

# **Polyamory as a possibility of feminine empowerment**

Daniel Cardoso, FCSH-UNL, [danielcardoso@gmail.com](mailto:danielcardoso@gmail.com)

Carla Correia, FPCE-UL, [c.sofiacorreia@gmail.com](mailto:c.sofiacorreia@gmail.com)

Danielle Capella, FCSH-UNL, [dcapella@gmail.com](mailto:dcapella@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

This work affirms itself as being eminently theoretical, in spite of having some factual bases. This work affirms itself as being an attempt to demonstrate the potential for several different concepts to interact with one another. And herein, the authors do not intend to remain as mere observers of facts or designers of theories - quite the opposite. By recognizing a bias, one can address it, characterize it.

So, the intention here is clearly one of social intervention. Against sexual and relational normativity, we intend to place ourselves as developing a sexual-loving-positive discourse towards an idea of empowerment and construction of the self.

Even though some of the ideas we are to present needn't be exclusively applied to women, we feel there are some particulars of this work that, according to the latest research, make more sense when talking about women. Besides, this is also an attempt at promoting a feminist point of view.

The concept of sexual fluidity is one of the cornerstones of this academic exercise, and we intend to use it respecting the caveats that the authors themselves have used. That is to say: although sexual fluidity can be an important part of some women's lives, it can play little to no role on others. So, this is not about setting a supreme or better model, but an attempt at diversity, and at thinking about the backgrounds and different shapes diversity can take.

## **Polyamory - concept(s)**

«'Polyamory' refers to the open acceptance of multiple romantic/sexual relationships», say Barker and Ritchie (N/D). « Polyamorous people openly engage in romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships with multiple people simultaneously», says Sheff (2005). «Polyamory [...]is the desire, practice, or acceptance of having more than one loving, intimate relationship at a time with the full knowledge and consent of everyone

involved», according to the English version of the “Polyamory” entry on Wikipedia (N/D). The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2009) defines it as «the state or practice of having more than one open romantic relationship at a time».

Although these definitions might seem quite similar, there is one easily verifiable difference: how much agencing and *praxis* each one allows for, In an almost innocent way, as a route to defining polyamory. The first two definitions come from academic sources who have been dealing with polyamory for a long time now; the last one from a dictionary. It should be noted that this last one is the only that emphasizes «the state or practice» as a necessary element, whereas Barker and Ritchie mention only acceptance and Sheff talks about polyamorists by addressing what they do (but not *only* what they do). On the other hand, Wikipedia joins practice and acceptance with one other element: «the desire [to]», and leaves behind the semantic field of “openness” to make clear that which in the other definitions is only present as sub-text: «full knowledge and acceptance».

Now let us look at a definition coming from Portugal: «Polyamory is a kind of relationship in which each person is free to maintain more than one relationship simultaneously» (Poliamor – O que é?, N/D). There are two differences here at stake: first, this definition is the only one to talk about freedom (meaning individual rights) and about a “person”; second, it makes no attempt to specify the kind of relationship being talked about. It is apparently taken for granted that it’s talking about love (namely what is usually known as romantic love), but it’s not talking *only* about romantic love. The complement to the definition comes in the negative form: «It doesn’t follow monogamy as a model of happiness, which doesn’t imply, however, promiscuity». This opens the door to several models to be explored, all of the unclearly defined, along with an attempt to avoid reducing the definition to the sexual component.

Indeed, what can be seen here is an interesting component, present in some degree in all of the definitions: the subject’s agencing. The different levels of involvement necessary to meet the definition, some of which are explicitly stated, invariably point to the acceptance, enmeshment and opening of an agent. As a counterpoint, is marriage or monogamy ever defined as an “acceptance” or an “opening”? If one looks at these definitions from this point of view, they seem to enclose in themselves an appeal to take a different path, an appeal to openness and acceptance – and makes it the center point of the definitions themselves.

The relationship with sex is also turned into a locus of debate, like in the case of the Portuguese website. As it was mentioned above, the reductive perspective of the sexual component is avoided, but then again, it seems as if the sexual question is wholly avoided. There is also a constant discursive tension between polyamory and other sex-related standardized behaviors – such as “promiscuity” in the example above, or swinging in other cases. In a text called “Polyamory is not about the sex, except when it is” (2008), Mint does an analysis of the interaction between polyamory and sex, framed by the reading of Foucault.

In it, he identifies the differentiation polyamory makes from the stereotypical monogamous love relationship as one of the main loci of power. Since those are socially bound to sex, polyamory cannot disentangle itself from addressing both questions, thinking itself in its relationship with sex, even when it’s just platonic polyamory we’re talking about. Then, “once the rule of sexual fidelity has been broken, everything else is up for grabs [...] we would not have platonic polyamory without the sexual-level power challenges of the larger polyamory movement” (2008). This question is centered around what the author calls “genital attachment”, the idea that whatever is done with one’s genitalia is revealing of a superior kind of truth. Polyamory uses this nexus of power to challenge monogamy (or how needs are thought about in the context of an amorous relationship, in the case of platonic polyamory); this alongside with the centering of discourse on relational and amorous issues. The intended side effect of this is the attempt to avoid the “sexual minority” label.

But there’s also a less theoretical aspect that’s also interesting when it comes to the word “polyamory” itself. Its appearance speaks quite emphatically about the need for something other than a descriptor of a sexual behavior, notwithstanding what has just been said. The word was created during an online flame war (Alan, 2007), and eventually spread out and was translated across many languages around the globe. There is a semantic gap that had to be filled here, and the reasons for this semantic gap lead us to think about what kind of normativity might be at stake here, and how do they interact with love, sex, feminism and polyamory.

As it can be seen just by looking at the definitions herein presented, a lot of emphasis is given to the individual, to what she can do and wants to do. This constitutes a stark difference from hetero- and mononormative relationships, where the person simply must adhere the best they can to a certain way of action, previously predefined. This is

not to say that heterosexual or monogamist relationships all must adhere to said model, and that is why the “normative” part of the expression used is so important.

The normativity mentioned here relates to that uncritical thinking that characterizes some relationships, where social models are absorbed and adopted, at least at a discursive level, as being “natural” or “good” (versus all the other alternatives, considered deviant or a mark of someone disturbed).

So, if the figure of the subject is central to polyamory, one other thing follows: each person, with their own subjectivity, will embark on a different *praxis* of polyamory. This makes it both difficult to come up with a definition of polyamory in a level other than description or enumeration and allows for great variation from individual to individual, thus making it theoretically harder to polarize behaviors.

On the other hand, that diversity also encourages acceptance of those very same variations. And, why not?, it also promotes acceptance of what is *not* polyamory.

### **A feminist reading of Polyamory**

It may very well seem that this is a sexist man's dream.

And the community knows it. One of the most important references to be found online (judging by its Google ranking on a search on "polyamory"), Xeromag, seems to have its front page on polyamory written with guys in mind.

"But polyamory is not polygyny. Polyamory applies equally to everybody. In an ethical polyamorous relationship, the same opportunities are afforded to everyone, regardless of their sex. Polyamory is not about collecting a bunch of women for your harem. Polyamory is about sharing some part of your life and sharing your love with more than one other person--and your lovers sharing some part of THEIR lives and some part of THEIR love with more than one other person. Polyamory is not about "owning" your lovers and hiring an army of eunuchs to make sure they don't stray" (Veaux, 2008)

In the last section, we've established the importance of the self in the process of being polyamorous. Now, the Other comes into play. And the Other here is the woman (still) as there is a very clear rethoric that takes the place of the reader as one coming from a position of hetero- and mono-normativity, but it does so only to unravel any possible contradictions of that positioning. And, even more importantly, that unraveling is made by conceding the Other with the position we've previously seen applied to the self. One of many blurring of borders is precisely this - there is no right nor reasoning applicable to the self that is not at the same time applicable to the Other.

Feminism has long been concerned with relationships - and especially with how women seem to be framed mostly as part of a relationship, as caregivers, and hardly if ever that relationship and care is actually the care for the self.

Barker and Ritchie point out three factors that sum up a feminist approach to hetero- and mononormative relationships:

“Monogamy is a restrictive state reflective of the ownership of goods and people inherent in patriarchal capitalism, with women being degraded and reduced to servants, slaves to men’s lusts, and instruments for the production of children.

- There are gendered power dynamics within monogamy which allow women little autonomy or opportunity to develop their identities because they privilege the stability of the couple over individual experiences and solitude

- Monogamous relationships separate women from their friendships with each other. (Barker & Ritchie, N/D)

But why could polyamory be any different? Well, by all the above reasons, there is great difficulty in establishing a domination relationship based on a capitalist model, there is almost a compulsion for the definition and experimentation of one or several identities (and no necessary centering on the couple), and nothing points to monogamy here (obviously!).

And if we now take a closer look at what some sociologists say, we might begin to understand a bit of the background - the feminist background - this can be given. For ease of analysis, let us join several authors and try to draw a somewhat clear picture from there. Notably, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2003), Giddens (1993) and Kaufmann (2008).

What can we conclude from such different authors? The bottom line can be something like this: family, or the notion of family, has never been a static concept, it has always evolved with time. And the latest turns have made it separate itself even further from what we hold as the traditional model. And as women gain their sexual and emotional independence, conflicts between different roles and models start being more obvious, and contradictions (like those of the pure relationship) become more evident. Even the sexual revolution has led to an increased strain upon women's role, say Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2003). And if it's true that, according to the same authors, it has served to turn the "perfect relationship" into a sort of obsession, it is also true that many different alternatives are being tried out, as ways to try and escape the fundamental contradictions these authors have identified.

Polyamory is one such alternative. It's interesting to see how much of polyamory seems to fit rather well with Giddens' (1993) pure relationship. And it's also interesting to see how this pure relationship isn't gender specific, nor specific to one particular kind of love or relationship. The pure relationship, where the relationship stands (or fails) by what the people involved can obtain for themselves in connection to every other person is more of a stance on relationships. And that is quite comparable to what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim say about the way people approach relationships nowadays (in this case, specifically romantic ones) - it seems they're always trying to find what suits them better, what seems to be more convenient and in line with each person's desires and goals.

Now, notice that this applies to women as well as to men. But this growing relevance of what could be called a private or intimate sphere of life as another possible venue of confrontation brings to the fore that kind of discourse that has been, until recently, firmly on the side of the feminine identity. Feelings are seen as opposing reason in our culture - or were. And so one of the main loci of feminist activism is this movement of bringing to the fore what was supposed to be only of the feminine sphere.

As Barker and Ritchie (N/D), along with Sheff (2005; 2006), have shown, though, this can also be a double-edged sword. Just like the sexual revolution has added some extra pressure upon women (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2003), this familiarity with the discourse of feeling that women have can also add some pressure. It's interesting to notice how Giddens (1993) frames this question as a masculine problem with intimacy, something that seems to be deeply ingrained in our social functioning. And the "emotional narrative of the self" Giddens mentions seems quite close to something that Sheff mentions, an element of empowerment for women. This ability to re-do the narrative/biography of the self and use it as an affirmation of political, social and personal relevance is one of the main elements we wish to emphasize here. Challenging the social norms of how to do relationships is part of this remaking of the biography of the self.

And in redefining our coordinates, we open ourselves to a possibility of empowerment. Men can enter the discourse of feelings and emotions by transforming the meaning of masculinity, and women can affirm themselves and use this growing relevance of the feminine sphere to challenge the overly strict definitions of gender, and by doing so, subverting them (Butler, 1999).

Like we've mentioned, the issue of polyamory doesn't relate only to emotions. Sexuality also plays a big part. This is where the topic of sexual fluidity conflates with polyamory. We will now do a brief walkthrough of what sexual fluidity is, and how the openness of polyamory could be an enabler, an empowering enabler, for sexual fluidity.

### **Looking back - Freud's bisexuality and present-day "unlabeled"**

Around one hundred years ago, Freud showed us a new perspective about the human sexuality. One of his assumptions was the bisexual nature of the individual, which he thought to be a natural law, reflecting the biology of the human being (Freud, 1920, in Mijolla & Mijolla-Mellor, 2002), and so being one constitutional characteristic of the person (Freud, 1923). This bisexuality is considered to be, moreover, fixed very early in the development of the infant, more exactly in his second year, being related with the anal stage, as Mijolla & Mijolla-Mellor (2002) tell us.

By the traditional view of Freud, this bisexual ambivalence crystallizes and origins two different identifications: one paternal and one maternal. These two identifications will maintain a delicate equilibrium, from which will be reflected the sexual orientation of the individual (Freud, 1923). As so, every individual is, at the same time, attracted to both sexes, although it is "supposed" that people usually only establish love relationships with people from one of the sexes: in other words, is supposed that people are homosexual or heterosexual.

In the mentioned paper, the author exposes also his point of view: the bisexual ambivalence is a very important feature when it comes to the Oedipus complex, since it influences it in two important ways. First, it is responsible for the outcome of this complex, through the fragile balance between the sexual predispositions (homosexual and heterosexual). Their relative strength will determine if the identification is made to the same-sex parent or to the opposite-sex one. Second, the constitutional bisexuality of the child implies that the Oedipus complex must have a double strand: the child not only loves the opposite-sex parent and feels the same-sex parent as a rival, but also loves the same-sex parent and feels the opposite-sex parent as a rival. In other words, there is a *positive* Oedipus complex, in which the child shows his heterosexual tendencies, and there is also a *negative* Oedipus complex, in which the child shows his homosexual tendencies. Both of these strands are always present, and they should be, so that the development of the child may be healthy.

Moreover, in his work of 1925, Freud tells us about the differences between the women and men. He thinks that the anatomical difference between them (lack of a penis) causes repercussions in the psychic structure through the formation of the *superego*. One of the differences would then be the fact that women have a more emotional behavior than men, since their *superego* would relate more to their emotions and it would be less inexorable than the masculine. We think that this can be related with the strong difference that seems to exist between men and women when it comes to sexual variability (Baumeister, 2000): maybe a more yielding *superego* gives the women the overture they need to have more flexibility in their sexual lives. We will return to this point later on.

The bisexuality is so important in Freud's view that it appears as a fundamental factor, without which it is not possible to understand the sexual events both in men and women (Freud, 1920, in Mijolla & Mijolla-Mellor 2002). This clearly show us the real meaning that this feature had to this author, even if it is, often and in a very convenient manner, forgotten. In reality, this psychological bisexuality is something to which Freud gave a great importance, what was a real innovation in his time.

In a paper written in 1933, Freud goes even farther and gets really near of some of nowadays thinkers, when he talks about femininity and masculinity as artificial constructs which don't reflect reality, but only some aspects of the person. This can be related to the gender stereotypes, which try to make each one of us to fit in small boxes to which society calls man and woman. But reality is a lot more complex, and the polarization between only man and only woman is a mere simplification of a possible plethora of genders that have come to be or might come to be.

Later on, in the same paper, he talks about a particular expression of the bisexuality in women: the alternation between periods of greater expression of masculinity and other periods of greater expression of femininity (Freud, 1933). Once again, this points towards a greater capacity for sexual variability that women have, a concept central to this essay.

Summarizing, Freud gave a great importance to the notion of psychological bisexuality, which he thought that was responsible for a number of events, namely: the evolution of the Oedipus complex, which was for him the cornerstone of the mental health; the different kind of *superego* that can be found in women; the wavering between more masculine and more feminine periods along a woman's life.

## **A long road ahead – What is (a) sex?**

*“I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974.”*

*Jeffrey Eugenides, Middlesex*

After this short summary of Freud’s ideas, it is time to think about the evolution of the notion of bisexuality. Unfortunately, the “way forward” wasn’t directly from his words, and some of his discoveries were somehow pushed away, and are being recovered nowadays.

The post-freudian authors have given more importance to the early interactions of the child with her surroundings and the significant people in a very precocious moment of his development (Mijolla & Mijolla-Mellor, 2002), and by doing so, offsetting the idea of an original bisexuality.

In our point of view, Freud’s notion of a constitutional bisexuality has its merits, but it lacks the grasp of many nuances related to love and sex life, but also to the sexual and global identity of the individuals. Nowadays, there is more, much more than simply man and woman: we have transsexuals, hermaphrodites, travesties, transgender, and so on... How can we fit all these in the simplistic definition of man and woman, and heterosexuality and homosexuality?

With our more open society, people are starting to feel free to express themselves in ways that weren’t even dreamed of in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century society in which Freud lived. People are rediscovering what it means to be a man, and to be a woman, and some people are also discovering that none of those categories applies to them.

The great question of our times in this aspect is, undoubtedly, what makes a person a man or a woman. We don’t have the answer for this now, and probably we will never have it. Just like Freud (1933) said, masculinity and femininity are only concepts, and a person is much more complex than that. If in every one of us there are features that belong to the stereotypes of both sexes, what is there that makes us belong to one or the other? And are there only two sexes?

Even from just a biological point of view, we are not sure if there are just two sexes. What determines that? External organs? Genetics? There are some people who are born with both a penis and a vagina. What should we call them? Are hermaphrodites a different sex? Is it fair to them that the parents tend to decide for them what their sex is

when they are too young much to know what they will want to be? Maybe that child really feels like a woman. Or maybe the child feels like a man. Or maybe (s)he doesn't feel like either! And when we talk about genetics, a woman has XX chromosomes and a man has XY chromosomes, right? Well, Doyle & Paludi (1995) talk about chromosomal abnormalities linked to the sexual chromosomes, from which the more common are the Turner syndrome (XO), the Klinefelter's syndrome (XXY) and the XYY syndrome (XYY). What will we call to these people? They don't fit in those small boxes. Maybe they feel like *regular* men and women – it is possible, and to be expected, since some of these conditions are rarely diagnosed. But this shows us how complex and intricate the sex question may be...

Let's now talk about the psychological side. People don't always feel well with the body which they are born with, and they don't identify themselves with the sex of that body, or even when they do, they may not be comfortable with the rules to which they are *supposed* to obey, just because of the gender roles. This is a problem which can cause great psychological pain and suffering, and is sometimes depicted in mainstream media – for example, the real life-based movie *Boys don't cry*, or the Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*. Those are just two examples who talk about individuals who don't feel they fit in with what the society expects them to be. Gender problems are not well seen or understood by the society, and these people are often victims of discrimination, because they don't conform to the gender stereotypes. About this, Doyle & Paludi (1995) put the question: "Is androgyny the answer?". They define androgyny as the "integration of positive feminine and masculine personality traits in one individual" (p. 83). They think that it isn't. In their opinion, the real and good answer is social change – society must stop emphasizing the sex-stereotyped valor of the behaviors, and instead value them because of their intrinsic value. We agree that this can be an answer, really, but it stills leaves open the view of the world as a black-and-white setting of two and only two sexes.

We've mentioned earlier the transsexuals, hermaphrodites, transvestites and transgendered people. All these are particular cases that make us think and question the man-and-woman sex duality, and consequently the homosexual-and-heterosexual duality, and even the idea of bisexuality. Because the idea of bisexuality only makes sense if you think about the sex in the referred duality. If you think that there might be a multitude of sexes, or even more, that the sex isn't important, because before all the

rest, each one of us is an individual, the notions of homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality make a lot less sense.

For example: if a person falls in love with a transgender, what is that person? A homosexual? A heterosexual? A bisexual? None of these? All at the same time? This is an issue which has, for now, no answer, but it calls into question the rightness of the concepts of sexual orientation that are currently in use.

Freud (1933) noticed some women had shifts between a “more feminine” behavior, and a “more masculine” one. He saw this as a manifestation of their bisexuality, but we think we can go farther. Baumeister (2000) defends that women’s sexuality is more plastic than men’s: could not those two aspects be related? Could not this ambivalence noted by Freud be the sign of a greater plasticity of the women in a variety of aspects that exceed the sexuality? After all, the author showed how several different factors, some of which can maybe influence others contexts of women’s lives, contributing to a consistency between attitudes and behaviors. Diamond (2009) then added many other sources in seeking to destabilize some notions about sex, gender and orientation that seem to have crystallized in academia and in common sense.

Freud also mentioned another point that can be related to this greater plasticity of women in their sexual life: the fact that their *superego* relates more to their emotions and it is less inexorable than the masculine. Through this, we can perhaps embark on a rereading and updating of what Freud didn’t actually say but couldn’t fail to notice and point out. Maybe Lisa Diamond’s concern with a dismissive attitude towards “statistical anomalies” goes further back than she thought herself. A more permissive *superego* may very well be a factor that is part of the psychoanalytic version and interpretation of a sexual fluidity. This more permissive *superego* thus represents a greater latitude of action by the self, less constricted by archetypical and seemingly immutable social constructs as codified in language and culture and, thus, in the *superego*.

And so we come to a seemingly growing difficulty in defining gender and, by consequence, in defining orientation. Maybe this is why one of the categories for sexual orientation (and one of the most picked, too!) in Diamond's study was "unlabeled". Obviously, this subversion is, in a Butler-like sense, strictly connected to identity. Let it be noted that identity comes into play again, for it is important that it happens so.

### **Sexual fluidity**

Although this idea isn't new, the concept of sexual fluidity was created by Lisa Diamond (Diamond, 2009). It can be defined as the "situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness" (p.3), and it is the characteristic that allows women to be attracted to both men and women, independently of their sexual orientation. Ultimately, it creates a feature which is transversal to sexual orientation: not directly dependent of the sex or gender of the person with whom the woman involves herself, but depending mainly of the characteristics of him or her. It is about loving and/or being sexually attracted to a person, more than to a man or to a woman.

This concept has its roots in works done by sex researchers of different areas (psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc), which noted that women having same-sex relations are much more common than one could think, even if they identify as heterosexual, and have lived most of her lives as such. This posed some questions to the researchers, and they eventually concluded that sexual orientation isn't as fixed and immutable as we previously thought. Sophie (in Diamond, 2009) found in her work that women are susceptible of unexpectedly changing their orientation's self-identification and the way that they express themselves through the sex, and concluded that our current identity models don't reflect this possibility, and so they need to be adjusted. It was noticed, nevertheless, that this is a mark of western societies: other cultures have a more open opinion about changes in sexual desires, looking at them as normal and expected, and not thinking about the sexual orientation as something we are born with (Diamond, 2009). This goes in line with Foucault's notion of sexuality as an invention of the modern (western) world (Foucault, 1994).

It was only in the 1980's that the special relevance of sexual fluidity in women's sexuality started to appear by itself. One of the first people that called the attention to this was the poet and feminist thinker Rich, who designated what she calls a "lesbian continuum" (in Diamond, 2009), which included all kinds of strong bonds between women, from deep emotional relations to sexual relations. This author defended that it didn't matter if a woman was having or not homosexual relations in a certain moment, she was still capable of a great range of different degrees of intimacy with other women. Research has also tells us that there are a myriad of factors that can influence the "moments of change" that characterize the sexual fluidity. Kitzinger & Wilkinson (Diamond, 2009) and Rust (in Diamond, 2009) point out some of them: sociocultural influences and opportunities, as well as interactions between personal and cultural factors. One crucial factor seems to be falling in love: Diamond (2009) refers that

sometimes, unexpectedly, women fall in love with someone of the same sex, and that this emotional connection may be strong enough to make them reevaluate their sexual identity.

### **Sexual fluidity and love**

But how do these two things connect? Or: aren't those things already connected, as we have said before? Both questions seem to rule each other out, but in fact they point towards different things. When we talked about the unwavering connection between love and sex when addressing the concept of polyamory, we were talking about social constructs as well. Lisa Diamond (2009) - and Baumeister before her - talks about the physiology and neurology of sex and love.

And whereas the social construct is of the binding together of both functions, love, she says, is "unoriented", as it relates to attachment, a mental process that can be done using any gender. And given that "there is no plausible evolutionary basis for other-sex *or* same-sex orientations to be coded into the basic psychological and biological processes of pairbonding" (Diamond, 2009), then the correlation between self-reported sexual orientation and actual practices is bound to be ascribed to cultural influences. And indeed, she points out that the road between love and desire is a two-way road, especially for women, where falling in love for the "wrong" gender (meaning the gender that is not contemplated by one's self-reported sexual orientation) can (and does) lead to desiring that person (and potentially reviewing one's sexual orientation).

So, thinking about different ways of loving may end up being almost the same of thinking about different ways of understanding one's own orientation - at least, for women. And thinking about different ways of understanding both love and sex, by drawing upon the paradigm set by sexual fluidity may be a way to further develop a potentiality that seems to be present in quite some women, with some consistency.

### **Let's begin with love - Polyamory as a setting for sexual fluidity**

Then, it seems we need to redo the connection between love, sex and polyamory (the pun would no doubt work better using "multiple loves"). Let's begin with love then, with love's potential to destabilize sexual behaviors in women. The result, we posit, is that it becomes less and less relevant whether polyamory is truly (ontologically) about love or about sex, but that polyamory focuses on love, on feelings, as its main drive, as

its discourse of election that it uses to convey meaning. And by doing so, it gains the power to directly address the questions and possibilities raised by sexual fluidity.

By defending and setting as its standard the possibility of non-exclusive relations and non-exclusive feelings, polyamory seems to provide a whole different background in which to live and try out different love configurations. And in a way, this contradicts to a point the effects of social and situational convergence either towards a heterosexual or a homosexual stable and normative identity.

Obviously, this is not without problems. Beyond problems arising from the aforementioned difficulties in recreating sexual and gender identities, this subversion can itself be subverted by applying a heterosexist framing. The polyamorous community knows this. As an effect of that, two different expressions have been coined, meaning the same - HBB (Hot Bi Babe) and "the unicorn". Both relate to a couple-centric notion where a heterosexual couple finds another woman to live/have sex with them, or to serve as an appendix to the relationship. What we have here is the notion that the male derives pleasure by proxy from the homosexual liaison of his "wife" and another woman, whom also satisfies him directly. But even that is a - although quite realistic - hypothesis that completely undermines the sheer possibility of that woman (the one already part of the couple) wanting to explore different possibilities. And although this notion is viewed as male-centered and abusive, there is the seemingly insurmountable fact that Sheff's interviewees had quite some trouble trying to point someone as being heterosexual in their acquaintance groups.

It seems, then, that in spite of the outer precautionary stance on male-dominant views, in the end non-heterosexuality ends up being quite relevant, and in one of the most comprehensive studies currently available (data from the USA, study conducted by Ryam Nearing, called "the "Loving More Magazine" study", in 2000) shows that about 44% of the respondents' that chose to identify as women relations were with women.

So, to conclude our main point, it seems that the data confirm what we've been arguing: the social setting of polyamory encourages sexual fluidity, and it is viewed as empowering and challenging, as having something to contribute to feminism as a social and political movement. So whether love or sex comes first in polyamory theory matters little, since each one can lead to the other, when it comes to women's sexual responses; what matters here is that feelings - that almost sacrilegious word that has long been the domain of femininity - now takes the background, and in a seemingly feminine (as per the stereotype), fluid way.

This is what is empowering. From the perspective of feminism, polyamory constitutes a bold statement in the area of bringing relationships into what was thought to be the feminine realm, and with it comes also a feminine model of approaching sexuality. Polyamory and sexual fluidity are confluent, and have the ability to nurture each other into empowering women, into enabling the reinterpretation of gender, sex, orientation and power. Through love.

### **Work to be done...**

Still, there are things missing. Data is one of them. Some studies are being conducted right now on the topic of polyamory. A book is being prepared, edited by Meg Barker. But the theme is still far from wide-spread, far from understood or researched. We appeal to you all to this topic, and hope to spur some research on this in Europe, where it is most lacking. Also, in your other fields of expertise, we hope that by presenting this essay we've raised some awareness to the possibilities and configurations that polyamory and other forms of responsible non-monogamous relationships can bring to the table. As said before, polyamory seems to be an attempt at an answer to the emotional and social conundrums we're experiencing as post-modern dwellers of an ever-changing world.

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