships with multiple partners, everyone involved being aware and in approval of this situation, are rather revolutionary. Correspondingly, the main body of academic literature on the topic approaches polyamory through the lens of subversion, more specifically: queer theory.

“Queer” ‘is a generic term ‘for all nonstraight and nonnormative sexualities’ (Ahmed, 2006, p.68), and therefore it is regularly linked to the topic of LGBT² identities. Queer theory is moreover a *critical* theory, as it seeks to question and subvert ‘the “normal,” where “normal” is what seems natural and intrinsic’ (Song, 2014, p. 166). Generally, heterosexuality is “the normal” that is held at gunpoint, which is considered to form a compulsory standard from which deviant sexualities are (symbolically) punished (Meeks, 2007). Heteronormativity comprises more than the narrow definition of the naturalization of sexual attraction between two members of the “opposite sex”. It also for instance includes the naturalization of monogamy, as it, too, is presented as a natural component of reproduction, for which *one* man and *one* woman form the “necessary ingredients”. Akin to how LGBTs are framed in terms of their subversive potential, then, queer theorists argue that polyamory is also capable of questioning and upsetting the heterosexual norm (Barker, 2005; Jackson, 2003; Song, 2014). As a consequence of the strong affiliation between queer theory and LGBTs, interviews for the empirical scrutinization of polyamory are carried out almost exclusively amongst the members of this social category. While queer theory is a legitimate approach to the study of polyamory, it is also a limited one, as it results in 1) the a priori exclusion of polyamorous people who might identify as heterosexual, and 2) polyamory mostly being studied in the light of gaining acceptance of LGBTs, which effectuates an apparent moral undertone in articles on the topic (e.g. Barker, 2005; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Heckert, 2010; Jackson & Scott, 2004).

Claiming that polyamory is necessarily queer is thus an assumption that carries a political agenda. A more impartial cultural sociological approach that seeks to understand polyamory as an element of broader cultural transformations in the West, is largely lacking (but see Barker & Langdrige, 2010). Monogamy today sits uneasily with statistics on marriage (monogamy’s prime institution) and adultery: with a 38% divorce rate in 2013, The Netherlands has witnessed a 14% rise since the year 1950 (Centraal bureau voor de statistiek, 2014), and in the US, an estimated

²LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender

thirty to sixty percent of people in a relationship is having an affair (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). The 1960s counterculture can be considered a pivotal moment amidst such changes, as it revolted against traditional institutions such as the church, the state, and “technocracy” (Roszak, 1969) and campaigned for individual freedom and authenticity rather than following the logic of “the system”. The counterculture’s “Free Love Movement” advocated in this same spirit that love should be left to lovers, not to the state. The state-form of love mainly implied Christian marriage, which clearly prescribes heterosexuality and monogamy. Therefore, its rejection opened up the possibility of not only refusing to get married, but also of non-heterosexual and non-monogamous relationships. During this sexual revolution, the “open relationship” flourished. Importantly, while such relationships have not become common practice since, this movement did not form an isolated historical moment. Rather, it is a concretization of broader societal sentiments, as the counterculture ushered in an ‘acceleration in an ongoing process of cultural transformation’ (Houtman, Aupers, & De Koster, 2011, p. 12). In other words, values such as “freedom” (from e.g. the state) and “authenticity” (e.g. as an “individual”), have become increasingly mainstream since and can also be applied to romantic relationships. Thus, from this perspective, there is not necessarily anything “odd” (which is one synonym of “queer”) about polyamory. While it indeed ‘queers the institution of mono-normativity’ (Cardoso, 2011, p. 9), it also constitutes a relationship type that moves away from traditional monogamy in a manner that reflects broader contemporary beliefs. Indeed, it could point not only to a rejection of the heterosexual norm, but also to a realignment of the heterosexual norm itself.

The counterculture forms a historical moment in the transformation of values in the West, but it does not explain it. A main approach in cultural sociology that seeks to do so, is the individualization thesis. It argues that the process of secularization has ensured that religion no longer glues the public to the private, and that therefore traditional structures have made way for a more fragmented and fluid culture in which, ostensibly, individualism and pluralism prevail (Durkheim, 1973; Riesman, 1950). Since institutions such as the church are not guiding anymore, ‘the individual is continually obliged to negotiate life-style options’ (Giddens, 1992, p. 75) from their “personal” perception. Identity therefore becomes a choice among infinite options - indeed, choice itself becomes a core value: ‘the *postmodern* ‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open’ (Bauman, 1996, p.18). Giddens (1992, p. 75) moreover claims that ‘such choices are not just ‘external’ or marginal aspects of the individual’s attitudes, but define who the individual ‘is’ (Giddens, 1992, p. 75). Identity has become a “reflexive project of the self” (Ibid, 1991), meaning that individuals define who they “are” on the basis of reflecting on their past, current and future autobiographies.

Several cultural sociologists have theorized about what the advent of such self-reflexive and unbounded individuals means for the state of contemporary romantic relationships. In line with what was envisioned by the Free Love Movement, Giddens (1992) optimistically claims that love today is deviating from the conservative marriage form towards what he sees as a more democratic, extra-state relationship type. He terms it the “pure relationship”, ‘in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver’ (Ibid, p. 6). The pure relationship is ‘entered into for its own sake (...) and (...) is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it’ (Ibid, p.58). An even more postmodern approach comes from Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), who in *The Normal Chaos of Love* describe how, as a result of the diminishing power of marriage as a Christian institution, relationships have become a matter of choice rather than necessity. As a result, people are nowadays choosing (forms of) relationships on the basis of who (or what) “suits” them:

[I]t is no longer possible to pronounce in some binding way what (...) love mean[s], what [it] should or could be, rather, [it varies] in substance, exceptions, norms and morality from individual to individual and from relationship to relationship. (...) Increasingly, the individuals who want to live together are, or more precisely are becoming, the legislators of their own way of life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 5).

Because of the supposed uniqueness of each individual in a relationship, love is thus ostensibly losing any kind of structure and ‘is becoming a blank that the lovers must fill in themselves’ (Ibid, 1995, p. 5). However, while Giddens and Beck-and Beck-Gernsheim are neutral or optimistic about relationships that are characterized by such a degree of “free choice”, there are also academics who have a cynical take on the matter. In his book *Liquid Love*, Bauman (2003) makes a parallel between contemporary relationships and consumer culture, claiming that both relationships and consumption goods are today expected to be constantly upgradeable, changeable and replaceable. He sees individualization as “rampant” and the resulting “boundlessness” and “lawlessness” of humans as causing internal conflicts and anxiety (cf. Berger, Berger & Kellner’s “Homeless Mind”, 1973). Human bonds themselves, Bauman argues, are nowadays frail, and he envisions the rise of so-called “semi-detached couples” who want to go their own ways, live in separate homes, and when it comes to future plans, they will ‘see how it works out’ (Elliot & Bauman, 2007, p. 106). Overall, they are too fidgety to be fulfilled by a single person for long. There is an underlying mood he brings forward for this state:

‘men and women (...) despairing at being abandoned to their own wits and feeling easily disposable, yearning for the security of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to ‘relate’; yet wary of the state of ‘being related’ and particularly of being related ‘for good’ (...) since they fear that such a state may bring burdens and cause strains they neither feel able nor are willing to bear, and so may severely limit the freedom they need - yes, your guess is right - to relate (Bauman, 2003, p. viii)

Thus, Bauman argues that our contemporaries carry two irreconcilable souls in one chest, longing ‘to tighten the bonds yet keep them loose’ (ibid). Vacillating between freedom and security, not able to find meaningful relationships, Bauman argues they will finally ‘seek redemption in quantity’ (Ibid, p. xiii). His critical take on having multiple relationships reminds of an oft-heard critique on polyamory that goes as follows: ‘Like so much butter, romantic love must be spread thickly on one slice of bread; to spread it over several is to spread it too ‘thinly’ (Comer, 1974, in Jackson & Scott, 2015, p. 152).

Polyamorous relationships, in which the consensus is that it is desirable to allow “loving” multiple people simultaneously, is at face value a prime example of an “individualized” relationship type as described by Giddens, Beck- and Beck-Gernsheim, and Bauman. Indeed, it stands apart from the state, “keeps the options open”, “avoids fixation”, and, if you will, “seeks redemption in quantity”. To study polyamorous lifestyles through the lens of “individualization” and therefore perceiving personalities as ongoing “reflexive projects of the self” (Giddens, 1991), polyamorists’ experiences with and perceptions of relationships in their past, present and future should be the object of study, and to do so, biographical interviews are pre-eminently suitable.

3. Methods

The biographical approach. Biographical interviews conform to the assumption that ‘increased societal reflexivity and progressive de-traditionalization of the social order have [...] rendered self-identity a ‘reflexive project’ to be constructed by individuals themselves’ (Atkinson, 2007, p. 536), as they allow interviewees to reflect on their personal lives chronologically and thus talk about their identities as evolving stories. Moreover, such an approach is exceptionally suitable for studying polyamorous identities: as polyamory is relatively uncommon and the term has only seen the light in 1990, polyamorists will have made a transition from monogamy to polyamory within their adult lives. Indeed, self-help books on the topic talk about “opening up” as a process (e.g. Taormino, 2008). In-depth semi-standardized interviews with a biographical and a topic-

component have been conducted with twelve polyamorists, either on Skype or in person. Questions concerned one's upbringing, the development of love lives from an early age, one's introduction to polyamory, views on monogamy, jealousy and adultery before and after making the switch to polyamory, the experience of current relationships, expectations of the future, and personal interests. Within these questions, an emphasis was put on attitudes towards traditional values. The interviews varied in length between one and two and a half hours, with an average of one and a half hour, and were transcribed verbatim.

Sample. Apart from an abstract notion of polyamory's possible association with individualization theory, there was no 'preconceived theoretical framework' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45).

Therefore, the sample design was not laid out beforehand, but evolved in interaction with data collection: theoretical concepts that emerged during data gathering informed 'what groups or subgroups [to] turn to next' (Ibid, p. 47). For instance, at a certain point I interviewed two polyamorists who identified as "queer", and since this type was at that point underrepresented in my sample, I aimed to find more people who identified as such. One of these two interviewees introduced me to a secret facebook group that was also built around a support group, where I met other queer-minded polyamorists who were willing to be interviewed. Thus, the sample is a combination of theoretical and snowball sampling. Theoretical sampling is a useful way to compare themes across diverging types of social groups and therefore it facilitates the maximization of variance, which is especially important considering the limited focus of polyamory research on queer culture. Moreover, a good research design 'must fit not only with its use, but also with its environment' (Maxwell, 2004, p. 3). Seeing polyamorous people are often secretive about their lifestyle and therefore rather elusive, and as I experienced that my presence as a researcher was sometimes looked upon askance, access to the field happens gradually and must be done in a cautious manner. The snowball method was therefore also a manner to underline my trustworthiness to new respondents in advance. All respondents were approached either through one of the three secret facebook groups that were organized around the topic of polyamory I was a member of, or through non-virtual events such as drinks and support groups.

Additional methods. For further enrichment of the data and a degree of triangulation, I also made field notes of four non-monogamy support groups and one drinks event. At each event, I was asked to maintain a level of abstraction in the notes in order to secure the anonymity of the attendees. Besides the field notes, I read some of the books that were read most avidly by my interviewees, and followed blogs and magazines that published on the topic. I have integrated these data into the article where appropriate.

Analysis. Seeing identities as reflexive projects means seeing individuals as actively shaping the

social world, rather than reflecting a reality that is “out there”. Therefore, this study views the interviewees’ speech as discourses, in order to scrutinize ‘the way that language is used to present different ‘pictures’ of reality’ (Tonkiss, 2004, p. 249). Conforming to the bottom-up research design, I coded the interviews along the lines of Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) “grounded theory”. Conceptual labels that applied to themes emerged through “constant comparison” between the interview transcripts. The coding process was characterized by an open, axial and closed phase.

4. Debunking monogamous “myths”: More Others, More Self

How can polyamorous relationships be understood from the viewpoint of polyamorists’ beliefs about relationships? Throughout the interviews, several discourses manifested themselves that strongly opposed tradition and indeed emphasized an individualist ethic. Both implicitly and explicitly, the following traditional monogamous assumptions were contested by the interviewees, namely 1) love can only be with one, 2) your other half is out there, and 3) your partner is your (most) significant other.

Monogamous assumption 1: love should only be with one. The “mono” in “monogamy” says it all: the core characteristic of this relationship type is that a person is meant to relate with no more than one other individual. But there is a deeply-held belief among the polyamorists that stands in the way of this notion, namely that people are their own person and that each person is therefore unique, which entails that every connection is different and stands on its own merits. In other words, one relationship has nothing to do with another, and consequently, they do not stand in each other’s way. As Ronja states, ‘that it (...) does not diminish your relationship if you engage with other people too’. To substantiate this point, Hanne uses the metaphor of other enchantments in life that also do not cancel each other out: ‘Emotionally, in terms of love, [my relationship with Robbert] stands apart from what I have with Jack, and the one doesn’t come at the expense of the other. (...) When I was pregnant with [my second child], I was very afraid that I wouldn’t be able to love the second as much as the first. That’s actually the same mechanism.’ Thus, it is argued that there is no love lost when one has multiple partners, since *love is not a zero-sum game*.

Another discourse that aims to disarm the first assumption concerns how to deal with jealousy. Some interviewees mentioned how monogamous people often put forward the occurrence of jealousy as proof of the idea that love should only be with one and that polyamory is therefore doomed to failure. To debunk this idea, the polyamorists argued that generally, *jealousy is a projection of one’s own fear*, rather than an indication of a lack of commitment. In other words, instead of looking at the other to find the source of their problem, they look at themselves and try

to readjust their own viewpoint. As Marijke asserts: '[I] was scared when [my girlfriend] told me [that she wanted more connection with Olaf], but I won't say "you shouldn't do this, because I'm afraid", no, I just say "this is what happens in me". (...) So that you can feel all sorts of things, but that you don't project onto the other.'

Monogamous assumption 2: your other half is out there. Related to the idea that love should only be with one, is the monogamous assumption that the two people in a relationship complete each other: they are "halves" that together make a "whole". Again, it is the notion that people are individuals that sits uneasily with this, as merging with another person surely obstructs one's individuality. The polyamorists claim that people are "I's" rather than "we's", indeed that *you are not your relationship*. As individuals, it is argued, people are well able to think and act without the help of a so-called significant other, like Ronja said: 'I always try to avoid the word "we." (...) He can decide on his own what he thinks. (...) You are not your relationship, you are yourself, and that person is himself. It's not like you melt together and then lead *one* life.' Besides, they maintain, this "other half" simply does not exist. Identities are experienced as multi-dimensional and fluid rather than as coherent entities, and therefore it is argued that *no individual can perfectly match another*. Their approach suggests a "saturated self" as advanced by Gergen (1991), a personality that is made up of a complex plurality of roles resulting from the multiplicity of ideas that it is exposed to in "postmodern" societies. For instance, Frank constructed a theory on polyamory of which he drew a diagram during our interview, in which he depicts himself as a large circle in the center and his relationships as smaller circles that overlap with his in varying degrees. He aims to demonstrate that some parts of him, where common ground is found, are shared, but 'there is no-one who [fully] overlaps'. Rather, different people touch on different sides of his person: 'I see everything as a complement (...) to your existence. I am a versatile person and in this versatility you can find almost everything.' Polyamory offers him the possibility to be 'different selves, or at least different "aspects" of themselves in different relationships' (Barker, 2005, p. 85). Mathis states along these lines:

I believe there are a lot of different people in the world with whom you have a special connection. That may be dozens or hundreds or maybe thousands (...) but none of them is *the* one, because they all add something to my life in some way. (...) Our monogamous society says, "you have to find a person who is perfect for you," but (...) no one can possibly give all that you have.

Frank and Mathis also underline here that *relationships add something to your "self"* rather than that they are part of it, or as Marcel phrases it: 'to be complete yourself, to see the other as an

amazing bonus'. Being involved with multiple people allows them to 'really become (...) an individual again', since it obstructs the formation of a "couplecentric" identity, which compiles a final blow to the idea of a symbiotic relationship. The high esteem that is assigned to agency furthermore entails that no one should have a say in what another person should (not) do. The word "possession" was used by most interviewees, in the sense that *lovers should not want to possess one another*, but let themselves and others "be themselves". "Someone to call your own" in this view is repulsive rather than romantic. Daan illustrates this succinctly:

[Common jealousy] is very much informed by the assumption of possession (...) I think the restrictions of someone in this are actually really weird, that you limit someone to do certain things because you don't feel good about it (...) I think that that, *especially* towards the people about whom you should care a lot (...) that you should (...) grant them that they are a happy person and can be themselves.

Monogamous assumption 3: your partner is your (most) significant other. Some interviewees were annoyed with what they saw as the widely accepted hegemonic position of partners over other social contacts: when people find a partner, this drastically changes how they relate to other people, especially friends, manifested for example in less time spent with these others (cf. Berger & Kellner, 1964). The appraisal of "the individual" comes into play here, too: every person has a full value as a human being, which makes hierarchization demeaning. Ronja says she does not find the connection between her and her lover more important than the one between her and her good friend: 'so then I could also say "we" about myself and Heleen, you know, (...) there [are] more "we's".' Relatedly, within polyamorous relationships, a well-known point of discussion is the possible distinction between primary and secondary partners, in other words, that some partners could be more significant than others. Regarding this idea, Mathis notes: 'I find it somewhat demeaning to (...) ascribe the level of "secondary" to a person with his own desires and his own needs'. Mathis, however, does form a hierarchy between *himself* and the people he sees. He identifies as a "solo polyamorist", which he tells me entails 'that the primary relationship you have, is the one you have with yourself'. To overcome hierarchization, a "formless" approach to relationships is advanced. Marijke: 'there is no dominant best way or form. (...) I've released all that. (...) We go with the flow'. Thus, in the eyes of the polyamorists, *love is lawless* - sometimes, as in Ronja's case, to the extent that there is a want to not distinguish romantic relationships from other relationships: 'that you actually stop labeling everything, this is my friend, this is a friend, this is my best friend, this is my brother'. This throws up a logical

question for some: if there are no laws to love, *what is a relationship, anyway?* Marcel told me that ‘in any case I’m not sure anymore what a relationship is (...) When you have let go of that monogamy part, all at once it becomes a lot vaguer’. He expands on these deliberations:

(...) and then you enter a very gray area: what is a friendship and what is a relationship and what is a connection (...), especially if you don’t make plans but feel what is there at that moment, then you actually can’t make a distinction anymore. (...) Yeah, I’m not so sure anymore (...) [The term “relationship”] for me imposes restrictions that I don’t find pleasant. So I’m increasingly letting go of the term.

The polyamorists here thus explicitly reject monogamy as an imposed tradition that dictates how relationships ought to be. They do so through the promotion of individualist values, indeed especially its pillars, “authenticity” and “freedom”. The fact that they only partially identify with their partner(s) and are to varying degrees reluctant to form a union or to hierarchize between partners, underlines the need to respect one’s own and the other’s authenticity. The idea that one should not have a say in another person’s life underlines the importance of personal freedom. The individualized view of love culminates in the idea that ‘the most important relationship is the one you have with yourself’, rather than with a “significant other”. Furthermore, monogamy is deconstructed to such an extent that the meaning of the term relationship becomes fluid, to the point where some start wondering what it means altogether. Taken together, these discourses at face value support the idea that love in this instance has become “individualized” and that, without the structuring traditional framework of monogamy, these individuals are forming relationships idiosyncratically. However, the sheer fact that these individualized discourses form coherent themes as a result of their symmetry means that the interviewees do not come to any idiosyncratic conception of relationships at all - rather, this idiosyncrasy is part and parcel of their discourses. Paradoxically then, their individualism seems to form a quite structured vocabulary, which points towards the idea that “individualism” could be a socialized discourse (cf. Houtman, Aupers & De Koster, 2011).

5. From mono to poly: cultural conversions to polyamory

To explore to what extent polyamory is an individual or a social phenomenon, the following questions will be addressed: who are these polyamorists, what are their stories behind choosing such relationships, and what are their similarities and differences? Looking at their early biographies, it becomes clear that none of my interviewees has always lived in a polyamorous

manner, nor were they brought up by parents who practiced polyamory. While all interviewees and the families they came from are white and middle or upper-middle class, when I asked them about their childhood, these did not throw up structural similarities with those of other interviewees, nor did there seem to be any “particularities” in their early biographies that would explain a shift away from monogamy. The conversion from a monogamous to a non-monogamous outlook on relationships rather took place later on in their lives, in accordance with Kolesar’s (2010, p. 3) finding that the North American multiply partnered people in her sample have been raised in families that did not differ much from national census statistics, and that they reported ‘a decrease in religiosity and strong increase in liberalism since childhood’. While most of the polyamorists had for a long time been familiar with terms such as “open relationship” or “swinging”, they were relatively recently introduced to the term “polyamory”. Open relationships and swinging were strongly associated by most of them with sex and for this reason also rejected and considered “not really poly” (cf. Klesse, 2003). At some point, the interviewees heard or read about polyamory, after which already experienced but undefined feelings “fell into place”. Marcel (32), who had been with Eliza for five years before it got too hard for him to suppress the fact that he wanted to have other relationships alongside theirs, is exemplary for this process. He told Eliza about these feelings:

(...) and she also to some extent shared these feelings, then we started to think more about it and we discovered via a blog [Personal Development for Smart People] of a later friend that that’s called polyamory (...) that it is an option that you can have relationships with several people (...) and that at once gave, yeah, rest, that you’re not the only one who feels this way, and that it isn’t strange to have those feelings. (...) that opened some doors for us: “oh wait, there is more possible than just the one form of relationship that you normally get handed, monogamy and otherwise cheating” (...) we didn’t know this was also an option.

The realization ‘we didn’t know this was also an option’ coincides with statements of other interviewees, like ‘why didn’t I think of this before myself’, ‘this is it’, and ‘things fell into place’. This discovery of an already existing concept that fits extant sentiments is a form of social validation of seemingly individual beliefs and feelings and offers a new and structured conceptual framework to approach relationships (also see Barker, 2005). Media such as books and blogs on polyamory overall played a large role in the socialization of interviewees from monogamy to polyamory, as many of them talked about consulting them for guidance when problems such as jealousy occurred. Such books are strongly characterized by an individualist language themselves,

and they consistently urge the reader to fill in their relationship according to their ‘own personal ethos’ (Easton & Hardy, 2009, p. 14). The old, monogamous way of “seeing” is then considered to be a result of cultural conditioning, as Hanne puts it: ‘before that time, ideas about how relationships work were so deeply entrenched in me, that I wasn’t even aware of how much you are indoctrinated by the social norm.’ But while, like their beliefs about relationships, the interviewees’ concrete introductions to polyamory are very similar, the contexts in and ontologies from which they deconstruct monogamy differ structurally. Already during my fieldwork, I automatically ended up in more or less delineated social environments. Assimilation into polyamory went hand in hand with involvement in a broader cultural lifestyle, of which two strands are most noticeable: queer and holistic culture. Within these interpretive contexts, different perceptions of the self and polyamory influence each other.

Queer culture: polyamory as a natural orientation and polyamory as a socially constructed identity

As mentioned before, both queer theory and queer practice ‘resis[t] the expectation that everyone should have a monogamous, cis-gendered, heterosexual relationship form’ (Song, 2014, p. 166). For Mathis (23, pansexual), being queer likewise means ‘that I don’t really put myself in a certain box, and that I somewhat rebel against the norm, as in [against] heteronormative, cisnormative people.’ His facebook profile picture shows him wearing a shirt with the heart shape-infinity symbol, and he is carrying a protest sign that says “Poly, Pansexual and Proud”. I attended one of the by him organized non-monogamy meetings, at which many of the attendees were non-cisgender and wanted to be addressed with the gender-neutral pronoun “they”. The overall language used by the queer-minded polyamorists when discussing relationship practices, was both academic and political in tone. Indeed, they were all knowledgeable of queer theory and had degrees in the social sciences or history. With regard to their day-to-day relationship practice, the queer-minded polyamorists all emphasized a book that stresses the political character of polyamory, namely Easton and Hardy’s (2009) *The Ethical Slut*. In the spirit of queer theory, it ‘seeks to question and subvert ‘the “normal,”’ (Song, 2014, p. 166) by claiming that we ‘have all been taught that one way of relating - lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage - is the only right way’ (Easton & Hardy, 2009, p. 9), that expressing sexual and emotional freedom is consequently a political act, and that polyamory might therefore ‘even change the world’ (Ibid). Mathis most pointedly verbalized this political overtone:

I think polyamory is always a political statement (...) because polyamory is not really the norm; on

the contrary (...) our whole society is organized according to the monogamous principle. (...) Many of our institutions are aimed at either you're single, or you're dating, or you're married, but it can't be that you're a couple with more than two people.

Thus, for the queer-minded polyamorists, polyamory is simultaneously a personal and a political practice. This hints at an anarchist perspective, in the sense of opposing 'the intrusiveness, destructiveness, and artificiality of state authority (...) and the desire to construct a social order based on free association' (El-Ojeili, 2007). Anarchy signifies 'the condition of being without rule' (Ibid) and aims to put the "individual" in control. Some people in the queer scene brought to my attention a practice known as "Relationship Anarchy", and it shows striking similarities to the individualist discourses as discussed in paragraph four:

Relationship anarchy questions the idea that love is a limited resource that can only be real if restricted to a couple. (...) Don't rank and compare people and relationships — cherish the individual and your connection to them. (...) Each relationship is independent, and a relationship between autonomous individuals. (...) Deciding to not base a relationship on a foundation of entitlement is about respecting others' independence and self-determination. (Nordgren, 2012)

Thus, monogamy is seen as a norm that constrains people to be their individual selves. But what are these "selves"? Within queer theory and culture, there are two (conflicting) ontologies that seek to dismantle the heterosexual norm and also interact with the queer-minded interviewees' conception of themselves as polyamorous, namely 1) polyamory as a natural orientation, and 2) polyamory as a socially constructed identity.

Polyamory as a natural orientation. As mentioned before, heterosexuality as a norm is generally based on the premise that, with a view to reproduction, it is the relationship form that "nature intended". One major approach that is put forward within queer theory and culture as a criticism on this idea is the "essentialist identity narrative" (Klesse, 2014, p. 90). It sees sexual preferences, such as bisexuality and homosexuality, as a biological given – indeed, that it is one's natural state, just like heterosexuality can be. Thus, like heteronormativity, this standpoint makes a claim to nature, but in this case to falsify rather than legitimize the compulsory character of heterosexuality by arguing heterosexuality is just *one* biologically given preference among many. Mathis likewise described polyamorousness as built-in: 'I've always felt (...) that I was not happy in a [monogamous] relationship (...) In the beginning I wasn't really able to give that a place because I didn't understand that there was an alternative to monogamy (...) I didn't know any better'. In a later conversation, he added: 'I'm very strongly attached to my own theory, that the

opposition monogamy - non-monogamy is a sexual nature similar to heterosexuality - homosexuality (...) in this way, many people who are “naturally” non-monogamous are raised as monogamous.’ Except for the fact that for him, the non-normative option was previously “unknown”, his discourse resembles that of many gays and bisexuals coming out, in which a person struggles from an early age to live as a heterosexual, after which they find out they are “really” gay or bisexual. This natural ontology of the self renders the individual perspective more legitimate than the institutional norm, as it ‘enables participants to reject claims that they could behave differently’ (Barker, 2005, p. 86).

Polyamory as a socially constructed identity. Another widely employed approach in queer theory, but one that contradicts the idea that sexuality is in one’s nature as it largely denies a determinative nature in the first place, is the idea that one’s sexuality is the product of human interaction. This is, in other words, the social constructivist approach. Daan (25, bisexual) correspondingly sees masculinity and femininity as ‘something (...) you can learn, a kind of role you can play’, and when I asked Ronja (25, bisexual) about her sexual “geaardheid³”, she expressed her disagreement as follows: ‘that suggests that it is already “in” you or something (...) I don’t think people are necessarily born gay or straight or bisexual, I think most people could change that’. In this way, they agree with gender theorists like West and Zimmerman (1987) and Butler (1999), who argue that gender is an interactional construct that has no existence “outside” of its enactment. Daan extends this approach to his polyamorous identity. He says that because he ‘came into contact with queer and feminist ideas, you’re going to look critically at the most basic things in life anyway, such as (...) relationships’ and asserts that polyamory ‘has really been completely new to my identity’. Thus, polyamory is here seen as a contingent identity rather than a biological given, pointing to an underlying socially constructed self – or indeed, *no* self. The social constructivist approach ‘presents [polyamorists] as responsible and in control of their lives’ (Barker, 2005, p. 86), since identity in this view is a matter of “free choice”. Monogamy is one social construction among many conceivable, and as a result of its relativity, it has no *inherent* legitimacy over other sexual preferences. The social constructivist ontology of the self also suggests the validity of the individual approach, as the lawfulness of common norms such as monogamy can be questioned on the basis of the idea that they are, in principle, fictions. While this approach on its own makes the choice for polyamory over monogamy rather arbitrary, it is most probably its interaction with the social context of queer culture that directs these interviewees towards polyamory, considering queer culture’s counter-cultural tendencies

³“Seksuele geaardheid” is a common Dutch term that does not neatly translate into English, since in English the common term would be “sexual orientation”. However, on its own, “geaardheid” translates to the English “nature”.

concerning norms such as monogamy.

Holistic culture: polyamory as a metaphysical essence

The larger part of the interviews (7)⁴ lacked the political overtone of the queer-minded altogether. They did not clearly place their polyamorousness in a broader societal debate; rather, their stories exclusively pertained to their own, personal life-worlds. Pertinently, they did not go against the heterosexual norm, at least not deliberately. This manifested itself not only in the absence of such a discourse, but also in the fact that most of them were married or had been so in the past, and that while some of the women identified as more or less bisexual, all men strongly emphasized their sexual preference for women. It stood out that each of these interviewees was or had been involved in holistic practices such as alternative coaching trajectories and/or tantra courses – practices that were often explicitly put away by the queer-minded as being “too floaty”. They had their own particular canon of books they consulted, one of which was Geurtz’ “Addicted to Love. The road to self-acceptation and happiness in relationships” (2015). Geurtz claims that ‘because we do not know the true nature of our mind, we also have a fundamentally incorrect view of the phenomenon of love’ (Ibid, p. 12). This idea informs a third ontology of polyamory and the self.

Polyamory as a metaphysical essence. Polyamory as a “metaphysical” essence is quite different from the “natural” and “socially constructed” approaches. As it claims that there is a definite essence to one’s being, it evidently differs from the latter, which maintains that there is no essence at all. And while the metaphysical ontology does not exclude seeing polyamory as a biological nature - indeed, some holistic-minded polyamorists also referred to their polyamorous orientation as genetically fixed – the metaphysical self is experienced a fundamental nature of being of all things in the world, tangible and intangible, rather than as a narrow “scientific” fact about hormones and chromosomes. Polyamory, being perceived as one’s true essence, is therefore experienced as bringing them closer to their “true selves”. As Simon noted when he described the first time he was going to sleep with someone other than his wife:

For twenty years I have walked around with, yeah, that I came across a lot of women with whom I wanted to do something, but I never did it. Each time I tucked it away, like, “can’t, shouldn’t, because I’m married” and now I was like, yeah, screw it; I’m going to figure this out. (...) Then you do have a moment in which you think like, what am I doing. But I thought to myself, this is what I want.

⁴I ascribe the unequal amounts of “queer-minded” and “holistic-minded” polyamorists to the fact that I encountered the former group “along the way”, after already having interviewed several people from the latter group, which I think is a process inherent to qualitative research, and in my view does not pose any problems regarding representativity.

All the holistic-minded polyamorists emphasized one or more crises in their lives, related to relationships, religion, and/or work, which were experienced as constraining one's inner essence. For instance, Simon (44, heterosexual), a married IT-engineer, was unhappy in his professional life: 'I come from a very technical background, no room for emotion and it began to break me up at work.' Because of his need for a more affectionate environment, he started a coaching trajectory called "emotional bodywork", which involves for instance breathing and touching exercises. This trajectory caused him to realize he had been hiding a playful, polyamorous interior under his "settled down" exterior:

[It] has continued the process of me getting more and more into my feelings. (...) This was so physical, that I began to get feelings for [my therapist] (...) Well, I've had this more often over the past twenty years, (...) but I've never done anything with it (...) but this was more intense. I had to do something with it. (...) I thought, well, this is it, this is what I've been missing all these years, and this is not going to change for the time being. (...) That has been choking me unconsciously (...) while the need was there, apparently. It came up violently. (...) [S]ince the first kiss last year, a lot has changed, I feel much happier, much more emotional, more joyful, but also more crying (...) I feel much sexier. I've started dancing again, the other day with Petra until late at night, in the disco. Yes, I feel eighteen again. "

Like Simon, Marijke (45, bisexual), one of the most spiritually literate polyamorist I interviewed, also felt personally restricted by institutionalized expectations. During her divorce, she was still 'very involved with the church', but she 'got stuck' in her religion at the same time her marriage stranded: 'I have knelt in the church for hours: "God, what is the purpose of love?"'. When she and her former husband divorced, she started to get more invested in spiritual practices, which 'initiated a quest' that brought her to her "true", polyamorous self:

Only after the divorce, I started to get to know myself (...) and I stumbled upon the tantric path, and there you learn the unconditional, universal love⁵ (...), opening your heart, and that has connected sexual energy with my heart. (...) [Universal Love] is what I already experienced in my relationship with God, too. Only (...) where I really got stuck were the intense, prescribed forms (...) so that basically went simultaneously with my marriage crashing (...) that there are certain prescribed that do not feel affectionate. And that's kind of been a parallel processes in me, and yes, in tantra they coincided (...).

⁵In spiritual teachings, "universal love" 'is an expression of the harmony of the totality (...) Everything fits and functions as a togetherness, as a oneness, and that oneness is you' (Almaas, 1997, p. 173)

Thus, religion, work, and monogamy are through interaction with holistic practices experienced as ‘alienating forces, estranging the individual from his/her ‘authentic’, ‘natural’ or ‘real’ self—from the person s/he is ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’ (Houtman & Aupers, 2007, p. 204). As Marijke notes: [I was] alienated (...) from myself (...) in my marriage in which I had promised to be faithful (...) I’ve always had to abandon myself to connect or stay with a partner, and this is the first time I’m completely at home with myself and with the other.’ Similarly, Marcel’s (32, heterosexual) turn to polyamory has brought him closer to himself but also alienated him further from common institutions: ‘That bubble in which [Felicia and I] live is so incredibly loving and so much directed at opportunities and happiness and playfulness, it has almost nothing to do with the rest of the world. So things like the news and such (...) it totally doesn’t fit my world.’

The convergence of holistic practices, experiencing a crisis and “discovering” who you “really are”, is a recurring pattern in the experiences of New Agers (e.g. Aupers & Houtman, 2007). As Marijke states: ‘what I often hear: “You *are* love”. (...) I think that that’s the essence.’ Love is thus perceived as a partner-transcending, universal essence, which is consequently at odds with monogamy. Like the socially constructed and biological notion of the self, this metaphysical perception of the self and love thus also leads to the experience of monogamy as an imposed norm, and likewise puts forward the perspective of the individual to achieve its deconstruction - but in this case, it is from the idea that truth can be known by looking into yourself. As Heelas (2008, p. 19) puts it when describing the holistic point of view: ‘the inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, power, authority and all those other qualities that are held to comprise the perfect life’.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The polyamorists in this study all deconstruct the traditional monogamous norm from the starting point that people are first and foremost “individuals”. In their view, love can be with more than one person as individuals are unique and therefore cannot “outcrowd” one another, there is no “other half” since individuals are complex, fluid and independent entities, and your partner does not necessarily come first, since individuals all have their own, unique worths. They often talked about letting go of the term “relationship” altogether to facilitate the customization of each connection according to the needs that apply to the particular constellation of individuals. These findings seem to strongly support the idea that people in general and relationships in particular have become “individualized” and that biographies are “do-it-yourself” matters rather than prescribed by tradition (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

Notwithstanding the degree of agency involved in polyamorous relationships, the findings nonetheless critique a reading that entirely adopts the position of the people it seeks to scrutinize, which would lead to the “unsociological” (though in sociology frequently suggested) conclusion that people and their relationships in “post-traditional” societies have become entirely unpredictable. While polyamory is laced with individualism, the latter here signifies ‘a vocabulary of motives, socially constructed as an individual that views itself as a choosing agent’ (Elchardus, 2009, p. 153). The established nature of this vocabulary becomes apparent in the extent of similarity between the individualized discourses and the readiness with which these were employed by the interviewees, implying that they can be read as “social” rather than “individual”. Indeed, polyamory, inclusive of its individualism, is a new institution in the making, as its vocabulary is actively constructed through self-help books, support groups, and continuous discussions among polyamorists in virtual forums, at drink events, and privately between partners. Failing to recognize the paradoxical character of individualism (Houtman, Aupers & De Koster, 2011) in post-traditional relationship types such as polyamory, has led not only to inaccurate academic conclusions, but also to moral conclusions about the state of caring romantic relationships - indeed, that they are decaying in the face of detraditionalization. Assuming that the presence of both a longing for freedom and security in one person form an irreconcilable contradiction (Bauman, 2003) overlooks the option of practices that integrate these two urges. Bauman’s dystopic view, in which having multiple partners signifies the inability of present-day people to form solid connections, is turned on its head by polyamory: rather than a symptom of weakening bonds, it exemplifies an alternative and meaningful relationship norm that forms a “solution” to the widely untenable monogamous standard. This shows how scholars themselves can be stuck in their own traditional thinking patterns, blinding them for the existence of meaningful, non-monogamous relationship types.

Pertinent to the idea that individualization is a social phenomenon, this study demonstrates that there are delineated interpretive context in which polyamory’s shared norm of individualism is embedded, namely queer and holistic culture. While polyamory can be considered an essentially queer practice from an etic perspective, as it deviates from the conventional heterosexual norm, this is not necessarily the case when assuming an emic perspective. While many polyamorists explicitly identified as queer, many of them did not. Most of these polyamorists had an affiliation with holistic culture, apparent from their practices and discourses, which exposes a neglected social group among those usually studied by scholars of polyamory. Considering the extent to which the holistic-minded differ from queer culture, the persistent habit to both take queer theory as a taken-for-granted approach and people who identify as queer as go-to informants in

polyamory research, overlooks polyamorists who by and large identify with the heterosexual norm and risks to misrepresent their motives by making the personal political without taking intention into consideration.

There is, however, an important agreement between queer and holistic culture: they are “inherently” tied to individualism. A resistance against traditional institutions such as monogamy, and especially the pressures these would exert on individual freedom, characterizes both communities. The ways in which they nominate “the individual” as the authority to resist this norm are, however, very different. Firstly, the queer-approach celebrates the individual through the anarchist idea that it can form a political counterforce to collective institutions, while the holistic-minded celebrate the individual through the idea that the highest attainable virtue is being your true, essential self. Secondly, within these cultures, there are three different perceptions of the self that interact with how the interviewees perceive of themselves as individuals. First, seeing polyamory as genetically founded in one’s nature bolsters the idea that one cannot help being oneself, that is, polyamorous. Second, and in contrast, a social constructivist notion of the self deems the individual agential instead of passively determined, as a lack of a self before culture implies that the self is a matter of individual choice. Finally, the metaphysical self sees love and the self as a “universal” essence. This approach is strongly embedded in “experience”, as it adheres to the logic “feeling is knowing”, which implies that “the inner realm” is the only valid source of “truth”.

The narrative of individualization has been eagerly applied by academics to explain a plethora of contemporary social phenomena, as it finds a smooth fit with the ubiquitous individualized language in contemporary culture, such as the vocabulary of polyamorists. As a result, applying the label of “individualization” is considered to be a more or less final explanation, and questions regarding its internal complexity are hardly awakened. Thus, individualization remains, by and large, a “black box” (Boudon, 1998). This study has attempted to open it up by using polyamory as a case. It shows that while the polyamorists display largely identical individualized beliefs about relationships, this individualism is a social phenomenon. Rather than a single, monolithic “individualization”, there exist multiple “individualizations”, which are embedded in well-defined interpretive contexts and ontologies. As this article can only provide a peak into this black box, it calls for the further dissection of the phenomenon of individualisation in the future. By not stopping at the conclusion that individualized discourses are a product of “the” individualisation, but asking the subsequent questions of what structural characteristics this individualisation has itself, what different forms it takes on, and what processes take place within it, the continuation of the within sociology rather persistent unsociological

approaches to this phenomenon can be circumvented.

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