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Introduction: Parenting, Polyamory and Consensual Nonmonogamy. Critical and Queer Perspectives.

Special Issue Editors:

Christian Klesse (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK)
Daniel Cardoso (Lusófona University, Portugal)
Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (Deakin University, Australia)
Michael Raab (Educational Collective BIKO, Germany)
Cornelia Schadler (University of Vienna, Austria)
Mimi Schippers (Tulane University, USA)

Abstract

This special issue explores key issues regarding the parenting practices within polyamorous and consensually non-monogamous intimate relationships. The contributions are concerned with the stigmatisation of child-care practices that deviate from the default of couple-based monogamy, exceed biological definitions of kinship, and experiment with new forms of spatial organisation beyond shared residence. In this introduction, we highlight key themes of previous research, highlight normative pressures and counter-normative contestations around the themes of exclusivity, gendered parenting roles, relational development framed as intimate growth, and a pervasive reproductive futurism. Polyamorous parenting practices negotiate a complex social terrain shaped by social and health policies, law, housing development, creating new avenues for parenting roles, and the (re)organisation of care work and the division of labour in child-rearing.

Keywords

consensual non-monogamy, polyamory, parenting, children, care work, reproduction

In recent years, we have witnessed the burgeoning of research into polyamory and other consensual non-monogamy (CNM) (for overviews, see Barker and Langdridge, 2010a, 2010b; Klesse, 2018; Ossmann, 2020). International Conferences on CNM and polyamory have been a regular feature of academic and activist landscapes since 2005, when the first International Conference on Polyamory and Mononormativity took place at the Research Centre for Feminist, Gender and Queer Studies at the University of Hamburg. Further, a Special Issue on Polyamory published in this journal in 2006 has played an important role establishing a research agenda around alternative family relationships (Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse, 2006). The introduction to this Special Issue defined polyamory as ‘a form of relationship where it is possible, valid, and worthwhile to maintain (usually long-term) intimate and sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously’ (Haritaworn et al., 2006: 151). Polyamory is usually considered to be one variant of relational practices grouped together under the rubric consensual non-monogamies (CNMs), aiming to capture different styles of openly negotiating intimate and/or sexual connection with multiple partners. Next to polyamory, arguably currently one of the most frequently reported upon CNMs, this term also includes open relationships, open marriages, multiple marriages, swinging, relationship anarchy (among others) (see Cardoso and Klesse, 2022).

Polyamory (and Consensual Nonmonogamies on a larger plane) are nowadays often considered in research on relationships and intimacies from within a queer paradigm (Schippers, 2016; Hammack, Frost and Hughes, 2019). Polyamory has been studied as a distinctive relationship and family practice, mode of intimacy, love style, relationship orientation, relational or erotic disposition, identification, community practice, philosophy, and rallying point for social movements and activism (Lano and Parry, 1995; Klesse, 2007, 2014b; Anapol, 2011; Cardoso, 2014, 2019; Sheff, 2014;

Brunning, 2018) from multiple disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, media and communication studies, linguistics, political theory, and economics. Researchers focused on emotional dynamics, relationship satisfaction, power issues, legal frameworks, class and social stratification, and multiple identifications from within intersectional perspectives (Noël, 2006; Barker and Langdridge, 2010a, 2010b; Klesse, 2014a, 2018, 2019; Pain, 2020; Cardoso and Klesse, 2022).

Despite this growing recognition of CNM and polyamory as an important aspect of relational and familial diversity, key issues have remained underexplored. In particular, parenting has been treated as a taboo issue within multi-adult intimate relationships (Klesse, 2019). As a result of this, the social, legal, educational, and pedagogical issues pertaining to polyamorous parenting practices have remained poorly discussed in the academic literature. CNMs have been largely ignored in the wider feminist, LGBTQI*+, and intersectional scholarship on families and parenting (see, e.g., Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Pioneering research that has emerged in the last decade documents a widely shared sense of stigmatisation and regulation among polyamorous parents and parents in other complex multi-adult family units (Sheff, 2010, 2014; Goldfeder and Sheff, 2013; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon and Hunter, 2013; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2020; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Sheff and Mountford, 2020). This Special Issue provides insights into legal issues, parenting arrangements, divisions of labor and care work, negotiations of parenting roles, and legal issues on this topic. And last but not least, also in the entanglement of all these topics during the current covid crisis.

The few studies on CNM parents suggest low visibility of this type of parenthood, which results in stigmatization and a lack of representation in legal structures (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010b, 2010a; Sheff, 2010, 2014; Goldfeder and Sheff, 2013; Pallotta-

Chiarolli, Haydon and Hunter, 2013; Klesse, 2019; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Sheff and Mountford, 2020). The consequences are closeted families that fear hostilities in neighborhoods or from institutions. The lack of legal representation also makes CNM parents vulnerable in custody cases, and threatens bonds with children in cases of parental separation (Klesse, 2007, 2019). Because only a few families live in places that recognize their form of relationship and parenthood, these relationships are constantly threatened in contexts in which adultery laws, anti-bigamy laws or immigration laws render their family relationships alegal or even illegal. In her research in Australia and the United States, Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a) identified three strategies CNM parents undertake to deal with this hostile environment: (a) passing, through assimilation to the norm, and closeted relationships, (b) bordering, through constant negotiation of situations and careful balancing of settings, where families can be open or not, and (c) polluting, through active non-compliance with family norms, embracing otherness, building networks and challenging institutions. Of course, for the last two strategies, the parents need to live in an environment where legal threats to their relationship and parenthood are low (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010b). In this Special Issue Kimberley Rhoten, Elisabeth Sheff and Jonathan D. Lane show that in many ways, CNM and polyamorous parents in the USA today are in a similar situation as LGBTQI*+ parents a few decades ago. A certain amount of cultural representation has been accomplished, but legal recognition is still pending, so polyamorous families cannot rely on protection through family law. The dominant strategy for dealing with this injustice is demanding sexual citizenship through legal strategies, i.e., recognition through (mainly legally defined) inclusion. Using the example of the struggle for same-sex marriage, Rhoten, Sheff and Lane show, that two problems arise from this process: On the one hand, inclusion means adopting hegemonic (heteronormative, neoliberal) values and therefore tends to go hand in hand with a deradicalization and

normalization of those included. On the other hand, this normalization inevitably implies the justification of other existing exclusions, eventually even the emergence of new exclusions. This social dynamic has formerly been criticized in the LGBTQI*+ movement as a homonationalist strategy, i.e., a mode of politics that is reaffirming racist, heteronormative and capitalist structures (see, Puar, 2007). To avoid this dynamic, Rhoten et al. propose to challenge exclusive institutions and practices instead of struggling for inclusion: "Rather than expanding to include polyamorous families, we instead urge reforming and reducing the marital institution and decreasing its hegemonic, legal, and symbolic control in order to address current inequalities."

While it is important to discuss the stigmatization and legal discrimination of CNM and polyamorous relationships, critical relationship research also suggests that having children is often framed as an important milestone in what Amy Gahran (2017) calls the "relationship escalator" (Gahran, 2017), i.e. a normative developmental script according to which only those relationships are represented as successful and normalized, when they are designed for the integration of children and fulfil a mandate of 'reproductive futurity' (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005). As relationships become ever more diverse and the boundaries and definitions of family manifest themselves as situated figurations (Schadler, 2016), children may become a marker for personal maturity, relationship quality and progress, hence creating a polynormative (Zanin, 2013) familism and reproductive imposition (Donath, 2017; Wilkinson, 2020; Lewis, 2021). Another recurring issue with the intersection between sexual minorities and children pertains to the issue of whose rights are being discussed: if child-rearing is seen only as a right of prospective parents, then we run the risk of politically objectifying children. Children are often framed as the political objects in struggles around minorities' rights, especially through the use of conservative rhetoric that deploys moral

panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Fahs, Dudy and Stage, 2013), often encapsulated in the (ironic) phrase “Won’t you think of the children?”. More than, as mentioned above, simply being a prime normative marker of relationship ‘success’ or ‘legitimacy’, children are culturally invested – by adults – with the reproduction of cis-heteronormative, classist and racialized ideals of (lack of) diversity (Cardoso, 2018). Because of this, the risk is doubled: not only is there a risk of adhering to normative ideals of relating, but also of adhering to normative ideals of childhood, proscribing the vision of producing ‘ordered’ and well-adjusted children which, then, serve to legitimize child-rearing within the context of CNM relationships. While this special issue focuses mainly on the parenting side of non-normative relating, it is worth it to keep in mind that childhood itself can be queered (Stockton, 2009), and that non-hegemonic relating can still uphold hegemonic values around parenting, gender and sexuality and impose them on children. Children’s citizenship is always “difficult” (Robinson, 2012) due to their status being constructed as liminal, in-becoming, incomplete (Blatterer, 2010). Therefore, we must consider how normative experiences both of child-rearing and of being-child can be engendered and subverted within CNM contexts.

The question then emerges whether polyamorous and CNM child-rearing families really transgress existing categories? In this Special Issue Rahil Roodsaz explores and interrogates the queering potentials of polyamorous relationships in the Netherlands. Starting from the assumption of a widely stated diversification of family models, she explores the question of whether poly-parenting has the potential to disturb what is considered normal, natural, ethical, and supportable in society, thereby disrupting the hierarchical separation between dominant categories, such as male-female, heterosexual-homosexual or poly-mono. Roodsaz suggests that her participants mainly stretch and diffuse existing categories rather than fundamentally disrupt hegemonic categories. In relation to Eva Illouz’s (2012) thesis, which sees

contemporary developments of sexuality and intimacy largely as an expression of typical neoliberal atomization, Roodsaz stresses that her informants are "creating new ethical and material space", and are therefore at least opening potentials for emancipatory social developments.

CNM relationships seem to provide the possibility for defining new roles of parenthood, new divisions of labor, new forms of care work, a transgression of binary gender roles and visibility for non-binary and trans parents. Relationship and family research stresses the impact of parenthood on gender roles and a retraditionalization thereof (Few-Demo and Allen, 2020). Research on polyamorous networks suggests that CNM relationships may also be trapped in gendered roles and unequal divisions of care tasks (Raab, 2018, 2019). In this Special Issue Michel Raab asks how poly-parents in Germany deal with the contemporary contradictory evocations around parenthood: On the one hand, becoming a mother is especially mythically exaggerated and seen as the completion of an essence of becoming female. On the other hand, a neoliberal discourse of parenthood as a project has been unfolding in recent years, in which participants regard each other as objects to be optimized. Raab reconstructs three ways of dealing with these contradictory invocations: An affirmation of the neoliberal-individualist view on relationships and people that is not compatible with parenthood, a deconstruction of fatherhood while reconstructing motherhood, and poly-parenthood as a project of social planning to strengthen a poly-relationship. For all three, essentialist and naturalistic norms around parenthood are modified, but most of the care work and responsibility for children remains with birth mothers. Raab identifies persistent modes of internalized gender-specific subjectivation as the source for this reinforcement of traditional divisions of care practices.

In her contribution to this Special Issue, Cornelia Schadler finds three types of organizing parenthood in CNM relationships in her Austria-based research: Polynuclear parenting simulates two-parent families with biological and legal children, hierarchical parenting includes a visible network of more than two parents that differ on their degree of involvement, and egalitarian parenting where three or more members of a polyamorous network consider each other as equally responsible and committed. In particular, the latter types of parenting produce new divisions of labor and care work and allow for an escape of the binary gendered parent identity. However, this transgression may be temporary and situational because a closer analysis also shows that these newly established structures easily collapse in specific situations, which underlines the vulnerability of these types of parenting.

In her groundbreaking work, Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli (2010a) emphasized the damaging impact of hostile environments that render CNM relationships and parents invisible or even threatens their existence. One of these environments is a public or private housing market that is not suited to the needs of CNM relationships and parents. In this Special Issue, Pierre-Yves Wauthier focuses the residential arrangement of consensually non-monogamous parents in Belgium. His comparison of residence patterns, combined with an analysis of life stories, shows how his informants manage to develop housing arrangements that suit their preferences, relationships, norms, the specific social framing, and their resources. The extent of constraints they have to deal with leads Wauthier to the hypothesis that the housing market's failure to provide adequate housing for non-conventional families is a significant factor for the ongoing dominance of monogamous and couple-centered families.

The COVID-19 crisis is often rightly seen as a situation which magnifies and accelerates existing inequalities and exclusions (Bayramoğlu and Castro Varela, 2021; Laster Pirtle and Wright, 2021). Research on CNM relationships during COVID-19 show that the crisis also transformed polyamorous networks often living across several households (Rothmüller, 2021). All of the issues discussed in the previous contributions of this Special Issue (legal issues, division of labor, transgression of categories) are addressed again in the article of Melissa H. Manley and Abbie E. Goldberg. They discuss how parents in CNM relationships in the USA cope with the challenges that come with the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the necessity of social distancing. Their mixed-methods study with bisexual, queer, gay, or lesbian parents shows how the participants deal with the challenges, but also use them as an opportunity for queering family. On the one hand, it becomes clear that social distancing manifests itself as pressure to normalize: because rules are made for monogamous parents, the opportunities for non-monogamous parents diminish, as evidenced by a decrease in contact. More abstractly, non-monogamous parents have to develop individual strategies of interaction, which they consistently do. It becomes clear that larger networks are definitely used as a resource for dealing with challenges, but as an ambivalent resource, since they suffer less from isolation but more from the strain of sharing time. It also becomes clear that changing dynamics and configurations at home are partly used to enter into new social arrangements - e.g., by moving in together. This amounts to intensifying counter-hegemonic relationships, which in turn challenges the boundaries between physical and social family and thus queering family.

Taken together, the articles comprised in this Special Issue cover exciting new ground. Research papers explore innovative and novel developments within CNM and poly-parenting in Europe and North America, which help to understand distinctive dynamics

within these alternative intimate and familial practices (Manley and Goldberg, Raab, Roodsaz, Schadler, Wauthier), illustrating the queering and transformative potential of caring and parenting in CNM relations. At the same time, many of the papers highlight social forces and dynamics that pull back well-meaning attempts at reconstructing parenting roles and the divisions of labour (namely, Roodsaz, Raab and Schadler). Socioeconomic inequalities, neoliberal imperatives, spatial constraints, poor housing, lack of access to decent health care, racial hegemonies, racialized cultural assumptions, age-based normativities, and biological definitions of kinship, legal invisibility or discrimination are identified by contributors to this Special Issue as causes for both inequality within polyamorous and CNM parenting units and their subordination and marginalization in society at large. The demonstration of grave experiences of inequality, stigma and discrimination across all the papers illustrates the relevance of a radical critique of compulsory monogamy, couple centrism or mononormativity in contemporary theories of intimate or sexual citizenship (Plummer, 2003; Richardson, 2018; Roseneil *et al.*, 2020). Some of the work collected here (Rothen, et al.) shows that full participation and proper citizenship for parenting CNM and polyamorous families and relationships can only be achieved through profound legal transformation, and a radical interrogation of the hegemonic status of monogamous civil marriage (see, (Emens, 2004; Polikoff, 2009; Chambers, 2017; Pérez Navarro, 2017).

The articles are organized in the following order: First, Rahil Roodsaz explores the queering potential of polyamorous parenting relationships in the Netherlands. In her qualitative study, Roodsaz focuses on how partners and members in polycules carefully construct and mediate roles, commitments, attachments and expectations around caring practice in consideration of differences in identity and positionality and their respective socio-economic conditions. She identifies the respective degrees of a queering potential around polyamorous parenting with regards to difference-oriented

selfhood (concerning the readiness to embrace difference and change), the expansion of political communities, the deconstruction of gender roles, and the realisation of enduring and unexpected care.

In the second article, Michel Raab draws on his empirical qualitative research with polyamorous parents in Germany to show how the persistence of hegemonic gender norms and biologicistic kinship discourses may obstruct egalitarian care relations regarding the organisation and division of labour. He is also interested in the different strategies polyamorous families use to address the contradictions of neoliberal imperatives in their everyday lives.

In the third article, Cornelia Schadler also addresses questions regarding the division of labour in her qualitative research with CNM parents in Austria and Germany. Following a new materialist approach, Schadler is interested in practices within the context of their structural arrangements (rather than identities). Like Raab, Schadler pinpoints constraints and unintended effects and consequences. She presents a tentative typology of different styles of realising care within multi-adult configurations that transcend biological kinship ties.

The first three articles prioritise the analysis of care, while the fourth article by Pierre-Yves Wauthier focuses on CNM parents' navigation of urban residential landscapes and the negotiation and realisation of dwelling patterns in non-monogamous child-care settings in Belgium. Tracing the residential trajectories of his study participants, Wauthier highlights the significance of spatial organisation, mobility, design, and urban development for the realisation of non-normative child rearing practices.

The fifth article by Melissa M. Manley and Abbie E. Goldberg draws upon mixed-method research (survey and interviews) to explore how CNM queer families in the USA met the challenges of the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic (recruitment of the sample between May and December 2020). The authors show that lockdown

regulations and the felt need to limit contact had a major impact on child-rearing practices in CNM families. Building upon queer theory, an intersectional framework and a study population primarily comprised of members of LGBTQI*+ communities, the research documents the impact of reduced contact on the spatial organisation of parenting practices that become increasingly focused upon singular households, imposing the need to prioritise contact with some members of a polycule above others. Manley and Goldberg are interested in how CNM queer families respond to these challenges, and whether they resonated with or contested (hetero)normative convention.

The last article, by Kimberley Rothen, Elisabeth Sheff and Jonathan D. Lane, explores the legal regulation and discrimination of CNM parenting families in the USA within a framework of citizenship theory. The authors engage in a critical reading of LGBTQ struggles for legal recognition of familial bonds and parenting roles to draw lessons for possible strategies for polyamorous parents and CNM activists. The article focuses on the tension between claiming rights and subjecting to pressures of assimilation, suggesting that the inclusion into certain legal rights or the creation of certain rights is likely to have its own downsides, reproducing certain inequalities and binaries, and that a comprehensive struggle for everyday belonging for all families will need to transcend the sphere of the law.

The contributions to the Special Issue thus encompass a wide range of perspectives that pertain to the study of internal family dynamics, the organization of care practices, the division of labour, reconstructions of kinship, socio-economic and spatial patterning and stratification, legal regulation and recognition, and the intersectionality of (inter)subjectivity regarding gender, sexuality, race, and class.

Unfortunately, our Special Issue is also missing crucial perspectives, such as in-depth engagements with the issues of coloniality and First Peoples, and furthermore

religion. The participants of the research projects discussed in this special issue were predominantly white and therefore the work presented here is also missing voices that explore important intersectional power dynamics. We would like to see future publications on CNM and parenting go further in exploring the diversity and intersectionality of experiences across racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and geographical positionings and locations. The essays presented in this special issue are also limited and partial in terms of their methodological approaches and disciplinary orientations. We have not been able to present, for example, research that explores questions of representation and popular culture from within cultural studies perspectives. Like any subject matter, research into polyamorous parenting would certainly benefit from trans- or supra-disciplinary interrogation. Lastly, issues around what concerns those who are raised in and by CNM families are also unfortunately left out of this Special Issue – an as-of-yet barely touched upon area of research where much more can be done to listen to children's and young people's own voices on this topic.

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