

**Abstract** Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with bisexual-identified practitioners of polyamory in the UK, this article shows that love, intimacy and friendship are salient themes in polyamory discourses. An exploration of the question of how respondents define polyamory with regard to different ‘styles of non-monogamy’ reveals that the boundaries of polyamory are contested within the movement that has formed around this concept. The prevalent definition of polyamory as ‘responsible non-monogamy’ usually goes hand in hand with a rejection of more sex- or pleasure-centred forms of non-monogamy, such as ‘casual sex’, ‘swinging’, or ‘promiscuity’. The author argues that the salience of the relational ideologies of love and intimacy hampers the potential of polyamory to ground a truly pluralistic sexual ethics.

**Keywords** friendship, intimacy, love, polyamory, promiscuity

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## Polyamory and its ‘Others’: Contesting the Terms of Non-Monogamy

In the years between 1997 and 2003 I researched gay male and bisexual non-monogamous relationship practices in the UK. One of my major research interests was to explore what discourses on non-monogamy circulate within the debates on sexual politics in the gay male and bisexual movements. I deployed a combination of qualitative methods, inclusive of qualitative interviews, focus groups, documentary research, participant observation, and discourse analysis. I conducted 44 interviews with gay men, bisexual men and women with significant experience in non-monogamous relationship practice.<sup>1</sup> About the half of my sample consisted of gay-identified men. The other half identified as bisexual or lived in a bisexual context. I interviewed 10 bisexual-identified men, including two transmen, and one heterosexual-identified man. Ten

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Vol 9(5): 565–583 DOI: 10.1177/1363460706069986

<http://sex.sagepub.com>

bisexual-identified women and one lesbian-identified woman participated in the study. I further conducted four focus groups with gay and bisexual men. My study shares a problem with other research into sexuality in that the vast majority of participants were white subjects of dominant ethnicity with a middle-class background. I interpret this bias as a result of my own privileged social positioning as a white, high-educated, middle-class academic researching in a context marked by deep social divisions (cf. Phoenix, 1994).<sup>2</sup>

Although the term polyamory has been around for a few decades, it is not yet widely known in the UK and the European continent. Whereas polyamory has provided the reference point for a significant social movement in the USA for some decades (see Rust, 1996; Munson and Stelboun, 1999a; Sheff, 2005), the social networks that have formed around polyamory in the UK are still quite small (see Barker, 2005). However, for a few years, seeds for a movement have originated from within the intersections of a range of subcultures, including the bisexual and BDSM scenes, the Pagan and new age movements, computer enthusiasts, the Science Fiction Fan scenes, and political or countercultural groups committed to communal living. From within this diverse context, a small group of activists has started to do campaigning work around polyamorous relationship practices. Although polyamory is not essentially linked to any particular sexual identity, a significant part of the UK polyamory scene seems to consist of bisexuals or – as one of my interview partners<sup>3</sup> put it – ‘heteroflexibles’. It is not surprising, therefore, that polyamory emerged as one of the most significant discourses on non-monogamy used by bisexual-identified participants in my study.<sup>4</sup>

In this article I present polyamory as a specific – even if contested – discourse on non-monogamy. In the first part of the article, I carve out some of its dominant elements or themes. I foreground the centrality of love to definitions of polyamory and show that as a discourse it blurs the boundaries between the sexual and non-sexual and partnership and friendship. In the second part, I explore how my interview partners define polyamory with regard to other ‘styles of non-monogamy’. Polyamory is frequently distinguished from casual sex and swinging. I argue that in particular its definition as ‘responsible non-monogamy’ has repercussions for the representation of more sex- or pleasure-centred forms of non-monogamy. In the third part of the article, I argue that a representational politics based upon a distinction between the ‘good polyamorist’ and the ‘bad swinger’ or the ‘promiscuous queer’ hampers the potential of polyamory discourses for grounding a truly pluralistic sexual ethics that may embrace the diversity of non-monogamous sexual and intimate practices.

## What's in a term? The concept polyamory

Polyamory it is a contested term. Its concrete meanings have been an issue of ongoing debate. Charles talks about the difficulties within the UK polyamory scene in coming up with a consensus on a definition for the purpose of getting an entry included in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

*Charles:* There seems to be a lot of discussion about exactly what it means, because it seems to be a manufactured word. You won't find it in the dictionary, but at the moment they're looking for new words for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. They're trying to get polyamory in as one of the new words. They're having a big problem actually trying to nail down exactly what a definition of it is, because there's a lot of disagreement about [it] . . . I suppose it's good to distinguish it clearly, just in one word. If everyone wants to agree, it would be multiple relationships. It's good to make polyamory more specific, about more emotional relationships. . . . It's loving relationships. I suppose it may not have to be physical relationships even.

Charles emphasizes the conflicts about the meaning of polyamory. He believes that the definition 'multiple relationships' probably is the least controversial. He then goes on to suggest his own interpretation in which he describes polyamorous relationships as emotional, loving and not necessarily sexual relationships. His definition converges with that of his partner Marianne. She explains the etymological roots of the word as follows:

*Marianne:* Polyamory is . . . well it's a new word really . . . It comes from the Greek word 'poly' meaning many and then the Latin word, the Latin bit is 'amory'. I guess they went for the mixture of Greek and Latin, because the all-Greek version would be polyphilia, and philias are usually things like necrophilia and paedophilia, things that are associated by the public with being bad. And of course there was already the word polyandry and polygamy, meaning many husbands or many wives. So I guess that's how the word came about. But people, who identify as polyamorous believe in the idea of more than one relationship, meaning more than one love relationship. And they don't even have to be sexual.

Love is central to the discourses on polyamory. This is clearly revealed in an analysis of the etymological roots of the term. Marianne's speculations about the reasons for the combination of Latin and Greek elements are also quite illuminating, because they point to a concern with the creation of a 'nice' word that cannot easily be subsumed to a canon of pathologizing sexological terms. The notion of non-sexual partnership endorsed by Charles and Marianne is a specific feature of polyamory discourses. While Charles suggests that this definition is not necessarily shared by all polyamorists, it was a quite common emphasis in my interviewees' narratives.

## Polyamory – a love song

With the Latin part of the word polyamory meaning ‘love’ and the Greek part meaning ‘many’, polyamory literally translates into ‘many loves’ or ‘more than one love’. With slight differences in phrasing, it is possible to find this kind of definition in almost all publications on polyamory (e.g. Lano and Parry, 1995; Anapol, 1997; Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004a). As I have already shown, the emphasis of love frequently correlates with a de-emphasis of sexuality. As a discourse endorsing love, polyamory can easily be integrated with other philosophies of love. Thus, it is the significance of love within polyamory that makes it possible for Marianne to reconcile non-monogamy with her Christian beliefs (cf. Goss, 2004). While certainly not all polyamorists are religious, some Christian groups promote this concept, and some authors claim that the term originated in certain spiritualist contexts (Anapol, 1997: 5, 127; Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2004c).

Irrespective of belief, some of my interview partners clearly welcome the de-emphasis on sexuality in the definition of polyamory. Andy, who is very confident with his sexuality and who strongly politicizes bisexual identity, explains that he would prefer the term polyamorous over the identity label bisexual, because ‘bisexuality’ puts too strong an emphasis on sexuality.

*Andy:* It’s always got this sexual bit there, hasn’t it? And . . . my sexuality isn’t always about my sex life. My relationship also, as I said before, can be sexual, but polyamory is more to do with affection.

Most polyamorists used the term ‘partner’ to refer to their multiple relationships of varying degrees of intimate closeness or commitment. According to hegemonic patterns of understanding, partnership tends to be perceived as a sexual relationship – or at least a relationship that originally was based on sexual attraction. Marianne points out that the notion of a non-sexual partnership is something that most people, who are not familiar with polyamory, tend to have difficulties in understanding.

*Marianne:* I mean sometimes when I try to explain polyamory to my friends, they don’t get it, because they say . . . I mean especially, if it’s relationships that aren’t sexual, they say ‘oh but they’re just close friendships’. And I’m trying to explain that ‘no, they’re not just close friendships – they’re closer than a close friendship – they’re people that I love’. And you know, some of my friends that probably are truly monogamous, they just don’t get it. Erm, it’s funny really.

Marianne argues that although sex is an important side to her life, having many sexual relationships is not the point of polyamory. Many people who are polyamorous would have fewer sexual partners than people who practice monogamy, she claims. Marianne’s attempt to carve out a space for an understanding of polyamorous partnership that is not motivated by

sexuality and may even be non-sexual is illustrative of a discourse in that the emphasis on love often correlates with a de-emphasis on sexuality.

## Philosophies of friendship

Whereas Marianne maintains a clear distinction between polyamorous partnership and 'ordinary' friendship, some research participants stressed the significance of friendship in order to explain the specificity of polyamory (cf. Lano, 1995). Cath explains that what she values most in polyamorous relationships is the possibility for all partners to maintain intensely intimate relationships. To have an explicit agreement about non-exclusivity opens up the possibility to realize the full potential of different relationships. Polyamory contains the promise 'that people, who are not sexually close, house-mates, close friends, get the whole thing, all the way up and all the way down', she maintains. Within polyamory friendships are taken seriously and can demand as much affection, attention and consideration as sexual relationships. Cath is particularly fond of her female friendships. According to her experience, it is in friendships and sexual relationships among women that closeness and intimacy are most intense.

*Cath:* Amongst my female friends . . . we also care for and talk about a lot, the private details of our lives. What makes the foundation of our friendship is in some way how much information we have about each other. We are . . . trusting, we are . . . close, we've been in intimate touch.

Cath repeatedly juxtaposes her experience of great intimacy with female friends and partners with what she perceived as a lack of emotional openness in her relationship with her current male partner Pal. All of Cath's previous partnerships have been with women. Her experiences with female friends, lovers and partners have set the standards for what she perceives as a close intimate connection. Research into gendered patterns of friendship suggests that hegemonic masculinities do not encourage disclosing intimacy both in other-sex and (heterosexual) male same-sex friendships (Nardi, 1992; Allan, 1996). For Cath, it is the particular friendship *between women* that seems to provide the model for what she perceives as the true promise of polyamory (Munson and Stelboum, 1999a). Female polyamorous practice can draw upon a long tradition of endorsing female affection and friendship in lesbian and bisexual feminism (Rich, 1983; cf. Raymond, 1986; Weise, 1992), which is evident in the extensive discussion on the culture of 'romantic friendships' between women in 18th- and 19th-century anglo-phone cultures (Smith-Rosenberg, 1975; Faderman, 1985; Moore, 1996).

The idea of intimate friendship (both sexual and non-sexual) has a central place within polyamorous discourses. One of the qualities usually

associated with friendships is their generally open and non-exclusive character. Rothblum argues that 'friendships *are* polyamorous and this permission to love more than one friend is in contrast to the way we conceptualize romantic relationships' (1999: 75).

Cath's partner Pal, describes his approach to polyamory as a process of moving from friendship to partnership, implying a fluid continuum between these relationship forms.

*Pal:* I am very much coming from becoming very, very close friends and then having those friends being very intimate, much more intimate and sort of sharing a life with them, but I really don't like the idea of having a mould for a relationship in the way of doing it.

For Pal, friendship symbolizes a relationship without such a fixed mould, a relationship, as he goes on to explain, in which you negotiate with each individual which direction things may develop. In Pal's description the boundaries between friendship and relationship are ambiguous. Ideally, they are worked out creatively between the individuals involved. Friendship makes such processes possible, because it is usually engaged in voluntarily and, despite the closeness and interdependence it is predicated upon, it is conceptualized in a way that respects individual autonomy (Rubin, 1985; cf. Allan, 1996; Nardi, 1999). Being able to work out together the mould of each specific relationship depends on a high degree of self-reflexivity and other-directedness, two skills or qualities that have been described as core aspects of intimacy.<sup>5</sup>

Utilizing the ambiguity of the boundaries between friendship, partnership or lover relationship is an important aspect of polyamory. For Sharon and her partner Mark, to have sex with friends (even the ones that are not defined as 'partners') is not exceptional. For them, the sexualization of friendship may work in different directions: sometimes long-standing friendships can turn into more sexual relationships, sometimes sexual attraction marks the beginning of a later not necessarily sexual friendship.

Tales of friendship are interwoven in the narratives of many of my poly-identified interview partners. Polyamory appears to be a particularly friendship-centred discourse. It shares this features with other (gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer) discourses on intimate and sexual relationships (see Weeks et al., 2001). Kath Weston emphasizes the closeness or interrelationship of the concepts friends and lovers/partners in contemporary queer kinship discourses (Weston, 1991: 117–22). Although I cannot explore this issue in full detail here, it is noteworthy that some of my interview partners have also evoked the language of 'chosen families' when talking about their polyamorous relationships. Whereas the hegemonic discourse on 'chosen families' tends to foster rather normative representations of monogamous gay and lesbian couple relationships that may

or may not involve parenting (Weston, 1995), polyamory may have the potential to conjure up more complex images of what 'families of choice' may indeed look alike.

## 'Responsible non-monogamy'

At least potentially, polyamory covers a wide range of relationship and sexual practices. For Munson and Stelboun,

[t]he term 'polyamory' includes many different styles of multiple intimate involvements, such as polyfidelity, or group marriage; primary relationships open to secondary affairs; and casual sexual involvements with two and more people. (1999b: 2)

With some imagination this list of polyamorous arrangements can be endlessly expanded or differentiated: open or closed group marriages, triads, quads, V-structures, poly webs, primary, secondary and tertiary partners. The different 'types' of poly relationships have been discussed elsewhere (Nearing, 1992; Labriola, 1999). I am more interested here in exploring the discursive process in which polyamory is distinguished from other forms of non-monogamy. This discussion will show that not all polyamorists accept such an inclusive definition of the term. The enthusiastic celebration of the diversity of relationship forms under the umbrella of 'polyamory' in some publications is not necessarily reflective of a 'peaceful coexistence' based in mutual respect of people with different lifestyles in the poly 'communities'.

For many, polyamory is much more than a politically correct linguistic alternative to non-monogamy. For them, polyamory circumscribes a *specific*, i.e. pronouncedly *ethical* style of non-monogamy (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; Anapol, 1997; Bloomquist, 2000). Lano and Parry, for example, define polyamory as 'responsible non-monogamy' (1995: v). 'Responsible non-monogamy' exists, the authors argue, if all partners are aware of and share a consensus on the non-monogamous aspect of their relationship arrangement. This explanation touches on two extremely important themes within polyamory discourses: honesty and consensus. While the ethical ideal of consensus can only be worked out in a process of negotiation, honesty is the precondition for such a process to be possible at all (cf. Jamieson, 2004). I perceive honesty as *the basic axiom* of polyamory. Tony stresses the centrality of honesty to polyamorous relationship practices.

*Tony:* Well, there's a sort of a mantra amongst what you could call the polyamory community. And that's honesty, honesty, honesty! You've got to be honest about everything and say how you feel about it. But there's little you can do because they'll know anyway. Erm . . . so always the first consideration

is to try to be as honest as possible, even when you're saying things that you don't like.

Other central elements of polyamory that are discussed in both the literature and the interviews are communication, negotiation, self-responsibility, emotionality, intimacy, compersion,<sup>6</sup> all of which are closely linked to the dominant theme of honesty.

Even if the definitions of polyamory as 'responsible non-monogamy' differ in detail, they have one thing in common. They inherently evoke other forms of non-monogamy (or monogamy) that are less or not at all responsible. A range of interesting questions emerges from this perspective: Which non-monogamies are constructed as 'responsible' and can therefore claim to be truly polyamorous? Which non-monogamies are rendered problematic in this polyamory discourse and what are the mechanisms through which this is achieved? What kinds of non-monogamy are assumed to play the role of the 'other' to the ethical project of polyamory?

## Polyamory and its 'others': Different styles of non-monogamy

It is generally argued that the advanced ethical character of polyamory derives from its strong emphasis on love, intimacy, commitment, consensus and honesty. As I have shown earlier, the emphasis on love often tends to go hand in hand with the de-emphasis on sexuality. In this context it is quite interesting to see that from some perspectives polyamory does not appear as a distinctive (i.e. 'responsible') form of non-monogamy, but not as non-monogamy at all. From Marianne's point of view, being polyamorous and being non-monogamous involves quite different approaches. In particular when she compares her personal approach to Lara's (i.e. her secondary partner's primary partner), she makes quite clear that the crucial issue in this distinction is the different emphasis on sex.

*Marianne:* Basically most people that are poly will have several different relationships, and the idea is that you build each different relationship on its own terms . . . whereas non-monogamy is much more about open relationships . . . I mean all these terms are kind of very interchangeable. There's no set definition . . . Well, Lara's idea compared to my idea – she's much more open to sort of sex with friends and sort of more casual sex, and I guess polyamory's more about love and non-monogamy's more about sex really, because I mean there's different ways of doing non-monogamy. There are things like swinging, which is when . . . you have one partner, who is your partner who you love. And then you have sex with other people . . . like at parties, a sort of wife-swapping business.



Marianne juxtaposes her polyamorous approach that consists in 'taking each person on their own merits' and investing in a limited number of emotionally close long-term relationships with Lara's non-monogamous approach that evolves from the notion of 'open relationships' and is to a stronger degree defined by having multiple sexual relationships. Casual sex and swinging (that Marianne labels with the derogatory term 'wife swapping') are presented as forms of non-monogamy rather than of polyamory. Marianne emphasizes that 'there are no set definitions' and that these words are to a certain extent interchangeable. Indeed, she herself occasionally uses the term non-monogamy throughout the interview to describe herself. In Marianne's account non-monogamy and polyamory are not sharply contrasted. There remains some overlapping space for ambiguous or shifting identification. Yet, finally polyamory and non-monogamy mark distinct identities: polyamory emphasizes love, whereas non-monogamy is based on a sex-oriented lifestyle or identity.

Despite this distinction, Marianne does not imply that one relationship style would be less valid than the other. For her, these differences are primarily questions of personal preference or natural inclination. Although she herself is not that interested in casual sex, she does not question her friends' enjoyment of such activities. Even if her usage of the word 'wife swapping' for couples who frequent sex parties is slightly disparaging, Marianne does not make her dislike of these scenes explicit.

## 'We are not promiscuous' – a politics of differentiation

Others drew the line between polyamory, casual sex and, most of all, promiscuity in a more categorical way. Most polyamorists in my study felt uncomfortable with the term promiscuity because of its strongly negative connotations. The derogatory term 'promiscuity' implies that a person has 'unreasonable' numbers of sexual partners. It is frequently associated with immaturity, character-deficiency, shallowness, narcissism, egocentrism, relational incapacity, lack of responsibility, and worthlessness (Seidman, 1992; LeMoncheck, 1997; Klesse, 2005). Even polyamorists who considered reclaiming the term promiscuity from a sex-radical perspective (such as, for example, Pal) talked of some people as 'being promiscuous in a bad way'.

Emma talks about the widespread anger among polyamorous people in getting mixed up with people, who are into casual sex, swinging or 'promiscuity'.

*Emma:* Well, I mean polyamory and promiscuity is not at all the same. I don't think it could be contained within polyamory, because a lot of us have been

rather suspicious of people, if they don't have [any] intention of seeing us again, hopefully forming a long term bond with them. But . . . I mean there is this whole image that polyamorous people are swingers, are promiscuous, do it with anyone. There is a confusion between the two in the public. [There are the ones], which might have related commitments towards a small group, say three people that they're together with and never have a relationship outside of that, and to be then between these people, who just pick people for random and stay for a very short time, that's very annoying for a lot of polyamorous people, but that's what is concluded. It's really annoying that the things are mixed up together, that swinging is mixed up with polyamory, is mixed up with casual sex and any thing.

The major difference between people, who are into promiscuity, swinging and casual sex, and practitioners of polyamory is that the latter have fewer partners and an honest interest in building intimate long-term relationships. Polyamory, for Emma, is about commitment and emotional closeness and not about the ambition to having many sexual partners.

Emma evokes the image of a small group of people, who are committed to each other and faithful within the group, as a typical example of the polyamorous way of life. The model Emma seems to have in mind sounds very much like what within 'poly speak' is called polyfidelity (West, 1996; Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004b). Lano and Parry define polyfidelity as a '[r]elationship involving more than two people who have made a commitment to keep the sexual activity within the group and not to have outside partners' (Lano and Parry, 1995: 128). However, definitions of the term vary slightly. Deborah Anapol, for example, comes up with two alternate explanations in her glossary:

(1) [original usage] a lovestyle in which three or more partners who are all primary with each other agree to be sexual only within the group. More primary partners can be added with everyone's consent.

(2) [common usage] Polyamory, Responsible non-monogamy'. (1997: 179)

Whereas the first definition assumes polyfidelity to be a sub-category of polyamory, the second declares it to being synonymous with polyamory or responsible non-monogamy. By collapsing polyamory into polyfidelity Anapol can be said to engage in a hegemonic strategy, fixing its meaning in a particular signifiatory context (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). As I will demonstrate in the course of the discussion, what is at stake in these competing definitions is the question of what presents 'true' polyamory and which kinds of non-monogamy can legitimately carry the label 'responsible non-monogamy'.

Both Marianne and Emma (although in slightly different ways) define polyamory in opposition to sex-oriented styles of non-monogamy. Polyamory is most frequently juxtaposed to swinging. According to

Sharon, swinging describes a non-intimate, random, arbitrary and technical approach to casual sex.

*Sharon:* There's definitely a sort of emotion involved and . . . pretty much how ever you define or act on polyamory, there's emotion in it, whereas a swinger, whom I talked to about this, said the whole point is [that] there is no emotion. It's just about bodies and sex. It's like give her sex, give her a wank. Not really . . . that turns me off completely.

Being 'far too cold and clinical', swinging is the kind of sex that for Sharon comes closest to the meanings she associates with promiscuity. A similar objection to swinging can be identified in quite a lot of the popular publications on polyamory (Anapol, 1997: 10–11; cf. Petrella, 2007, forthcoming).

Many of my interview partners shared the reservations about swinging that are widespread in society at large. Apart from a critique of the notion of sex for pleasure, they saw swinging as being primarily rooted in heterosexuality. This became evident in the occasional reference to swinging as a practice of 'wife-swapping'. This term connotes a male-centred (hetero)sexual interaction based on the exchange of women. There is no place in this language for representing female agency in sex with either men or women. Sexual activity between men is not represented at all. Of course, there is some evidence in the scarce research into the dynamics of swinging sessions that most men are reluctant or anxious to engage in same-sex activities and that there is a high prevalence of homophobia among men in the swinging scenes (Bartell, 1971; D. Dixon, 1985; Allyn, 2000). According to this research, behavioural bisexuality is more common among swinging women. Moreover, women, who engage in swinging, often thoroughly enjoy their same-sex experiences and may even start assuming a bisexual identity (J. Dixon, 1985, 1984/2000; Rodríguez Rust, 2000). In a similar vein, Marlene explained that she discovered her sexual liking for women in the course of a swinging relationship with a befriended married couple that she and her first husband engaged in during the 1970s. Even after the end of their swinging relationship their friendship continued for more than a decade.

## The sex-radical critique of polyamory

The rejection of swinging and casual sex in polyamory discourses is not unequivocal (cf. Lano and Parry, 1995: vi; Easton and Liszt, 1997: 41). Some of my interview partners have raised objections to the tendency in the polyamory movement to define polyamory against promiscuity, casual sex, and swinging. They deplored the fact that the promotion of polyamory as an ethically advanced style of non-monogamy creates

divisions within the movement and undermines sex-radical politics. Pal is very aware of major differences with regard to the ways in which people practice polyamory.

*Pal:* Yeah, there tend to be big differences between very different ways of doing things. It's almost quite difficult to find your own ways and find what you *do* have in common, because, let's say; some people do have the idea of commitment, fidelity, being sort of sexually exclusive . . . I see that quite as an extension of a one-way doing of a relationship, referring to a . . . society thing, which I don't want to be part of. Other people are happy with that, because . . . that's what they want and they have thought about this and that . . . But sometimes I don't feel that I have a lot in common with the way they do their lives. The same sort of problems, conflicts come up . . . some were arguing that I do like to know lots of people with whom to start a relationship. So, yeah, that's definite open. See, these people seem to think their way is higher evolved . . . Some people say 'Why are you people promiscuous?' . . . It's quite a debate sometimes between people.

While Pal himself is committed to an 'open' approach to polyamory, he notices that others endorse exclusiveness and faithfulness. On a certain level, Pal assumes this to be a matter of personal difference. However, the issue gets more complicated, if relationship and sexual choices get politicized in a moralistic manner. Pal deplores the arrogance of some polyfidelitous people, who accuse him and his friends of promiscuity. That is why he suspects assimilationist aspirations behind the motivation of people, who endorse (group) marriage and faithfulness (cf. Klesse, 2006b).

Sibyl has even more profound political disagreements with the direction of polyamory activism. She sees a tendency among poly activists to distance themselves from swingers and pleasure seekers. For Sibyl, who takes an explicitly sex-positive stance, it is *politically wrong* to distance oneself from such groups. If it were not for these political reasons, Sibyl explains, polyamory might in fact provide an appropriate language for describing her current relationship practice. It is due to her political critique of the sex-negativity of some parts of the polyamory movement that she refuses such identification and opts for a non-monogamous identity instead. However, Sibyl does not want to foreclose the possibility that in the future more inclusive interpretations of polyamory may be possible.

When I took part in a workshop on non-monogamy in London, the concept polyamory was discussed quite controversially. One of the most outspoken opponents of the idea of polyamory was Benjamin, a gay man in his 60s, who has been very active in the gay liberation movement. Benjamin deplores the way that the term 'polyamory' etymologically privileges the notion of love and fails to include spontaneous or casual sexual encounters. For Benjamin, the celebration of polyamory equates with a denial to show solidarity with people, who are attacked as being

'promiscuous'. While he himself aspires to nothing more than building a monogamous partnership based on love, he does not want to diminish the casual sexual encounters that he has in the meantime.

Pal, Sibyl and Benjamin all argue from what could be called a sex-positive stance. However, there are differences between Pal's, Sibyl's and Benjamin's positions on polyamory, too. Pal elaborates his critique from within the paradigm of polyamory. He has personally been very active campaigning about polyamory, but is wary about certain tendencies within a movement he strongly identifies with. Sibyl thinks that current hegemonies in the poly movement render it inappropriate to identify with polyamory. Benjamin's position is shaped by an even more profound scepticism about the discursive effects of a relationship ideology that is built upon the concept of love. Despite these differences, their positions have in common a weariness that polyamory discourses bear the potential to reinforce the stigmatization of people, who seek sex for the sake of sexual pleasure, have 'unreasonable' numbers of sexual partners, or do not look for long-term intimate relationships.

What is at stake for all of them is not so much the question of their personal life practice or current relationship ideal, but the readiness to politically defend the validity of a diversity of queer relationship forms and sexual practices. According to their critique, progressive social movement politics should avoid adopting argumentative strategies that may reinforce the marginalization of certain sexual practices and identities. The presentation of polyamory as 'responsible non-monogamy' is based on the attempt to challenge the negative assumptions of non-monogamous people as promiscuous, over-sexed, self-obsessed, irrational and pathological (Seidman, 1992; see Levine, 1998; Klesse, 2005). However, rather than to deconstruct exclusive assumptions at the heart of promiscuity discourses, many polyamorists deploy an argumentative strategy that aims to demonstrate that the promiscuity allegation is not applicable to *them*. This strategy is based on an act of distinction. Polyamory is said to be different from promiscuity, swinging or casual sex. This distinction follows a logic similar to the one that Smith (1994) has identified as structuring what she calls the 'desire for an imaginary inclusion'. In her comments on lesbian and gay politics, Smith has argued that while certain strategies of representation seem to promise formal inclusion to respectable 'homosexuals' (i.e. the ones who do not challenge the heteronormative status quo), they continue to ostracize non-conforming or politically militant 'queers'. These modes of representation correlate with processes of 'othering' that primarily work through the discursive distinction between 'good homosexuals' and 'dangerous queers' (cf. Bell and Binnie, 2000). Some of my interview partners feared that exactly such a kind of mechanism may be at work in the juxtaposition of polyamory with

promiscuity. The problematic dichotomies they see getting established in polyamory discourses are ‘the good polyamorist’/‘the bad swinger’ or the ‘responsible non-monogamist’/‘the promiscuous queer’.

## **Conclusion: Love and intimacy as relational ideologies**

Throughout this article, I have emphasized that I do not think of polyamory as a unified discourse. Most aspects of polyamory are contested in the movement that is forming around it. At the same time, the discourse on polyamory is modelled around certain core themes: namely love, intimacy, honesty, communication and commitment. According to Jeffrey Ringer (2001), we can understand such themes as ‘relational ideologies’, i.e. a set of normative assumptions that frame and regulate relationship practices in particular ways. As a love- and intimacy-centred discourse polyamory can be presented as being superior to other forms of non-monogamy that emphasize more strongly the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Various strands of feminism have been extremely wary of the normative effects of the idealization of romantic love in particular in women’s lives (Evans, 2003; Jackson and Scott, 2004). Within the hegemonic heteronormative gender regime, ‘successful’ romantic bonding – with a male partner of a socially ‘approved of’ class and ethnic or racial background (cf. Haritaworn, 2006, forthcoming) – has got ascribed the power to validate women’s social lives. At the same time, true love has been implicated in the discourses on femininity that support a gendered double standard of sexual morality (cf. Pheterson, 1986; Klesse, 2005). Research indicates that adolescent women can often only legitimate their sexual contacts in their social environment, if they take recourse to romantic love narratives (Lees, 1993; Holland et al., 1998). The (new) salience of love narratives in ‘queer’ culture – which is also evidenced in the current prominence of the demand for same-sex marriage rights – is somewhat oblivious of the critique of love that has marked earlier periods of feminist, lesbian and gay or counter-cultural politics.

Just as love, intimacy assumes the role of a relational ideology that establishes normative expectations about sexual relationships. Berlant and Warner have argued that ‘[h]eterosexual culture achieves much of its meta-cultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy’ (1998: 553; see also Berlant, 1998). Contemporary hegemonic notions of intimacy are heavily influenced by therapeutic discourses (Jamieson, 1998, 1999; Klesse, 2006c). Normative assumptions regarding the value of intimacy are not limited to heterosexual relationship cultures. Gay male public and recreational sex cultures have been pathologized – both from without and within the gay male movements – for not sufficiently emphasizing emotional closeness and intimacy (Seidman, 1992).

The current celebration of love and intimacy usually bolsters the hegemonic ideal of the monogamous long-term couple (see Bell and Binnie, 2000; Califia, 2000). Polyamory is an interesting case here. The political and representational effects of discourses mobilized in polyamory activism are thoroughly ambivalent. Although polyamory heavily draws upon the discourse of 'disclosing intimacy' (cf. Jamieson, 1999), it cannot be said to foster the normative ideal of monogamy. Through the promotion of multiple partnerships, polyamory challenges the hegemony of the core couple as the only valid relationship formation. Many polyamorists see polyamory as a critical discourse that aims at diversifying intimate and sexual cultures. At the same time, polyamory discourses tend to establish exclusive standards for what should be considered an ethical sexual and relationship practice. Thus, polyamory seems to be positioned ambiguously in the conjuncture of diverse normative and counter-normative discourses on sex and relationships. The central role of love and intimacy in polyamory discourses renders them vulnerable to being appropriated by normative and assimilationist ideologies. Although some of my interviewees identified polyamory with a queer sex-radical agenda, this is why I have some doubts whether really one day, as Sibyl has been hoping, more inclusive interpretations of polyamory will gain hegemony.

### *Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank the research participants for sharing their experiences and ideas around polyamory. I am also grateful to Jinthana Haritaworn and Chin-ju Lin for their continuous encouragement.

### *Notes*

1. The majority of research participants resided in London and the south-east of England, others lived in (or around) Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Dublin, Glasgow, and Edinburgh.
2. For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of my research sample and of methodological concerns regarding questions of social positioning and intersubjectivity in the research process, see Klesse, 2003.
3. With the usage of the term 'interview partner' I intend to acknowledge that the production of knowledge in the context of qualitative interviewing is a joint enterprise and an active collaboration between researcher and research participants. Due to inherent connotations of differing degrees of activity/passivity this aspect is not so well expressed in a terminology that distinguishes between interviewer and interviewee.
4. Polyamory emerged as a significant trope in my interview partners' narratives only when I started to interview people who had closer links with the bisexual movement in the UK. While most of the bisexual research participants in my study strongly identified with polyamory, only one of the gay male research participants declared his strong sympathy for the concept.

5. Idealistic accounts of polyamory come very close to what Giddens (1992) has described as the 'pure relationship'. However, critics have argued that this model implies a reductive notion of intimacy and does not reflect inequalities and power imbalances in the relationship context (Jamieson, 1999; Klesse, 2006a).
6. The *Polyamory Society* defines compersion as follows: 'the feeling of taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves, especially taking joy in the knowledge that your beloveds are expressing their love for one another' (<http://www.polyamorysociety.org/compersion.html> [accessed: 25 June 2005]).

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### **Biographical Note**

See Introduction – Biographical Notes.