DEBATING POLYAMORY AS RESEARCH: AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF A ROUND-TABLE ON POLYAMORY AND LESBIANISM

Daniel Cardoso
FCSH – UNL / ULHT
danielscardoso@gmail.com

Inês Rôlo Martins
FCSH – UNL
inesrmartins@gmail.com

Salomé Coelho
FCSH – UNL
salome.coelho@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Stemming from the auto-ethnographic telling of a round-table organized by a lesbian-focused activist group in Lisbon, Portugal, the authors reflect on the intersections between doing research, spreading that research, doing activism and working with / listening to sexual minorities as a way of critically involving the LGBT community and their concerns in the scientific process. As we'll see, conflicting political and identity agendas might create tension between different minorities, and even the reinstatement of (homo-)normativity. We claim that only through debate, exposure and recognition (which mixes research, scientific dissemination and activism) can enable us to think in a way that includes others' perspectives, but that the modes of performing debate also need to be critically reflected upon, keeping in sight the ethical concern for the intimate citizenship of those represented (and of those absent).

KEYWORDS

Polyamory, auto-ethnography, intimate citizenship, lesbianism, public debate, queer

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea for this paper came out of one of several public debates regarding polyamory (an ethical form of non-monogamy), in Portugal. This specific one, as we'll detail below, was organized by the only lesbian-oriented activist group in Portugal (*Clube Safo[1]*; Sappho Club in English) and, given that context, it seemed like a good place to reflect upon how debating actually happens, and what themes and issues are brought out into the public arena of discourse, not only by those whose intention is to present an idea, but also - or mainly - by those who show interest enough to take the time to go to an event, and who engage in a debate.

---

[1] www.clubesafo.com

Though it is still lacking in many ways, there is a growing body of research on polyamory, albeit anglophone and psychologically centered. Most of this research seeks to explore the ways polyamorists behave, organize and talk about themselves and conceptualize their relationships.

This presentation follows a completely different path: we don't seek to analyze how polyamorous people talked about polyamory, but how people interested in talking about polyamory (but not necessarily polyamorous-identified or even supportive of the idea of polyamory) bring up different topics and approach them. This, in turn, is used to reflect upon the presuppositions that permeate the discourse on polyamory, and to try to identify some possible disconnects between (a) polyamory theory and the ways it is commented upon in different contexts.

This paper aims to be an auto-ethnographic account of the debate, written by 3 of the people who were there (two of them, Daniel and Inês, were invited to speak, in representation of the PolyPortugal[2] group and the other, Salomé, a co-organizer of the event), along with a series of theoretical reflections about what was said, based on feminist and queer theory on the one hand, and post-habermasian notions of public discourse and rationality, on the other. The intention here is to open up the theoretical field within which polyamory is often placed and investigated.

One other possible outcome, perhaps not only for academia but for the community overall, is a meta-analysis of how to address the public space when it comes to raising awareness about forms of ethical non-monogamy, and possible rhetorical and theoretical strategies needed to create empathy and mindfulness for different emotional, intimate, erotic, sexual and bodily practices and lives.

2. WHAT IS POLYAMORY - POLYAMORY, ORIGINS AND USES

Although the adjective "polyamorous" has seen sporadic use since 1953 (Cardoso, 2011), the word "polyamory" only came about in the last decade of the 20th century, in two very different contexts: once associated with a neo-pagan inspired workshop on relationships, and again as a neologism used to create a mailing list (the first occurrence in 1990, and the second in 1992). None of the people involved knew about the others, and yet the meaning attributed to the word on both occasions was practically the same. Due to this, the internet became one of the main expression and organization points for polyamory, enabling people who were reflecting and doing activism about it to get to know each other and work together.

«Polyamorous people openly engage in romantic, sexual, and/or affective relationships with multiple people simultaneously», says Sheff (2005). «Polyamory […]is the desire, practice, or

---

[2] www.polyportugal.blogspot.com

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 (2008). 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 agency and praxis each one allows for, as a route to defining polyamory. It should be noted that this last one is the only that emphasizes «the state or practice» as a necessary element. 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».

Still, dictionaries and encyclopedias usually present a more utilitarian view of what identities are – a more academic meta-analysis is in order. Haritaworn et alia (2006: 518) define it as «the assumption that it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person». The main point in this definition is that polyamory can be defined fundamentally as an assumption – in other words, as an ideological background or moral bottom-line from which an identity can, then, be formulated.

Polyamory's relationship with sexuality, heterosexuality and monogamy is fraught with rupture. As Pepper Mint (2008) states, even if the people involved were to remain sexually monogamous or sexually inactive (as is the case with asexuals), the challenge to mono-normativity would remain: this challenge isn't related with actual practices, but with the aforementioned assumption – in a way, it is the contradiction of yet another assumption, one that states that (romantic) love (and sex) must be lived only in exclusionary (or exclusive) pairs. Veaux's (2010) "Map of Non-Monogamy" shows how several interceptions can be thought of between polyamory and other sexualities, also considered as deviant sexualities. From hereon we can posit the notion that polyamory is transversal to all other forms of sexual difference, as it is a relationship identity, rather than a sexual identity, but one that directly appeals to sexual practices and to sexualized notions of the subject. Polyamory is, therefore, situated outside Gayle Rubin's (2007) "Charmed Circle", and is stereotypically seen as a bad or deviant practice, as many sexual identities and acts are.

Polyamory draws deeply from a series of feminist discourses on gender and sexuality (Cardoso, 2010), while at the same time making it possible to talk about this subject without an explicit commitment or engagement in feminist analysis – making it so that sometimes feminist thought (on gender, for example) within polyamorous discourse is a sort of a "phantasmal experience" (Cardoso, 2011). On the other hand, the ethics that underlie polyamorous identity can be said to relate with the Foucauldian notion of the "care of the self" (Foucault, 2006), thus interacting with an individualized and post-modern view that the subject has of itself (Cardoso, 2010). And although the Other is not absent from the care of the self (in fact, the Other is of utmost importance to the practices required by someone who wants to engage in caring for

oneself), it still occupies a different position and importance, when compared to the feminist ethics of the "care of the Other". As we'll see below, one of the main points of our analysis will focus precisely on the ethical status of the Other and the discursive practices of Othering during this round-table on polyamory.

3. DEBATING PRIVATE LIVES AND GOING BEYOND RATIONALITY

Several feminist critiques show that modern political thought is deeply gendered in its structures (Eley in Silva, 2009: 19), considering how the distinction between private and public spheres was part of a discourse that contributed to the legitimation of women's oppression and their exploitation in the private domain. This determines who can access public space and which topics should be debatable or not (commonly to the exclusion of daily life from public debate) and what form should these discussions take.

With these preoccupations in mind, this work considers the coexistence of diverse forms of discourse that go beyond a rational-critical-argumentative communication (Esteves, 2003) and still are political in their ability to foster public discussion. Thus the dominant standard – rational-argumentative – can coexist with other forms of language, for example the ones more related to emotions and feelings. In this context, the concept of what is political opens itself to new meanings, covering a wide range of issues, that according to Ranerup (1999) can be anything from economic or environmental issues to issues related to society in general, to transit or children care (in Tsaliki, 2002).

Against the monolithic concept of an unified public sphere, several authors propose simultaneous, multiple, and sometimes opposable, public spaces. Nancy Fraser sees the public space as «parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs» (in Silveirinha, 2005: 155). In this sense, these are also arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities, allowing «members of oppressed, subordinated or marginalized groups – women, workers, immigrants, people of color, homeless people, lesbians and gays» (Howley, in Devereux, 2007: 342) to form discursive spaces that «defy social, political and economical relations of domination» (Howley, in Devereux, 2007: 342).

We bring forward the conception of communicative democracy proposed by Iris Young, precisely because of its focus in «speaking across differences of culture, social position and need» (Young in Benhabib, 1996: 127). The main question is the need for «a broad and plural conception of communication that includes both the expression and extension of shared understandings, where they exist, and the offering and acknowledgment of unshared meanings» (Young, 1995: 149). As Young puts it:

«If we are all really looking for what we have in common - whether as a prior condition or as a result - then we are not transforming our point of view. We only come to see ourselves mirrored in others. If we assume, on the other hand, that communicative interaction means encountering differences of meaning, social position, or need that I do not share or identify with, then we can better describe how that interaction transforms my preferences. (...) There is thus something to be learned from the other perspectives as they communicate their meanings and perspectives, precisely because the perspectives are beyond one another and not reducible to a common good. This process of mutual expression of experience and points of view that transcend the initial understanding of each accounts for a transformation in their opinions» (Young in Benhabib, 1996: 127).

This analysis is particularly relevant given the kind of debate organized - a space open to anyone who wanted to take part, to discuss an issue pertaining to feelings, emotions, and private lives is precisely the kind of contestation that these authors mention, since any wholly rational discussion of polyamory would be intrinsically flawed. This was one of the few situations where a minority discourse (polyamourous discourse) was allowed time, space and attention, in the context of another minority (lesbianity), and where the objective was to establish the differences (as well as resemblances) between polyamory and a mono-normative society. At the same time, it is important to understand that the appearance of a given topic on a public sphere isn't, in and of itself, a guarantee that the topic - and the people behind it - will be respected, or accorded the same attention or respect as a more traditional theme. As we will see further on, the transformation of private and emotional matters into politically significant themes involves not only their presence and circulation as discourse, but also specific forms of engaging with the themes - and this is where the need for a reflexive and critical stance is especially felt.

4. CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE

This round-table was organized by the only Portuguese lesbians rights' defense group, Clube Safo (Sappho Club, in English), which was founded informally in 1996, and formally in 2002, with the purpose of supporting and defending the rights of lesbian women, by developing a space for social, cultural and political intervention and promoting a positive image of the lesbian identity, with emphasis on health and education. Along the years, this association has struggled to keep itself alive, even going through times of inactivity, since it had no one to manage it. It was only after a hiatus of 3 terms (that spanned from 2008 to 2011), that it managed to have someone filling the official roles of administering the association as such.

The event itself, aimed at discussing the overlaps between ethical non-monogamy and lesbians' lives, was held at UMAR's[3] (in English: Women's Collective Alternative and Answer) new headquarters, the Center for Feminist Culture and Intervention (CCIF). UMAR is the oldest

---

[3] www.umarfeminismos.org

feminist association in Portugal, founded in 1976, and has diverse fields of intervention such as gender violence, LGBT rights, migration, labor rights, education and others.

The round-table started off with a short-movie documentary about a women's, lesbian and trans community in Germany (Vacations in SlutMeadow[4]) directed by Ann Antidote and Roderick, both of whom are DIY (do-it-yourself) activists and artists, in areas like queer and polyamory, as well as bondage and BDSM. The goal of exhibiting the documentary was to show how other activist groups talked about, and lived with polyamory (in fact, the group itself participated in the organization of the documentary itself), allowing for a comparison with the Portuguese context. This implied reflecting about practical aspects of polyamory and opening up what we might call a queer point of view about the possible strategies of power resistance within responsible non-monogamies, and how those might be mobilized into a political self-reflection of the Portuguese LGBT community. In short: how can the struggle against heterosexism be related to the struggle against mononormativity?

The event itself took place in the late afternoon of October 29th, 2011, with Inês Rôlo and Daniel Cardoso representing the PolyPortugal polyamory group, and Ann Antidote and Roderick (also members of PolyPortugal) participating via Skype, from Germany. Ann started off talking about the movie, and then Daniel and Inês presented some of the main notions of polyamory (as outlined above) in a non-academic way, using their own life experiences, coupled with theoretical knowledge. The debate was then opened up to everyone present in the room, which totaled about 40 people, the overwhelming majority of them women. Since the debate lasted for about two hours, it is understandable that we can't give a full account of all the elements discussed there.

What we aim to do below is to highlight what we considered to be some of the main (theoretical) points discussed. This is necessarily biased, but at the same time we expect this bias towards a greater recognition of emotional and erotic alternatives can be balanced with a critical look to how and what we communicate, and what sort of feedback is felt when a group is presented with one of several alternatives to a mononormative existence.

5. DEBATING POLYAMORY IN THE CONTEXT OF A LESBIAN-FOCUSED ORGANIZATION

5.1 Rhetorical strategies - dialoguing with monogamy

Since western thinking is dominated by binary conceptions it is hard to break with oppositional forms of discourse. In this context this could result in the mistake of trying to substitute a (monogamic)-hegemony for a (non-monogamic)-hegemony. With this in mind, and drawing on previous experiences of other debates, the speakers opted for a strategic approach,

---

[4] http://polygarchutopia.blogspot.com

presenting polyamory in a non-oppositional relationship with monogamy. Instead we departed from the idea of plurality - of a multiplicity of ways of doing monogamy, in fact, monogamies - and several ways to do polyamory - likewise, polyamories, or other various forms of responsible and consensual non-monogamies. Monogamies and polyamory were presented as being both valid alternatives where none was superior or more legitimate than the other - and that it is even possible to be both monogamous and polyamorous at the same time. This was a conscious attempt at creating the conditions for a healthier debate, where people didn't feel attacked in their positions and lifestyles, nor rejected because of the relationship mode of their choice.

One other rhetorical choice was to make a minimalist definition of polyamory, attempting to avoid the exclusion of several different non-monogamous behaviors (as long as the values of ethicality and responsibility are maintained); and also to problematize the relationship between polyamory, sex, love and intimacy. One of the most highlighted ideas was that of polyamory as a process, comparable perhaps to the notion of queering, rather than a set of closed practices and beliefs.

On the other hand, the definition of what does not constitute polyamory was less flexible. The speakers, especially Daniel Cardoso, were very adamant on defining what cannot be considered polyamory: cheating, and other behaviors that aren't seen as responsible or consensual.

Talking about our own lives is an integral part of how these debates play out, since to exclude it from the debate would demean our own experiences, and the fact that they, too, are a source of reflection, and constitute a part of the body of knowledge we use to define, live and give visibility to and about polyamory. This recentering on personal experience also allows a possible escape from the hegemonization of polyamory, but at the same time it can generate a distancing between speaker and listener, a process of othering. This is evident, for instance, when someone says 'That's how that person did it, but with me it's different', which creates an apparent impossibility to transmit personal experiences between different people.

The objections raised by some of the participants in the debate (which will be focused upon further below and include pain, fear, solitude, and so on) were often counterpointed by examples from monogamous relationships, while Inês and Daniel pointed out that suffering might exist, regardless of the relationship type. This is an attempt to show that suffering is transversal to all kinds of relationships (thus promoting the idea that polyamory and monogamy are equally valid) but, at the same time, it seems like the portrayal of polyamorous suffering was more positive than that of monogamous suffering. This over-valuation stems from considering polyamorous suffering as more of an opportunity for personal growth, by enabling a desirable and positive questioning of mononormative presuppositions and spurring a process of constant personal transformation.

This perspective of total freedom of personal (re-)construction and (re-)definition is very much present throughout the debate, as a strategy to oppose normativity. But it also runs the risk of feeding into a liberal perspective of empowerment that hides the weight of structural pressures, and their influence in this notion of individuality and subjectivity.

With this in mind, what follows is a critical view over the objections and comments raised to the representatives of PolyPortugal, and amongst the people there.

5.2 Towards a (de)politization of everyday life

> *«Living with one person only is already so complicated... let's get practical! How do we live with 3 or 4 people?! [...] How can I, within myself, reorganize myself and accept the Other's reorganization?»*

> *«I'm a bit new at this - not in age, though, obviously - but I wanted to know what's the process. Because, for me, it seems that polyamory is mostly about organization. [...] How do we deconstruct ourselves, as persons, in order to transform betrayal into polyamory?»*

> *«How does one do stuff like Christmas, or New Year's Eve, things that bond us affectively?»*

Many of the questions posed, in this as well as in other debates, pertain to the actuality of polyamory - that is, to how polyamory is actually lived, actually performed. This has little to do with, for instance, the possibility of loving or desiring more than one person at the same time; in fact, many questions are centered on day-to-day practices, such as holidays, sleeping arrangements, scheduling of time across different partners, etc. But the basis of many of these questions is not a desire for prying into others' lives, but rather a set-in disbelief in a polyamorous everyday life.

Talking about polyamory always seems to imply some degree of novelty or at least a first moment where some discursive problems are explained to be put aside. The "I'm new on this thing" posture is a frequent expression for people who are entering a whole new subject and don't want to be judged by any preconceived ideas they might have. This preoccupation leads to a discourse mainly centered on the practical side of polyamory – the how-to-do.

Moreover, quite a few examples (though not all) start off from the notion of a pre-existing couple (which is, perhaps, how the people doing the questions are currently configured as, romantically speaking), in which the other partner comes into contact with a new possible partner, often in the context of a sexual encounter - what is typically termed a "V" relationship, with the person doing the questions being at the tip of the "V".

> *«If my [female] partner comes home and says 'Tonight, I'm going to sleep with my other [female] partner', or, for instance, if I had a [male] partner that would say to me 'Look, sorry, but tonight what I really want is to go to my other [female] partner'; I don't know how I, as a product of this culture, will accept this, keep loving him - or, in this instance, keep loving her - and accept this, and be at peace, in serenity with myself; to have that emotional availability, such that I*

can think that my partner's and her partner's happiness is more important than my own.»

«You love two people... How do you, inside yourself, have the availability to give to the other the freedom to have, eventually, other partners? How does that work in harmony, without any conflict?»

«When you love someone, is it easy for you to be available to see that person not being with you at a given moment, while that person is with another, a third one, who also loves her and adores her, and that also wants to be with her?»

So, not only is polyamory or non-monogamy seen as something that produces an unrealistic *everyday life*, it is also seen as an exception event that comes to disrupt a monogamous everyday life (which is, in contrast, perfectly plausible, and whose difficulties of scheduling, for example, are seen as different from polyamory's).

Another subject that was broached was solitude - seen here as a positive statement about any person's autonomy. This was, actually, a very confusing moment in the discussion, at first, since the use of the word "solitude" elicited many rapid commentaries on loneliness and sadness. Only after a few moments, and interventions, was it possible to arrive at solitude as a baseline for other kinds of relationships: solitude being a way of feeling happy in the relationship one has with oneself.

«There's a keyword here, that hasn't been said yet: solitude. Solitude, but with a positive connotation: knowing and being able to be alone with oneself, for a night. Accepting that the partner, or partners, just aren't there, for one night, and being at peace, alone.»

This moment was a counterpoint to much of what was said before and after, in that it returned to the subject as the main figure through which relationships can be thought of. And although it related to the personal situation of the person first commenting on the issue, it made many others, especially those in relationships, reconsider the "couple" as the unit of a romantic relationship. On the other hand, though, solitude wasn't considered as a gendered experience, being mainly conceptualized as an abstract position by an equally abstract subject (Kaufmann, 2008), which might lead to the overlooking of the difficulties behind positive solitude as a function of gender.

All in all, most of the examples that were offered in the form of questions to the representatives of the polyamory group seemed to be organized around the figure of a couple and, perhaps more importantly, around a certain teleology of what a family ought to be - for instance, there were several questions about co-habitation, but no questions about non-cohabiting polyamorous families; and the issue of children was conspicuously absent from the debate as well.

«When we're in love with someone, I think that there's a will to live together with that person, to share a home, and a life, etc.... or, at least, most of us feel that. How does that work out? How do I decide if I'm going to live with her, or with him, if the both of them aren't willing to live with each other as well? How does each one of them manage things, if I choose to live with her, or with him?»

This seems to result in the search for a 'how to' experience or narrative, an answer-seeking exercise that might end up in a depolitization of private and intimate life. Instead of all the possible political, philosophical and (why not?) queering questions that would not be out of place in this debate, there is a lot of thought put into the micro-management of what would seem to be an almost-impossible event within a couple's life, rather than in a subject's erotic life. So, talking about polyamorous experiences becomes talking about hurdles to be overcome, rather than about shifts in perspective, or challenges to the more traditional economy of sex, feelings and relationships (which, obviously, wouldn't implicate any sort of 'conversion' to non-monogamy).

5.3 Presupposed feelings, and the erasure of ethical alterity

Other questions dealt with a fundamental issue in polyamory: feelings. But, again, many of those questions were oddly similar to each other, and the questions necessarily convey the expectations that the audience has in respect to the issue - thus allowing us to consider what are the *presupposed feelings and responses* when one imagines oneself being confronted with polyamory.

> «*We can only deconstruct what's inside when we feel shaken on the inside, otherwise we can't deconstruct anything.*»

> «*Let's imagine that I'm in love with her and with him. [...] What do I have to do? [...] Because I'm going to have to convince these two people to have a polyamorous relationship with me!... Another question: are they supposed to have a polyamorous relationship with each other, or am I a sort of vertex?*»

The first tendency, as commented above, is to apply polyamory to a current relationship and situation, in which a potentially polyamorous situation occurs in what is, otherwise, a monogamous context. So, the person commenting or asking a question will evoke a hypothetical situation where her or his partner has a new partner (or, more to the point, is going out on a sexual encounter with someone) and then, paraphrasing several different interventions: "how do I deal with the pain?", or: "how do I deal with jealousy?". In what seems like a monochrome exercise in imagination, specific feelings are attributed to specific roles: the person whose partner goes on a date is left suffering, and the other two people are problem-free. Here's one first presupposition: that (using the typical examples of a "V" relationship) the person in the 'vertex' position is intrinsically privileged (or should we say, mathematically privileged, since "more" seems to be "better"), or intrinsically at a disadvantage (again, mathematics: more relationships equal more headaches) and, as Other, assumes no role in the ethical and emotional processes of the people asking the questions.

> «*If I'm a polyamorous relationship, it seems that the pressure [of having a relationship] gets multiplied by all the people involved.*»

> «*What would be worse? The pain of losing one person, both, or the smaller pain of having to deal, more or less easily, all of these circumstances?*»

This actually started a sub-debate on pain, and the role of pain in life - several people commented on the fact that pain is part of growing up, of learning and maturing oneself, and that there is no life that completely excludes pain, in fact, that the total exclusion of pain would produce a stunted individual. Even so, some of the participants also tried to turn the debate towards happiness - even when it was seen as one-dimensional.

> *«How do we construct a new ethics of polyamory, based on truth for everyone, without any pain or sorrow?»*
>
> *«What I can't understand, is how do we deal with this without any pain, without hurting or being hurt... how can we shed all of this load? If polyamory is a source of happiness, or intends to be one, how do we do this to try and get that happiness?»*
>
> *«Pain is always with us.»*

Again, it's interesting to see the absences this introduces: both the possibility that the person who hypothetically goes on a date might be nervous, insecure, or feeling the need of reassurance (and the same goes to the new person entering an already established dynamic), and the possibility that the person who isn't on the date might actually feel happy about the situation (what polyamorists termed compersion). Or, to change the context, maybe the person who wasn't on a date might indeed feel sad - after knowing that the date didn't go as expected. But none of these examples were offered up by the people participating in the debate, and were only shortly commented after Daniel introduced them to try and diversify the topics.

What this implicates, in a more theoretical perspective, is a focusing on the experiences of the self that falls in line with a more individualized perspective, but not with an ethics of the care of the self, nor with the more typically feminist view of the care of the Other. In fact, these presuppositions achieve quite the contrary: they erase and push away the Other as an autonomous ethical subject, risk turning it into a unidimensional entity, erase or make difficult the possibility of a mindful (Barker, 2011) stance, while framing the subject itself as a mere recipient to the Other's actions (and thus facilitating a discourse that centers on guilt and aggression), focusing on what a mono-normative context leads us to expect. Empathy, then, is what the Self feels for the Self, and the interpersonal nature of both relationships and of ethical practices is seen as secondary, in favor of guidelines on how to cope with only one kind of emotion. Happiness, be it one's own happiness or others', seems to necessitate no need for coping strategies or be the subject of further reflection - only negative emotions would then need processing , feeding into a contemporary forcible summon to happiness that has been the target of some feminist critique (Ahmed, 2010).

> *«We all just want one thing, which is to be happy.»*
>
> *«I think the most important thing is to make 'happiness' stand out over 'pain' or 'solitude'.»*

On the other hand - and this is something that appeared already on several of these public debates on polyamory - when the conversation goes into suffering and pain, or jealousy, it

seems that an unspoken (but explicitly negated) promise is broken: the promise that polyamory, just by being polyamory, can make people suffer less, or be more happy than in monogamy, perhaps due to the conceptual change of the notion of "infidelity" that is behind polyamorous reasoning.

«*So, we're just replacing different patterns of sorrow...*»

Faced with the fact that polyamory isn't a sort of special response to suffering in relationships, and with the notion that polyamorous practices can also mean insecurity, jealousy and, yes, suffering, some people demonstrated their dismay or disappointment. Others in the audience responded to this by returning to the above point, that there is no life without pain. But while it's plausible to assume that a polyamorous living isn't a guarantee against any and all pain (which might lead us to wrongfully conclude that polyamory is somehow superior to other forms of relationship), the reification of suffering as a marker of credibility places relationships in the role of harbingers of pain, and the subject before the task of having to find out how to reduce that very same. This discourse coexists, nonetheless, with a romantic view on how love is inherently positive, demonstrating a contradiction that illustrates Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2003) point of intrinsic contradictions in the process of western individualization.

5.4 Normal(izing) sex(es)

«*It confuses me that Inês can sit there and the first thing she says is 'I'm a lesbian and feminist activist', and then introduces Daniel as her boyfriend - this, to me, is confusing, because, if she says she's a lesbian, how can you be in a relationship with a man?*»

«*- What if your [female] partners invites you to do it, the three of you?*

- Probably I'd refuse: you know why?; because I like to choose the people I'm with!»

«*The issue of sex, is that that's where we undress ourselves, both on the inside and out... It's one of the more common ways of hiding our fears and frailties.*»

The tendency towards the normalization – instead of a queerization – of sexuality is best illustrated by an event that almost took hold of the debate. One of the speakers (Inês) presented herself as a lesbian, and also as being in a poly (in this case affective, amorous and sexual) relationship with a man. The intention of the speaker was to open up a space of debate around the queer feminist potentiality of polyamory, by telling her own personal experience of self-discovery and identification - both politically and sexually - as a lesbian woman in the context of a poly-queer relationship with a cisgendered man. We use here the term queer feminisms as «modalities of conceptual repositioning that categorically reject the unicity of sexual difference» (Oliveira et. al, 2009: 13), but also in connection with lesbian feminisms. Instead of bringing forward a critical reflection on identity and sexuality, what became the main focus was why the speaker didn't say she was a bisexual. This generated an emotionally defensive response by some of the participants that appeared to feel threatened by this affirmation. The attempt to make sense of the speaker's sexual behaviors and her identification as a queer lesbian was a

defining moment of this debate - more controversial than the discussion of non-monogamy or even promiscuity. One of the discussants defined lesbians as women that feel affection and/or attraction towards other women. This definition leaves outside several political preoccupations on the potentially normalizing and repressing role of essentialist identities, as understood outside a queer and performative approach to what an 'identity' might be. It's interesting to notice that a queer stance on sexual orientation is still not perceived as valid by some participants on this feminist lesbian space, prevailing instead an institucionalized conception of lesbianity. Even the moderator asked why some of the people who were engaged in this question chose to omit they were bisexuals, even though they'd said so themselves shortly before the debate started, thus choosing to emphasize Inês' queer identity, but downplay their own.

The oppositionality between what is good sex and bad sex is thus maintained, together with a fixed view of what a valid sexual orientation is – mainly that the gender of the one(s) you sleep with holds the truth of your orientation.

Coming towards the end of the debate, there were some attempts to disrupt more stabilized notions of polyamory, or eroticism, thus in part opposing the view above:

> *«I think there's a lot of polyamorous relationships out there, but they aren't called that, just because people don't have sex. Maybe we're turning this into something more complicated than what it really is.»*

> *«We can transform that negative side, that fear of losing someone, into an erotic experience, a turn-on.»*

Even though this last perspective was proposed by some of the participants, the idea of a connection between having sex with someone and being intimate with that someone was still present, maintaining the monogamous expectation around this correlation, even though not everyone agreed. Still, what prevailed was the idea of sex as an intimate and ultimately profound and life-changing experience, always holding the truth of what and who we are (Foucault, 1994, 2000).

6. CAVEATS AND AFTERTHOUGHTS

It's never enough to stress some things about the paper: we are explicitly not saying that the above is what people think, or that this somehow reflects their 'hidden' opinions. Nor are we saying that issues such as pain, jealousy, insecurity, among others, aren't part of real polyamorous experiences - or that "V" relationships aren't real as well. Or that these women and men don't reflect about their private and personal lives in a politically aware way. Or that, because of what was said, then they 'must' be monogamous.

Our intention was not to do an uncovering of the truth behind what the people in the debate said. The above reflects our own readings and thoughts, stemming from our experience of being

in this debate (and in several others). It would be deeply irresponsible to extrapolate something about these people from what was said and reported here. At the same time, though, there is no discourse without a compromise with power and intelligibility, nor without a frame of reference - and social-wide frames of reference are more often than not normalizing in ways that, every day, catch each and every one of us off-guard.

The purpose of this analysis isn't to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between normative discourses and what specific people said during the debate - but to see if what was said is intelligible in the context of those normative discourses, or not. For us, it is not politically irrelevant that there are public debates about polyamory, nor is it politically irrelevant that (comparatively to other events) so many people attend them and are willing to discuss such matters.

In closing, and as with many other issues relating to what Plummer (1994) termed an "intimate citizenship", there is no straightforward answer. The terms and questions that guided most of the discussion were: 1) barely, if at all, specifically related to how polyamory and LGBT issues (in this case, specifically lesbian issues) interact with each other, on a public and activist scale; 2) often framed with the couple as a starting point for most of the "what-ifs" presented; 3) focusing on stereotypical assumptions about each role in a non-monogamous relationship, on identities and how identities can relate with specific acts (sexual or otherwise), and on a romantically-centered notion of "love" and "intimacy"; 4) only seldomly using feelings and emotions-related reflection to extrapolate into more macro-structural critiques of intimacy, sex, gender and ethics; 5) using neo-liberal constructions of subjectivity and alterity, which isolates the Self from the Other in ethical considerations, and risks an universalization of subjectivity that imperils the recognition of difference.

What was presented here points towards what might be a more general problem, aligned with some of the scholarly criticism of post-feminism: that of the subversion of "the personal is political" - if all that is personal is political, then there is no need to link microscopic/personal/bodily practices to a higher-reaching discourse and engagement with the disciplinary power of mononormativity. The very real and very political necessity to manage our everyday lives might be precisely what drives us away from considering how our everyday lives are influenced and affected by macrosocial power relations and institutional procedures - no matter if we live polyamorously, monogamously, or in any other configuration.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press Books.

Álvares, C., Cardoso, D., & Martins, I. R. (2011). Argumentação numa esfera pública reticular: As vozes femininas online. *Comunicação & Informação, 2*(12).

Barker, M. (2011, September 14). Mindfulness: A strategy for social engagement? *Social Mindfulness*. Retrieved January 27, 2013, from http://socialmindfulness.wordpress.com/2011/09/14/mindfulness-a-strategy-for-social-engagement/

Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2003). *La individualización: El individualismo institucionalizado y sus consecuencias sociales y políticas*. Barcelona: Paidós.

Benhabib, S. (1996). *Democracy and difference: contesting the boundaries of the political*. Princeton University Press.

Cardoso, D. (2010). *Amando vári@s - Individualização, redes, ética e poliamor* (Tese de Mestrado em Ciências da Comunicação). Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas - Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisboa.

Cardoso, D. (2011). Polyamory, or The Harshness of Spawning a Substantive Meme. (D. Cardoso, Trans.)*Interact*, (17). Retrieved from http://interact.com.pt/17/poliamor/

Cardoso, D., Correia, C., & Capella, D. (2009). Polyamory as a possibility of feminine empowerment. In *Proceedings of the 9th Conference of European Sociological Association*. Presented at the 9th Conference of European Sociological Association, Lisboa.

Cascais, F., & Cardoso, D. (2012). "Loving Many": Polyamorous Love, Gender and Identity. In N. de H. García & M.-A. Tseliou (Eds.), *Gender and Love: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 21–29). Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press.

de Oliveira, J. M., Pinto, P., Pena, C., & Costa, C. G. (2009). Feminismos queer: disjunções, articulações e ressignificações. *Ex aequo*, (20), 13-27.

Esteves, J. J. P. N. (2003). *Espaço público e democracia*. Editora Unisinos.

Foucault, M. (1994). *História da sexualidade I - A Vontade de Saber*. Lisboa: Relógio d'Água.

Foucault, M. (2000). Sex, Power and the politics of Identity. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984. Subjectivity and Truth* (Vol. 1, pp. 163–173). London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (2006). *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*. (F. Gros & F. Ewald, Eds.). Picador.

Haritaworn, J., Lin, C., & Klesse, C. (2006). Poly/logue: A Critical Introduction to Polyamory. *Sexualities*, *9*(5), 515–529.

Kaufmann, J.-C. (2008). *The Single Woman and the Fairytale Prince*. Polity Press.

McLaughlin, L. (1993). Feminism, the public sphere, media and democracy. *Media, Culture & Society*, *15*(4), 599.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (2009). polyamory. Retrieved January 26, 2009, from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/polyamory

Mint, P. (2008). Polyamory is not about the sex, except when it is « freaksexual. Retrieved December 6, 2008, from http://freaksexual.wordpress.com/2008/01/31/polyamory-is-not-about-the-sex-except-when-it-is/

Plummer, K. (1994). *Telling Sexual Stories* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Rubin, G. (2007). Thinking Sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In R. Parker & P. Aggleton (Eds.), *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Sheff, E. (2005). Polyamorous Women, Sexual Subjectivity and Power. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *34*(3), 251–283.

Veaux, F. (2010). The Map of Non-Monogamy, v.2.5.2. Retrieved May 16, 2011, from http://www.xeromag.com/sexualinformatics/nonmonogamy2.5.2.gif

Wikipedia. (2008). Polyamory. *Wikipedia*. Retrieved October 23, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyamory