

## **Poly Economics –Capitalism, Class, and Polyamory**

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Suggested running head: **Poly Economics**

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### **Abstract**

Academic research and popular writing on nonmonogamy and polyamory has so far paid insufficient attention to class divisions and questions of political economy. This is striking since research indicates the significance of class and race privilege within many polyamorous communities. This structure of privilege is mirrored in the exclusivist construction of these communities. The article aims to fill the gap created by the silence on class by suggesting a research agenda which is attentive to class and socioeconomic inequality. The paper addresses relevant research questions in the areas of intimacy and care, household formation, and spaces and institutions and advances an intersectional perspective which incorporates class as nondispensable core category. The author suggests that critical research in the field can stimulate critical self-reflexive practice on the level of community relations and activism. He further points to the critical relevance of Marxist and Postmarxist theories as important resources for the study of polyamory and calls for the study of the contradictions within poly culture from a materialist point of view.

### **Keywords:**

Polyamory - Nonmonogamy - Intimacy - Households - Class - Capitalism

## **Poly Economics – Class, Capitalism, and Polyamory**

Over recent years, polyamory has received a significant amount of attention in mainstream media, popular psychology and social science literature. Sheff and Hammers (2011: 201) describe polyamory as “a form of association in which people openly maintain multiple romantic, sexual and/or affective relationships”. For a long time the term was only used among small circles of people, who took an interest in countercultural debates on consensual nonmonogamy. This situation has changed in the face of community building and campaigning work by activists and the popularisation of the concept in mass-marketed pop-psychological relationship manuals (Klesse 2007). Mainstream media accounts often stereotype polyamorists as delusional and narcissistic, but positive representations are no longer exceptions (Ritchie 2010; Ritchie & Barker 2006). Although polyamory is still an under-researched topic, there has been a steady growth of research, which took off with the publication of several pioneering texts by activists and activists/scholars in the 1990s and gained momentum in the early-mid 2000s (Barker & Langdrige 2011). The common lack of engagement with power relations is a striking feature of the emerging polyamory debate across the genres of self-help, activist, and academic literature (Haritaworn et al. 2006). Contemporary writing on nonmonogamy often fails to deploy overarching frameworks of political analysis which go beyond narrowly defined identity political concerns. This marks them as distinct from the wider political agenda of antimonogamy arguments advanced in the 1960s and 1970s within

feminism, gay liberation and anticapitalist countercultural movements (Jackson & Scott 2004). Over recent years, only a handful of texts have engaged with the social divisions and exclusive dynamics bound up with polyamory (Haritaworn et al. 2006; Klesse 2007; Noël 2006; Rambukkana 2010, *forthcoming*; Sheff & Hammers 2011; Willey 2006, 2010). More systematic discussions from the angle of political economy are still outstanding. This article begins to fill this gap by applying Marxist and materialist feminist, Black feminist and queer of colour critiques to the study of polyamory. My primary task here is to sketch an agenda for future polyamory research from class and political economy perspectives.

The article is organised as follows: In the first part, I detail major characteristics of polyamory as an intimate practice. In a review of the literature on polyamory I show that poly communities tend to reproduce a culture of multiple privileges, namely around class and race/ethnicity. In the second part of the article, I present an outline for a class-focused research agenda around the following three areas: intimacy and care, household formation, and spaces and institutions. I conclude by arguing that the socioeconomic inequalities that are prevalent in polyamorous communities can only ever be challenged effectively, if the ambivalent position of polyamory with regard to the cultural dynamics of neoliberal capitalism are fully understood.

## **Revolutionary Love or a Culture of Privilege? Background and Literature Review**

For many people polyamory functions as an umbrella term for all “ethical forms of non-monogamy” (Lano & Parry 1995). Polyamory endorses the values of shared knowledge, commitment, integrity and consent (Emens 2004). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, polyamory consists of “the custom or practice of engaging in multiple sexual relationships with the knowledge and consent of all partners concerned” (Polyamory 2007). In reality, of course, consent is contingent and always compromised by power imbalances between partners (Klesse 2007). The same applies to other values, which are salient in the philosophy of polyamory. Some authors suggest that feminist values of egalitarianism have shaped polyamory as a discourse (Ritchie & Barker 2007; Klesse 2010). It is a core principle of polyamory that both men and women can enter multiple partnerships, which distinguishes it from (patriarchal) polygyny, the most common practice of polygamy worldwide (Sheff 2005). Some authors consider potential overlaps between the categories, for example in cases in which all partners in a polygamous relational setting adhere to the values associated with of polyamory (Emens 2004). Yet others point out that polyamory designates not only a way of life, but also a distinctive social or erotic identity. This is why they think the term should only be applied to people who self-identify in this particular way (Tweedy 2011).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christian polygynists in the USA and Canada usually distinguish their agenda from that of polyamory communities. The latter, too, tend to emphasise differences between the approaches (Stacey & Meadow 2009). However, in comments to the debate on legal marriage reform, conservative journalists have frequently conflated the concepts. The most common argument is that the legislation of same-sex marriage will lead – in a slippery slope – to the cultural acceptance of multiple marriage of both polyamorous and polygynous kinds. If same-sex marriage has not yet done it already, this will finally undermine the traditional values of

The verbal commitment to gender neutrality does not mean that of poly communities (and poly intimacies) are not profoundly troubled by gender inequalities in practice. The following problems are addressed in research publications: the sexual objectification of women by men, men's refusal to engage in emotional labour or to contribute a fair share to domestic labour, including child care (Klesse 2005, 2007; Sheff 2005, 2006). As Wilkins (2004) has shown in her study of nonmonogamy in USA Goth culture, such contradictions are rendered invisible, if the definition of feminism is limited to a concern with women's sexual emancipation only.

For Munson and Stelboum (1999b, p. 2), 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". The terminology of primary, secondary or tertiary relationships is commonly used to mark differences between relationships in more complex relational networks in terms of precedence, intensity, or commitment. Geometrical shapes or letters are used to denote the numbers of partners involved in certain constellations and the emotional or erotic dynamics among them.

Examples include the terms triangle or quad for multi-partner relationships in which all people are closely involved with one another, or

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marriage (see, for example, Kurtz 2005; for a similar argument in a different context, see Duncan 2010). In many cases, these arguments are presented with an explicitly racist slant, conjuring up the spectre of hyperpatriarchal Muslim polygyny at the heart of a nation defined as Christian (Denike 2010; Rambukkana forthcoming).

V, Y, Z, W or X for multi-partner relationships, in which only some people in the group share a mutual connection (Benson 2008, pp. 48-49).

Polyamory stands for a patterned multiplicity and research indicates that rule-based prioritisation (e.g. around primary/ secondary partner distinctions) is quite common (Klesse 2007). Wosik-Correa (2010) refers to this tendency of containment as “agentic fidelity” and Finn (2010), as “dyadic commitment”. Many multi-partner relationships raise children, a fact which adds to the complexity of polyamorous relationship or family networks (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2011; Sheff 2010). Polyamorous parenting practices frequently transcend biological kinship ties and are prime examples of the “chosen families” phenomenon (Weston 1991). Yet as Emens (2004: 306) reminds us, the above-mentioned typologies can never exhaustively represent polyamory: “[B]ecause the number of people in poly relationships has no theoretical limit, the models of poly relationships are also theoretically limitless”. Rigid typologies are therefore not helpful in this context.

### *Multiple significations: sexualities, emotions, politics, and identities*

Defining polyamory as responsible nonmonogamy implies that polyamorous relationships are of an erotic or sexual nature (Munson & Stelboum 1999b, p. 1). However, not everybody agrees on this point. It is not uncommon to encounter the argument that nonsexual relationships, too, can be polyamorous (Scherrer 2010). Ertman (2005, p. 487) discusses

the following scenario: “[I]f a lesbian couple has a child by alternative insemination, using a gay man as a known donor to the father of the child, and the donor remains involved in the child’s life, I see the arrangement as polyamorous”. Ertman then expands her argument to also include relationships in which *none* of the participants has an erotic connection with others in the network on the condition that “there is some requisite level of intimacy associated with organizing lives together” (2005, p. 488). Moreover, the special value placed on friendship in poly culture means that nonparenting and nondomestic (nonsexual) relationships, too, can be construed as poly relationships.

The relative significance of love and sex in the definition of polyamory has been subject to ongoing debates within polyamorous circles (Klesse 2006). Some see the predominance of love in polyamory as instantiation of a regressive “poly romanticism” (Wilkinson 2010). Polyamory reworks at least some key elements of late 20<sup>th</sup> century romantic love discourses. There are also highly politicised discourses on poly love, such as, for example, its stylisation as site for a bi/ queer contestation of heteronormativity (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2009); an eco-revolutionary force of evolution (Hedde 1999); an anarchist subversion of identity categories (Heckert 2010); or a nodal point for the development of environmentally sustainable forms of life and anticapitalist politics (Wilkinson 2010). Polyamory has also been invested with hopes for spiritual growth and the promise of self-actualisation and mutual empowerment (Anapol 1997; Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2009).



Ertman's (2005) reference to lesbian and gay identities in the quotation above indicates that polyamory can transcend heterosexual paradigms. Consensual nonmonogamous practice is quite common in lesbian, gay male and bisexual (lesbigay)<sup>2</sup> and certain transgender or gender-queer cultures (Adam 2010; Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004; Bauer 2010; Klesse 2007; Munson & Stelboun 1999a). Yet polyamory is not confined to any particular sexual identity category in terms of gendered object choice. Many poly-identified people are heterosexual and many poly communities are predominantly heterosexual in composition (Sheff 2011). Polyamory communities have sprung up in many localities in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. In the USA, the polyamory movement has achieved a high degree of organisation (Anapol 2010; Aviram 2010). In many European countries processes of community formation are well on the way (Klesse 2011).

Research into polyamory has mostly drawn a rather homogeneous picture of polyamory networks or communities (Klesse 2007; Ritchie and Barker 2007; Wosik-Correa 2010). Sheff and Hammers' (2011) review of 36 research studies into polyamory and BDSM<sup>3</sup> shows that most of them present research samples composed of predominantly white subjects holding above-average educational qualifications and occupying advanced socioeconomic positions. Sheff's own extensive qualitative research into

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<sup>2</sup> The term lesbigay is used for example by Carrington (1998) and Sheff (2011).

<sup>3</sup> BDSM stands for Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission and Sadomasochism.

USA polyamory communities is illustrative of this trend. Sheff conducted two interconnected studies (*Gender, Family and Sexuality: Exploring Polyamorous Communities*; 1996-2003; 40 in depth interviews and the *Polyamorous Families Study*; 2007-present, an additional 41 participants). 89% of the interviewees identified as white; 74% held professional jobs; 88% had some university education; 67% held a Bachelors degree; and 21% were currently completing graduate degrees. Her *Overlapping Identities Study* conducted in 2005 sampled 64 respondents who identified as polyamorists, swingers or fetishists. In this study, 90% of the participants were white and 95% had completed or were enrolled on an undergraduate degree. Weber's survey (2002) for the *Loving More Magazine* mirrors this trend. This survey was completed by 1000 respondents in the USA, who were recruited through a chain-referral sampling method. 40% of all participants had a postgraduate or graduate university degree, 30% a College degree, 26% had attended some College and 4% had a High School Diploma or lower qualifications (2002, p. 4).<sup>4</sup> Weber also points out that poly households have a higher income levels than the general population. In the 36 studies reviewed by Sheff and Hammers (2011) people of colour make up between zero and 4% of the respective research samples.

### *Class and race privileges*

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<sup>4</sup> These are the degree categories used in Weber's (2002) survey.

There are a variety of possible explanations for the consistent reproduction of such homogeneous depictions of polyamory communities. Sheff and Hamers (2011) deplore a widespread lack of concern of many researchers with race, class, age, and disability as “demographic factors” and instantiations of power relations. Even those who make an effort to recruit research participants from within subordinated groups often find that difficult, because of a widespread scepticism among minoritised communities towards social research which has stereotyped and misrepresented their concerns (Klesse 2007; Phoenix 1994).

Other explanations derive not from scrutinising research culture, but poly and BDSM communities. Researchers and activists have complained about the racial exclusivity of many poly, BDSM, and other sexual dissident communities in European and North American research (Butler et al. 2010; Haritaworn et al. 2006). As I have argued elsewhere (Klesse 2012), the endorsement of reflexivity, relationship talk, the rationalisation of emotions and carefully scripted negotiation in polyamory favours particular modes of habitus, which are much more prevalent in middle class cultures (see Skeggs 2004). This, too, reinforces class divisions. Further explanations can be identified in the effects of the legacies of classed and racialised politics of respectability. Bourgeois nationalism construed monogamy and sexual respectability as the civilisational achievement of white Christians of European descent and the prerequisite of the higher classes (Mosse 1985). This went hand in hand with the denunciation of Black people and other ethnic or religious groups as oversexed and lacking of sound ethical standards (Bhattacharyya 1998).

Stereotypical representations of the working classes stripped them, too, of the privilege of the status of respectability. Skeggs' (1997) UK research shows how the confluence of sexist and classist discourses on lewdness impose a regime of tight control with regard to young working class women's sexual behaviours and erotic subjectivity. Notions of respectability and targeted promiscuity allegations have been central to the histories of racism and the reproduction of class power. Black people (and other racialised groups) and working class people are likely to be exposed to grave stigmatisation if they publicly assume nonmonogamous identities. This underscores the constitution of polyamory (and other nonmonogamous identities) as a site of privilege. The complex interconnection between race and class privileges in education and the labour market further explains the close correspondence of class and race based exclusions.<sup>5</sup>

Polyamorous people's lives are at odds with the conventions of compulsory monogamy. As a result of this, they may face stigmatisation and discrimination. Some are shunned by their families or peer groups, bullied at work or in school, or have custody rights for their children contested (Emens 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2011; Sheff 2005). Yet I agree

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<sup>5</sup> Hall suggests that race and class need to be examined in their interconnections, but rightly assumes the relative autonomy of each division: "combined and uneven relations between class and race are historically more pertinent than their simple correspondence" (1980, p. 339). Yet he insists that race is the "modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'" (p. 342).

with Rambukkana (forthcoming) that many poly people, too, hold privileges. Rambukkana defines privilege “as a systematic relationship where one individual or group monopolizes some resources to the detriment of other individuals or groups”. Through the control of resources, privileges establish relations of power across various territories, ranging “from the concretely material (such as food, water, fuel, or land); to the social and cultural (such as employment, opportunity for advancement, respectability, wealth, ability to walk the streets at nights, ability to run for or hold high office); to the conceptual (such as ‘rightness’, ‘normalness’, ‘naturalness’, ‘goodness’, ‘wholeness’)” (forthcoming). Rambukkana adds that privileges always operate against the backdrop of structural forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism or capitalism. This is why class perspectives and a concern with the “simultaneity of interlocking systems of oppression” (Combahee River Collective 1979) are vitally important for the study of polyamory. In the context of polyamory, privilege is a pressing issue on various accounts: (a) the structural exclusivity of poly communities in terms of class and race, (b) the marginalisation of certain groups *within* poly communities and (c) the difficulties of intersubjectively negotiating power differentials within crossclass or crossracial intimacies. The latter two issues are important, because even if poly communities are predominantly white, highly educated and middle class, they are not necessarily exclusively so. Tensions regarding class and racial/ethnic differences thus do occur within polyamorous communities and relationships (see Klesse 2007; Sheff 2006).

Polyamorous communities will only be able to measure up to their self-set expectation to advance “egalitarian” routes to intimacy and eroticism, if the culture of privilege which underpins current poly relationship and community practices is fully understood. I believe that social research can play an important role in assisting and sustaining practices of critical self-reflection within social movements and countercultural settings. This is why I present an agenda for future research into polyamory which is attentive to questions around class and economy in the remainder of the article. I focus on the three core themes of intimacy and care, household formation, and spaces and institutions, and show how class perspectives are vital for understanding how social divisions shape polyamorous people’s lives.

### ***Intimacy and care***

Research concerned with power relations has frequently looked at how access to and control of resources impacts on decision making in relationships. Resource theory was first applied to the study of married (Blood & Wolfe 1960) and later nonmarried cohabiting heterosexual couples (see Felmlee 1994). Relationship research, which has paid attention to class has often looked at differences in earning as a source for “differential defining power” (Peplau et al. 1997). Weeks et al. (2001) adopted this term in their research into same-sex relationships in the UK to understand how differential access to economic resources may impact the power balance between partners to bring about certain decisions.

They expanded the concept to include a consideration of social capital in Bourdieu's (1986) sense, to take account of "the extent to which individuals can access local or community knowledge and support" (pp. 117/18). Other work has argued that this kind of analysis should incorporate the whole range of typologies of capital defined by Bourdieu (1986), in particular his notion of cultural capital, because social capital is always mediated by cultural value attributions (Erel 2010).

The concept of "relationship defining power" is certainly helpful, but it has its drawbacks, too. While it can be used to highlight material inequalities, it approaches these problems primarily as a matter of negotiation and mutual decision making. The negotiation model has sustained hegemonic liberal conceptualisations of relationship life in Euro American societies under sign of "reflexive individualization" (Giddens 1992). This framework forecloses the consideration of more radical dependencies, which may apply to situations in which people do not have the chance to leave a relationship, without abandoning their home, basic care provision, or access to their children. Material dependency is translated into an ultimately idealist understanding of intimate power as a matter of intersubjective psychological power imbalance. While this interpretation is to a certain extent valid and legitimate, it may be more adequate for some situations than for others.

I did use the concept "relationship defining power" myself in my study of gay male and bisexual consensual nonmonogamies in the UK, to analyse the power asymmetry in a polyamorous family which was about to purchase a house. In this situation, according to a partner who could not

contribute to the mortgage, most important decisions regarding the purchase, the distribution of living space, etc. were left to the ones with more financial resources (Klesse 2007, pp. 125-127). Yet in this scenario, too, not only was the weight of this partner's voice in the decision making process at stake, but also questions of property ownership, which have an impact on future life prospects, in particular in case of separation.

Detailed research into the question of how class differences are articulated in polyamorous relationships and families is urgently needed. Relevant research topics include financial and spatial arrangements, income generation, property relations, division of labour, work and care biographies, distribution of finances, consumption patterns, etc. In the following section, I will discuss in particular the question of care work in more detail.

The organisation of care work and the division of labour between partners and family members or within (or between) households has been an important focus of feminist research. Marxist and materialist feminists have extended the analysis of the gendered division of labour and the "feminization of care work" towards a wider theorisation of class relations and the mode of production/reproduction nexus (Delphy & Leonard 1992; Ferguson 1988; Sargant 1981). Antiracist feminists have further highlighted the exploitation of racialised female labour in the (post)colonial organisation of labour in global capitalism (Anderson 2000; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010 and this volume). While writing on polyamorous parenting suggests that poly relationships and families can pool resources



and share parenting and care responsibilities among multiple adults (Emens 2004; Riggs 2010; Sheff 2010), it may still be of great importance for some poly families to have access to professional child care services. Such services are usually very costly (Jackson 2011). The outsourcing of domestic labour is a common prerequisite of middle class families or relationships. Research into couple relations shows that domestic workers are often employed to avoid conflicts regarding the division of domestic labour. The record for egalitarian patterns of distribution of housework is poor within heterosexual relations (Jamieson 1998). Studies of same-sex relationships suggest that only those who can afford childcare or who draw on substantial out-of-home services (such as meals in restaurants, laundries, etc.), come close to an egalitarian ideal (Carrington 1999). In many cases, one partner specialises in homemaking, a decision which is usually driven by economic reasoning (respective career chances, pension arrangements, etc.). The structural disadvantages of women and Black people in the labour market (through, for example, differential pay and employment discrimination) means that gender and race have to be considered as structural and structuring factors here. Even if there tends to be an emphasis on equality (notably gender equality) in polyamory discourse (Emens 2004, p. 25), it is not reasonable to assume that poly relations address these problems any better than other intimacies (see Sheff 2005).

Feminist writing on gender relations in communes suggest that even projects which set out with a decisively political vision of egalitarianism, tend to reproduce gender and class divisions in their everyday lives (Glenk

et al. 2010). Asymmetries include gendered differences in the amount of time people spend on certain tasks, gendered differences in terms of the consumption of certain goods, and class differences in terms of living standards once people decide to leave a communal project, even where this was based on collective property arrangements. Only on the basis of detailed research into the organisation of care work in poly relationships and households can we understand the position of polyamory in the wider “total organization of labour” (Glucksmann 2005).

### ***Household Formation***

Household models have been central for developing policies within transnational, national and subnational bodies of governance. For example, the social policy provision of European welfare states has traditionally been modelled upon a universalised heteronormative model of the nuclear family (Carabine 1996; Cooper 1993). Many European societies have over the last two decades witnessed statutory changes which signal a growing trend towards legal recognition of same-sex relationships and families (Kollman 2009). In the UK, the introduction of a range of laws, including the Adoption and Children Act 2002, the Civil Partnership Act 2004, the Equality Regulations (Sexual Orientation) and the Equality Act 2010, have resulted in a liberalisation and diversification of policy provisions and to an incomplete and uneven institutionalisation of lesbian, gay and bisexual equality work across various levels and

sectors of government (Monro 2010). In the USA, same-sex marriage has been recognised in several jurisdictions, although recognition of the federal level has so far been blocked by the Defence of Marriage Act 1996. The category sexual orientation (usually referring to gay and lesbian and occasionally to bisexuality) has been included in many workplace equality statutes in the USA (Tweedy 2011). However, the creation of such laws does not guarantee that the development of policies and public opinion mirror their liberal intention. The legal recognition of same-sex intimacies often coexists with high levels of popular hostility towards LGBTQ people (Klesse 2007; Stacey & Meadow 2009).

Yet it is noteworthy that there have not yet been any remarkable legal provisions which aim at safeguarding the recognition and equal treatment nonmonogamous or polyamorous people, relationships or families (Emens 2004; Klesse forthcoming; Tweedy 2011;).

Models of economic development which have driven the programmes of financial institutions such as the World Bank have been criticised by feminist and queer scholars for their implicitly heteronormative framing of family and gender relations (Bedford 2009, 2010). A unitary model of the nuclear family has shaped both the dominant model of “new home economics” (based on a family unit in which women do unproductive care work and men act as breadwinners and altruistic decision makers about family resources) (see Becker 1991) and its feminist critiques since the 1980s from within bargaining perspectives (which envision partners and other family members as independent agents with different interests).

Standard accounts of development policies frequently use the terms “household”, “family”, “married couple” or “husband and wife” interchangeably. The fusion of the household with heterosexuality results in the exclusion of transgender intimacies, same-sex desire and homosocial bonds. It further renders it impossible to recognise the role of friends or nonbiological kin in the production of care work and reproductive labour (Bergeron 2010, see Roseneil 2004). The discussion so far reveals that governmental bodies (including transnational institutions, national and local governments) operate with economic household models derived from the image of the nuclear (heterosexual) couple based family. The lack of consideration of alternative households and families leads to biased strategising in planning which has negative implications among others for polyamorous households. Housing is an important and obvious issue here. Suitable housing is a prerequisite for the creation of larger poly households. Since landlords are not necessarily sympathetic to polyamorous families, urban planning and social housing providers are usually not familiar with or prepared to engage with the housing needs of non couple based multiadult family formations. Moreover, bullying within neighbourhoods is a not uncommon experience for poly families which is why suitable housing may present a significant problem (Andersson 2007). Whereas poly families who have the resources to get a mortgage, tend to find advice in guidebooks to polyamory (for example Benson 2008; Easton & Liszt 1997), no consideration is usually given to the practical concerns of those who do not have such resources. “Money makes everything easier” is the lapidary last comment of a housing advice page

of the website *Polyfamilies (How to Find Housing for the Poly Family 2004)*. Having the financial assets to buy a home or to pay a certain amount of rent creates options regarding the question of where to live. In a social context where geography is an important mediator in class based value determination, and in which postcodes determine access to schools, higher education institutions, etc. (mediated by classist and racist mappings), housing turns into a significant factor regulating resource distribution (Byrne 2006; Taylor 2007).

Queer friendliness is often stylised as the requisite of an enlightened middle class cosmopolitanism, a fact which masks the fact that homophobia transcends class barriers and that working class queers and queers of colour may get victimised in acts of anti-queer violence, often shaped by dimensions of both classism and racism (Mason 2006). Yet as we have seen above, claiming ownership of a jointly inhabited house, also grants a significant amount of power, which includes the act of power to eject a partner or ex partner from the house, if a conflict happens to escalate.

Many people may not have any desire to live in the same home with their partner/s (or any one of them). Others may find it easier to keep up with the conflicting demands of multiple relationships, if not all partners live in the same space. Yet it is necessary to have significant resources for travelling in order to keep long distance relations alive (Jackson 2011). Housing, household formation and relationship or lifestyle contingent mobilities are relevant themes for future class focused research into polyamories and consensual nonmonogamies.

Badgett (2008) has argued that economists need to profoundly rethink their basic concepts, including the household model, if they want to adequately theorise erotic diversity. “Making lesbian, gay, and, bisexual people visible within economic theory requires more than forcing them into standard economic conceptions of family based on gender differences alone” (p. 21). She goes on to argue “that lesbian, gay and bisexual people do not emulate the heterosexual marriage model when creating interpersonal relationships characterized by love, commitment, sacrifice, and interdependence, in other words, in creating what we might commonly think of as ‘family’” (p. 21). Badgett argues that even if same-sex couples may appear to be similar to heterosexual couples at first sight (for example with regard to the nature of commitment and the kind of emotional or physical intimacy), economic models derived from heterosexual households (whether based on the premises of a single family utility or a bargaining dynamics) will always fail to explain certain aspects of lesbigay household members’ behaviours (p. 26). Drawing boundaries around families based on assumptions regarding romantic love, erotic activity and/or legal relationship status further underestimates the scope of expansion of many lesbigay families. According to Sheff (2011, p. 487), lesbigay (couple based) families do converge with poly families to the extent that “[e]ach constructs chosen families from a mélange of biolegal family members, lifelong friends, and/or current and former lovers”. As I have shown elsewhere (Klesse 2007), lesbigay and poly families are not mutually exclusive sets of entities. Yet, due to their potentially quite complex structure, polyamorous multipartner families are

even more likely to display patterns too variable to be mapped through one dimensional nuclear family household models.

Although detailed research into the household arrangements of poly families is still to be carried out, existing ethnographic studies show that many poly families are families with multiple incomes (Sheff 2011). Many publications on polyamory emphasise the common practice of pooling resources, including income gained through wage labour of several family members (Emens 2004; Sheff 2010). Benson (2008) discusses a variety of different formal and pragmatic approaches which household members may adopt when dealing with multiple incomes and multiple categories of expenditure (such as goods for individual or collective consumption). Closer insight into the economic arrangements of poly families and relationships is of high importance, if we want to gain an adequate understanding of the power dynamics and structure of privileges within poly relationships.

The economic underpinning of the families of marginalised groups is often a powerful theme in the misrepresentation of these groups in the public sphere. For example, the myth of gay male affluence, which sustains powerful popular antigay sentiments has depicted gay men and lesbians as hedonistic consumers through the DINKY (Double-Income-No Kids) discourse, that is, as people who are well off without having any parental responsibilities (Chasin 2000; Hardisty & Gluckman 1997).

Far from being reality, the representation of gay men and lesbians as an economically privileged group has the effect of masking common

employment discrimination against lesbigay people and ignoring the practice of lesbigay parenting (Badgett 1997; Binnie 2009). In the case of the stereotype of gay and lesbian affluence, popular resentment is primarily mobilised on the grounds of class envy. Yet the denigration of particular familial and relationship practices can also be stirred by resentments stemming from contempt and disgust. Working class women who raise children out of wedlock and on their own are frequently framed as promiscuous and cast as welfare scroungers (Reekie 1998). In the USA, Black working class women in particular are stereotyped through the figure of the “Welfare Queen” (Cohen 2001).

The conviction of Mick Philpott in the UK for killing six of his children in an arson attack for which he was convicted for manslaughter (alongside with his wife Mairead and a friend, Paul Mosely) in early April 2013, triggered intense media coverage and a public debate about violence, class, benefit culture, illegitimacy and nonmonogamy. Mick Philpott had been at the centre of media attention since the mid 2000s. An unemployed father of 18 children<sup>6</sup> Philpott had lived for many years with his wife and an unmarried female partner and several children. Before his unmarried partner, Lisa Willis, left their joint home with her five children, 11 children had lived at the household. The family had become subject of angry attacks in the tabloid media already in 2006 because they claimed child benefits and had requested a larger council house. The Philpott case gained national notoriety in 2007 when Philpott appeared on the Jeremy

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<sup>6</sup> Some media articles talk of 17 children, however, the judge referred to 18 in court (Philpott jailed for life 2013).



Kyle show in 2007 to defend his way of life. Philpott became a kind of anticelebrity, built up as a public enemy figure by conservative critics who pointed to his case as a symbol for the alleged excesses of British welfare culture and the fading of moral standards. Due to intense media coverage, it also became common knowledge that Philpott had been convicted of attempted murder of an ex partner as well as a violent attack on her mother, and had been charged repeatedly for other acts of violence in the past. There is evidence that he had a long history of domestic violence and of systematically controlling, manipulating and abusing the women who were his intimate partners (Mick Philpott jailed for life 2013). Yet when he was convicted for the death of his children, who were killed as a result of a failed plan to frame his ex partner Lisa Willis for attempted murder, in order to gain custody, there were few mentions of “domestic violence” (Neate 2013). At a moment, when the UK government was implementing harsh cuts to benefits, media outrage about his deeds was channelled into targeted and histrionic attacks on the welfare system. The *Daily Mail* run the headline: “Michael Philpott: a perfect parable for our age: His story shows the pervasiveness of evil born out of welfare dependency” (*Mail Online* 2013a). A day later, the newspaper called him the “vile product of Welfare UK” (*Mail Online* 2013b). UK Finance minister George Osborne stated at an official visit to Derby (the Philpott’s home) that “there is a question for government and for society about the welfare state – and the taxpayers who pay for the welfare state – subsidising lifestyles like that” and closed by calling for a public debate (Mick Philpott case 2013). Yet is not only welfare spending, but also particular family

practices which have been scrutinised. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, The BBC News (Derby) ran a feature entitled “Philpott fire deaths trials shines light on polyamory” (Lowbridge 2013). The Wikipedia page on Philpott has set a direct link in the first paragraph to the Wikipedia entry on Polyamory (Polyamory 2013a, Mick Philpott 2013). Some polyamorists have therefore felt the need to caution that not all nonmonogamous households are violent and that polyamory does not equate with domestic violence (Hallam 2013).<sup>7</sup>

The Philpott case made it possible for conservative media to revitalise longstanding “Malthusian anxieties about the over-production of dependent citizens”, working class promiscuity and the perceived problem of illegitimacy which “surface constantly in contemporary welfare debates” (Reekie 1998, p. 58). The economy sustaining alternative family practices can thus play a vital role in their public denigration. Polyamory is potentially vulnerable to attacks both on the grounds of envy (where a case regarding high wages and multiple incomes can be made) or alternatively, on the grounds of contempt (in the case of poverty and welfare dependency).<sup>8</sup>

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7 This does not mean to argue that domestic violence does not take place in poly relationships and families. Yet it highlights that the problem in the Philpott case was domestic violence and not polygamy or polyamory.

8 On a deeper level, envy and contempt may – paradoxically – also meet. A good example is the role of straight envy in the culture of homophobia. Bronski (1999) argues that gay men are frequently hated not only because they are allegedly immoral and perverted, but also because they are believed to have a lot of pleasure and unrestrained sex.

### ***Spaces and institutions***

Research into LGBTQ sexualities has emphasised that the creation of community spaces has been a significant step in securing survival in a heterosexist society. For example, bars (but also baths and bookstores) have been vital for the creation of a sustainable gay culture since the 1940s in the USA (Chauncey 1994; Escoffier 1997). Bar culture created a nucleus for social networks, including working class communities, to blossom. Boyd (2003) highlights that even if bar life can be said to be “pre-political” in some regards, it worked as an accelerator for collective identities and early attempts of political organising. The same has been the case with regard to the history of lesbian politics and communities in the USA (Kennedy & Davis 1993; Nestle 1996).

However, neoliberal urban development and changes in the composition of capital within the “pink economy” have altered the face of many commercial spaces and restructured them around different cultural orientations, including a normative trend towards desexualisation (Floyd 2009).<sup>9</sup>

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9 Neoliberal urban regeneration has gone hand in hand with processes of desexualisation in some settings (such as, for example, gentrification programmes in New York throughout the 1990s), but not in others (such as, for example, development in the London Vauxhall area in the new millennium), where capital has provided for a strongly commercialised club-based public sex culture (see Andersson 2011; Warner 1999).

An intensification of value extraction in lesbian and gay commercial spaces reinforces the marginalisation of working class queers (Bassi 2006; Binnie & Skeggs 2004; Evans 1993). Commercial LGBTQ spaces tend to operate normative practices of inclusion/ exclusion, which construct certain bodies, inclusive of working class and racialised bodies as undesirable and not welcome (Taylor 2007). To the extent that poly identified people consider themselves part of a wider assemblage of LGBTQ communities, these exclusions may painfully affect them.

Polyamorous community structures are currently in the making. Even if social events in the UK, such as Polyday or the occasional poly gatherings at the annual Bisexual Convention (BiCon), are organised in a DIY spirit and aim to be inclusive, participation fees and accommodation are costly. It remains to be seen whether the polyamory movement can resist pressures towards intensified commercialisation and corporatization in the long run.

Further issues may emerge for those poly people who participate in BDSM. Some researchers have emphasised a certain overlap between poly and BDSM communities (Sheff & Hammers 2011). Kinky events take place only sporadically, often in larger cities. The common pathologisation and threat of criminalisation may render it safer for some people to engage in BDSM in places where they are less likely to be recognised (Langdridge & Barker 2007). Depending on their place of residence, people who wish to partake in such events may need financial resources to travel. BDSM culture puts a great emphasis on fetishes, and fetish gear, toys and equipment can be very costly (Weiss 2011). Of course, there are only a fraction of poly

people, who consider themselves to be part of BDSM (or other queer or sex positive) communities. Yet multiple community affiliations are not uncommon.

Apart from the question of whether or not to have access to certain spaces and how to negotiate the cultural codes around which they are structured, dealing with public institutions, too, may pose a problem for some polyamorous people. Pallotta-Chiaroli's (2011) research into bisexual and polyamorous adolescents' schooling experiences in Australia documents the pervasive unfamiliarity with and ignorance of what she calls "border sexualities" or "border families". It reports widespread experiences of alienation, marginalisation, bullying, many teachers' indifference towards the latter and high degrees of fear among polyamorous parents that their children may suffer discrimination, or that government institutions (such as child protection services) may break up their families.

While many adolescents and families find proactive and assertive ways to address these issues, others consider it wise to stay in the closet to protect their children and their families. However, confident upfront ways of addressing one's own or one's family's difference or of dealing with biphobia and mononormativity also depend on class or ethnic/ racial privileges (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2006). This research underwrites that "coming out" is a strategy which is mediated by multiple privileges, an argument presented for a long time in particular by queer of colour authors (Butler et al. 2010). As I have shown elsewhere, gender is also an important factor which mediates the risks of coming out as nonmonogamous and

polyamorous, which, in the face of a double standard and differential antipromiscuity discourses, renders it potentially more costly for women to come out as nonmonogamous than for men, with further issues involved for women of colour and working class background (Klesse 2005). Class barriers to access in higher education are a further problem.

Research by McDermott (2011a, 2011b) has shown that many adolescents in the UK experience university as a comparatively liberal space, which gives them more opportunity to explore their sexuality and in many cases to come out. The same research also demonstrates that such experiences are enabled through the mobilisation of class resources, inclusive of family support, confidence regarding one's own educational success and emotional dispositions towards engaging with the institution. The problem of class elitism and institutional racism at many higher education institutions in the UK, differential access to cultural capital, etc.

consequently shape the intersections between sexuality, class and race (Law et al. 2004; Reay 2005).

The experience of dealing with public institutions is a critical issue for many polyamorous people. This experience is profoundly mediated by the impact of class divisions. I have here discussed the example of educational institutions, because significant research has recently appeared in this field. Yet the experience of polyamorous people in their dealings with other institutions, is also virtually unexplored. Much work remains to be done, for example regarding the work place, the health services, financial institutions, the courts, etc. Such lines of research will

also help deepening the reflection on the significance of polyamory within the wider equalities and antidiscrimination agenda (Tweedy 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Polyamory is often described by its practitioners as an ethical practice of nonmonogamy. In this paper, I have shown that existing research persistently highlights the exclusive nature of most poly communities in terms of race and class. I have sketched an agenda for future research around the three key areas of intimacy and care, household formation, and spaces and institutions because I believe that without a sustained commitment to socioeconomic equality it is impossible to do justice to the common self-representation of polyamory as an egalitarian practice. I consider it as problematic that research into polyamory has so far shared the disregard for class analysis with most critical work within sexualities studies (Binnie 2011; McDermott 2011; Taylor 2011). I argue that class perspectives need to be integrated as an indispensable element in intersectional analysis of gender, intimacy, and sexual politics (Erel et al. 2010; Anthias this volume). The absence of any proactive debate about class issues in most currents of poly culture and politics, together with the exclusive nature of many poly community networks in terms of class positioning, raises questions regarding the common claims that polyamory could be seen as a revolutionary practice (Song 2012; compare White 2010). Peller (2013) argues in a Blog entry titled “Polyamory as a Reserve Army of Care Labor”: “Relationships are not objects that, depending on the

formation, determines whether or not the relationship is “feminist”. Relationships are a social relation, one that necessarily falls within the paradigm of all other capitalist social relations, no matter what form it takes.” Peller’s argument invites readers to think about polyamory from a materialist point of view and place it within the wider economic relations of capital. According to Hennessy (2000), historical materialist perspectives rest on “the assumption that the history of sexual identity – in all of the varied ways it has been culturally differentiated and lived – has been fundamentally, though never simply, affected by several aspects of capitalism: wage labor, commodity production and consumption” (p. 4). People who have discussed polyamory from the angle of political economy have usually described it as a distinctively Postfordist intimate and erotic formation (Pieper & Bauer 2005; Sigusch 2005, 2011; Woltersdorff 2011). Exploring polyamory within the contradictory field of the cultural dynamics bound up with Postfordism and the neoliberal policies, which have determined economic governance in the societies where poly communities blossomed, may help us to understand the contradictions which shape poly discourse and practice with regard to class issues. Writers inspired by Marxist perspectives have shown that social movements around gender and sexuality (including their actions, discourses, and cultural imaginaries) do not unfold independently from economic processes, market forces, state or class politics (Duggan 2003; Evans 1993; Floyd 2009). With regard to the study of polyamory, economic questions are virtually unexplored territory. For those who wish to embark on this journey, theories which aim to merge Marxist and



postmarxist, feminist, queer and anti- and postcolonial theories may provide a good starting point.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to Chiara Addis, Jon Binnie, and Susie Jacobs, who have given me important feedback and stimulating ideas after reading previous drafts of this article.

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