Chapter 9: Queer(ing) Consensual Non-monogamies, Queering Therapy:

Queer Intimacy, Kinship, and Experiences of CNM in LGBTQIA+ Lives

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In 2010, Elizabeth Wilkinson asked "What's queer about non-monogamies now?" criticising the assumed and discursive standards about the ''right'' way to be non-monogamous: couple-centered, love-based, and rule-regimented - arguably, standards derived from traditional monogamy (Ferrer, 2018). This "right way" to be non-monogamous is sustained by the cultural pressures of neo-liberal capitalist social relations (such as self-responsibilization, respectability, self-reliability, resilience, consumerism, market-orientation, and reproductive futurity) both *within* non-monogamous communities and the scholarship on Consensual Non-Monogamies (CNMS). These social relations consequently reinforce a normative sexual politics that rewards certain CNMs for approximating signs of straightness, monogamy, and heteronormative desire (see Ahmed, 2004; Duggan, 2002, p. 179). This observation strikes true when examining much of the academic scholarship concerning treatment, mental health, and non-monogamies, which tends to pay particular attention to couples and their realities, and exclude, stigmatize, or delegitimize practices of non-monogamies that do not uphold these norms. In this chapter we try to provide an answer to Wilkinson's question, by exploring the queer potentials of CNMs and of queer(y)ing CNM, queer ways of constructing kinship and intimacies, the experiences of queer people practicing CNM in relation to coming out and belonging, facing violence and stigma, and constructing new practices around consent.

'To queer is to make strange, unfamiliar, weird; it comes from an old German word meaning to cross', suggests Jamie Heckert (2012, p.64), and continues: 'What new possibilities arise when we learn to cross, to blur, to undermine, to overflow the hierarchical and binary

oppositions we have been taught to believe in?' (p.64). From this point of view, the intellectual and political effort of queering aims at thinking outside of boxes, binaries and taken-for granted categories. It is about perceiving ways of being in the world, forms of knowledge, relational styles, and desires that are not intelligible in mainstream binary-based taxonomies of gender and sexuality and upon which most psychological theories, as well, have been modelled. Historically, the term queer has emerged in dissident gender and sexual politics of counter-normative radical social movements (Jagose, 2010; Sullivan, 2003; Haggery & McGarry 2007). Although the meanings of queer have been vastly expanded over the recent decades, we would like to retain and contribute to this politicised legacy, seeing queering as a conscious interrogation of oppressive practices, with a historical mooring in LGBTQIA+ lives and commitment to counter-normativity. In the following sections, we wish to draw out the *queering* potential of CNM practices and to highlight what a queer sensitivity or queer understanding of relationality may offer to therapeutic practice.

The terminology employed throughout this chapter is neither consistent nor singular, and our use of particular terms follows how they are used in the specific context under discussion. For example, direct quotes from other authors feature *"LGB"* often indicating that the research was limited to particular political moments, locations, and participants. In our own analysis, we often use *"LGBTQIA+"* to reference more broader political movements. We also employ "queer" as a shorthand for all of the acronyms mentioned above terminology as a general political and relational identifier, as well as for ease of writing, all the while cognizant of Gloria Anzaldúa's (1991, p. 264) point that "queer" as an umbrella "homogenizes, erases our differences." We acknowledge that the term queer assumes different meanings in different contexts and is interpreted differently by different people. This is not at all surprising since the

term has been created as a critical concept that resists 'closure' through rigid categorisation. In discussions within ourselves, it became apparent that although we share an over-all approach, we hold slightly different ideas regarding what queer signifies and what a queer politics may entail. The sections that follow should not be seen as an attempt of providing clear-cut definitions, but as the beginning of a conversation about the insights that can be drawn from a critical reflection of LGBTIA+ CNM experiences, deploying a queer lens. This inevitably leads us to address not only promising potential, but also unresolved tensions and challenges.

Non-monogamies have been described by scholars as a relational paradigm, according to which it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain consensual, multiple affective and/or sexual relationships simultaneously (Ferrer, 2018). Within this paradigm, intimacy is "connected with sexual and emotional freedom, personal empowerment, liberation from patriarchal oppression, ethical interpersonal behavior, honesty and communication, non-possessive love and overcoming of jealousy, and psychospiritual growth" (Ferrer, 2018, p.818). Further more, queer communities understand non-monogamies to foster communities of interdependence and networks of care; value platonic friendships; promote shared vulnerability with metamours; create space to explore sexual desires and compatibility; provide room to get to know oneself in different contexts; create chosen families; inspire opportunities to be brave; envision new ways to build and express commitment and security; and initiate enduring relationships that embrace the changing shape of intimacy (Morrigan, 2019). Research into queer non/monogamous subjectivities and communities that continue to identify non-monogamies as "part of lives lived queerly" (Benson, 2017, p.26). Considering this, non-monogamous relationships are understood to be modes of queer resistance to heteronormativity, and a catalyst for mobilizing political values and reenvisioning relationship possibilities that are

more responsible, caring, loving, and sustaining alternative visions of social transformation. At the same time, imagining this kind of intimacy must involve responsibly attending to the social power relations that condition the possibilities for and of non-monogamous relationships. The significant constraints that racial, gendered, and other intersecting social locations have on transgressive relationship possibilities should be particularly addressed. As knowledge about CNM intimacy, identities, and relationships is still emerging in therapeutic fields, finding therapeutic and social support to navigate new experiences and power relations can be challenging for queer practitioners of CNM.

People of non-normative sexual and gender identifications and people practicing CNM seeking therapeutic support often find themselves facing scrutiny, over-surveillance, discrimination and pathologizing therapeutic approaches, as well as attempts to 'fix' their sexualities. As a result, many of them avoid therapy or refrain from disclosing all or some of their identities and relationship practices, often leading to inefficient or even harmful professional practice (Schechinger et al., 2018).

Sex, sexuality and relationships are structured within intricate systems of socially constructed binary oppositions. Binary opposition is the dyadic arrangement of two opposite terms or concepts in a dialectic connection, by which they are both "strictly defined and set off against each other" (Smith, 1996, p.383). These binaries are defined in a hierarchical manner, where one concept is considered to be socially desired and valued over the other (Derrida, 1981). Butler (1990) conceptualises 'the heterosexual matrix' to describe the interconnectedness of the socially constructed binaries of male/female, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual. Building from this, Steinberg (2020) contributes the concept of 'the relational matrix', to describe the intersections of the hierarchical binaries between sexual/asexual,

romantic/aromantic, single/coupled. Queer sexualities and theories have been subverting and challenging those binaries by creating liminal, unfixed, and fluid identifications (Berlant & Warner, 1998). CNMs, especially those that move beyond polynormative, couple-centred models, destabilise the relational matrix, by expanding the variability of intimate relationships (Sheff, 2013). CNM has an affinity with queerness, even if it cannot be collapsed into queerness and if hegemonic practices within CNM cultures may reproduce power relations and social normativities.

Our interests in contributing to critical conversations and new understandings of CNM in the fields of mental health go beyond academia into our relationship choices and the intimate and political networks in our lives. Through our writing collaboration we aim to hold space for the excitement, comforts, possibilities, challenges, and grief that we have experienced as queer scholars and practitioners of CNM, often negotiating both privilege and marginalization, and the intersections of religion, geography, gender, sexuality, and race in our lives.

We will now go about complicating and making unfamiliar some of the taken-for-granted knowledges about intimacy, relationality and non/monogamy, tapping into conternormative practices and theories, exploring the scope for queering relationships, kinship, emotions, sex, and consent. We address these concepts in this order and start out by asking how CNM may queer "relationships."

Queering Relationships and Kinship

According to the Collins Dictionary (2021a), one popular definition of the term relationship refers to more generic and abstract connections between things or groups of people, whereas a more specific meaning highlights interconnectedness: '[a] relationship is a close connection between two people, especially one involving romantic or sexual feelings.' Other

synonyms provided by the Dictionary (2021b) relate to 'association', 'affair', 'connection', 'affinity', 'amour' or 'bond'. The three core qualifying markers of 'a relationship', according to this definition are dyadic relation, romantic involvement and (mutual) sexual attraction.

Arguably, the Collins Dictionary presents here a very narrow definition of a relationship as an intimate constellation that reproduces normative ideas of the couple-form, based on commitment to monogamy (exclusive pair bonding) and a confluence of romantic love with sexual desire. In normative definitions of relationships (such as the one of the Collins online dictionary), these key markers of deep intimacy usually do not function independently in parallel discursive operations, but are interconnected and constitutive of each other. This means that, according to normative relationship definitions, the interplay of love and sexual attraction and/or practice create the sense of specialness and distinction that sets couple relations apart from other intimate close relationships (Lenz, 1998). The projected confluence or coincidence of love and sexuality underpin the common scripts of monogamous intimacy. Becky Rosa (1994) identified this aptly in her famous text 'Anti-Monogamy: a Radical Challenge to Compulsory Heterosexuality': 'For monogamy to exist there needs to be a division between sexual/romantic love and nonsexual love', she argues (1994, p.109). This results in a necessary downgrading and under-rating of friendship and other non-romantic and non-sexual intimate bonds.[1] At the same time, the qualification of "love" is also expected to be felt for and shared with one person only; it is elevated by desire and manifests itself fully in sexual consummation (Klesse, 2006, 2011). Sexuality on the other hand finds its only proper legitimation in deep romantic engagement (as an 'expression of love' or an act of 'making love'), and sex starts to be

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[1] From a lesbian feminist point of view, Rosa argues that this has negative implications for women's wider social relationships and the attempts to create a politicised feminist networks and communities: 'Women's monogamy has repercussions for their friends, for nonmonogamous women, and for feminism' (Rosa, 1994, p. 108).

perceived as tainted – and moves outside the 'charmed circle' of proper intimacy, if it is shared with multiple partners (Klesse 2007a; Rubin, 2002). According to these relationship scripts, only certain kinds of sexual interaction are validated, excluding kinky, fetishistic, object-assisted or non-genital sexual touch (Barker & Hancock, 2017).

Dominant ideas about intimacy are underpinned by a vast set of relational logics or cultural beliefs. These are often only partially coherent with each other or consistent within themselves and that can be articulated in different ways, with different emphases in different cultural (con)texts. Jessica Joan Kean (2018) provides a succinct list of some of these key relational logics, including (among others) the following: 'the passionate/romantic ideal of "one true love"', 'the steady/companionate ideal of a "soul mate"', 'the idea that there is a clear, coherent and sustainable distinction between the categories "friend" and "lover"', 'the belief that sex is healthy only in the company of romance and commitment', and 'the way romance and commitment are understood as leading to or synonymous with monogamy' (all quotes 2018, p. 470)[2]

Narrow definitions of what it means to be in a proper, valid, healthy and satisfying relationship mobilise these relational logics and form interconnected normative regimes:

1. Mononormativity (i.e. compulsive or institutionalised monogamy and the idea that proper relationships are a matter of a close bond between two adult people) (Pieper & Bauer, 2005; Schippers, 2016);

2. Heteronormativity (the view that true love and natural sex is contingent of gender complementarity, involving a cisgender man and a cisgender woman) (Berlant & Warner, 1998;Warner, 1993);

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[2] For a longer list of relational logics and fragmented normative assumptions, see also Kean 2015, pp. 700-702.

3. Couplism (i.e. the accumulation of cultural capital and legitimating power within couples) (Klesse, 2016; Lahad, 2017);

4. Amatonormativity (i.e., the expectation that people find their fulfilment in romantic relationships and that proper relationships are based on romance and loving sentiments) (Brake, 2012);

5. Compulsive Sexuality (i.e. the assumption that people need sexual relations to experience happiness and deep intimacy) (Brake, 2012; Heckert, 2010; Kean, 2015; Klesse, 2016; Rich, 1983; Rosa, 1994; Roseneil, 2006; Steiner, 1976);

6. and Compulsory Parenthood (i.e., the notion that everyone must want to have children and that parenthood is mandatory to normative adulthood) (Donath, 2011).

Feminists and queer feminists in particular have argued that to the extent that mononormativity overlaps with heteronormativity, it is underpinned by the ideology of complementary gender relations (modelled upon variations of hetero-masculinity and hetero-femininity) and a gendered double standard, that regulates women's relationships and sexualities in stricter and harsher ways (Rich, 1983; Rothschild, 2018, see also Klesse, 2018).[3] This gendered model often portrays men as predators and women as their prey. While it allows men greater sexual freedoms, it also requires them to be sexually available and sexually active at all times. At the same time, it designates women as more emotional and less sexual (Rothschild, 2018). Hegemonic masculinities also operate in gay male contexts, for example, gay male sexual passivity is stigmatized and interpreted through the intersecting lenses of femmephobia, misogyny and queerphobia (Connell, 2020).

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[3] Mimi Schippers (2016) rightly points out that mononormativity and heteronormativity interconnect, but should be seen as independent regimes of power, in their own right.

Through a discussion on "femininity," Angela Willey (2016) highlights that the gendered character of non-monogamy is simultaneously classed and racialised: 'Monogamy, then, though it is repeatedly left unsaid, is an absolutely central feature of femininity. Compulsory monogamy is thus deeply raced and classed, as it is the subject most estranged from normative femininity's white and middle-class coding, most vulnerable to violence, and thus most in need of monogamy's protection' (2016, pp. 6-7). This often shows up in clinical spaces through victimization discourse, where women practicing CNM who are seeking support are assumed to be victims of abuse, denying the complexities of their agency, choice, and pleasure. The racialized and classed aspects of monogamy and non-monogamy can also be seen in the hyper-sexualization of Black and working-class femininities (Skeggs, 2002).

These various 'normativities' interconnect in an over-arching projection of a 'regime of sexual normalcy' (Schippers 2016, p.15), and are underpinned by the intersection of simultaneously operating regimes of multiple oppressions (Combahee River Collective, 1982, see Cardoso & Klesse, this volume). They also structure wider normative expectations around what proper families are supposed to look like that hinge upon racialized and class-mediated ideas about reproduction and kinship (Cohen, 2001). Mimi Schippers suggests that many forms of non-monogamy are framed as threatening, because they are assumed to represent 'some kind of violation of the integrity of the couple' (2016, p. 2). The stigmatisation of consensual non-monogamy is thereby always mediated by oppressive structures around gender, race and class (Klesse, 2014; Rambukkana, 2015). Mimi Schippers (2016) puts is as follows: '[C]ompulsory monogamy insists on dyadic resolutions for all regardless of gender and race, but it is gender and race privilege that are at stake in the narratives we tell about monogamy and its failures' (p. 4). This can have manifold repercussions in the lives of women and (non-white) racialized

minorities. For example, in Christian's research some women who practiced CNM reported strong disapproval within their families, seeing their boundaries transgressed in sex-positive spaces, or having their credentials as good mothers called into question. British South Asian gay male and bisexual men contested culturalist framings of their intimate and erotic life decisions and racism in gay male and queer communities. People of different gendered, racial or sexual subjectivities reported how inter-racial dating is fraught with and over-determined by ethnocentric and racist assumptions (Klesse 2007a; Klesse, 2015). Some participants in Christian's research reported having experienced exoticising, racist or Islamophobic comments and having their physical boundaries transgressed in disrespectful manners.

The 'dyadic resolutions' of compulsive monogamy normalise the modality of couple bonding as a distinctive style of intimacy that has historically been shaped by romantic love. In the following paragraphs, we discuss how queering relationships through CNM may destabilise these triangulated notions of couple, intimacy and romance.

What is a "couple?"

In the Eurocentric culture of intimacy, the idea of the couple has gone hand in hand with regulative assumptions of what amounts to proper intimacy, and also what it means to love another person truly and deeply. In his history of heterosexual love in twentieth century Britain, Marcus Collins (2006) shows that within the discourse of mutuality that came to underpin the idea of conjugal marriage, mixing, emotional closeness, and a practice of refined and controlled intercourse (that is not governed by 'primitive sexual urges' were supposed to play together to create marriage as a space of intimacy and harmony. The wildness, degeneracy of domestic love and family life in the colonies provided the counterfoil for the idealisation of the white British family (McClintock, 1995, see Nagel, 2003, for the context of US settler colonialism). Loving,

caring, sharing, knowing, understanding, trusting, and communicating/disclosing are key elements of Western interpretation of the modality of *close association* called *intimacy* (Jamieson, 1998, pp. 7-10).

In her study of 150 straight and LGB couples in the USA, Canada and the UK, Sally Cline (1998) suggested that in all their differences, the couple narratives of her respondents converged to allow for the following definition of a couple:

> **Two partners who are committed in a primary way to each other. This commitment has to be for a longer continuous period than any commitment to other people. The couple commit themselves to sharing emotions, activities or time more intensely or more often than anyone else. A committed couple is one which desires *intimacy* and at one time, whether in the past or the present, has professed love. Whether the partners live together or apart, whether they share a bed or a bank account, is less significant** (p. 46, *bold and italics in original)*.

Intimacy, love and prioritization are the core ingredients of this understanding of what makes a couple, giving space for multiple variations regarding emotional and sexual trajectories and spatial or financial arrangements (see also Barker & Gabb, 2016). The intimacy of couplehood, according to Cline, is shaped by a sense of interdependence and a set of values or strategies, which she labels as the 5 C's: commitment (as a 'pledge of love and faith in the relationship), communication (verbally, physically and/or sexually), coping with change (the will and capacity to meet challenges over time), cherishing (a mutual disposition towards care for the other partner), and compromise (working it out).

While some researchers have stressed an egalitarian and democratic nature of contemporary couple discourses and couple culture (see Dunne, 1999; Giddens, 1992; Weeks et

al., 2001), others have stressed the persistence of emotional and/or economic dependency, gendered, racialized and class-based divisions of labour, and gendered power relations, which are particularly pronounced in heterosexual relationships (Carrington, 1999; Jackson, 1996; Jamieson, 1998; Jamieson, 1999; Klesse, 2007b; Van Hooff, 2013). They are further placed in wider frameworks of class-based, gendered and racialized practices of re/production (Federici, 2012; Federici & Linebaugh, 2018). The un-egalitarian nature of monogamy has been pointed out and critiqued since the end of the 19th century, by anarchist and Marxist authors, lesbian and queer feminists and by LGBTQIA+ activist from the gay liberation period onwards (Klesse, 2018; Rothschild, 2018).

While evolving around values of love, support, care, affection and empowerment, couple relations are at the same time fraught with and compromised by internal power relations, and beyond that, implicated in wider social structures of stratification and subordination. The normativity of the couple produces a further set of exclusions, namely of those who fail or refuse to enter couple relations, whether they are asexual, aromantic, singles or those drawn to multiple relationships. A recent study by Roseneil et al. (2020) that explored regimes of intimate citizenship in the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Norway and Portugal concludes that in all these countries being in a couple is seen to be 'the normal, natural and superior way of being an adult' (p. 3). Moreover, couplehood tends to be endorsed by the state in that it 'is institutionalized, supported and mandated by a plethora of legal regulations, social policies and institutions, cultural traditions and everyday practices' (p. 4). Because of this systematic privilegisation, coupleism can lend itself to develop subjective (couple based) strategies of the accumulation of power (Steiner, 1976).

Many people who practice CNM are consciously involved in sustained efforts to undo

and deconstruct these power relations and to develop alternatives to the couple-based script. Certain forms of CNM, such as single people who erotically and sexually engage with multiple partners, open relationships, swinging, polyfidelity, and polyamory decentralise the cultural hegemony of couple-normativity. People of all genders and of all sexual identities may feel drawn to open relationships, but sociological research has emphasised the high prevalence of such arrangements in particular within gay male cultures (Adam, 2006; Coelho, 2011; Heaphy et al., 2004; Klesse, 2007a; Seidman, 1992; Weeks et al 1996, 2001). Many of the values bound up with couple ideals discussed above (see Cline, 1998) may still operate within open relationships. This is in particular the case, if partners in an open relationship may consider themselves to be sexually non-monogamous, but emotionally monogamous, allowing only for outside erotic encounters that do not carry the risk to threaten the primary emotional bond between lovers (see Weeks, et al., 2001). Swinger relationships, too, tend to invest in a strong emphasis on couple unity and boundaries despite their practice of group sex or parter swapping (De Visser & McDonald, 2007; Frank, 2008; Wagner, 2009).

Strong boundaries around a dyadic primary relationship may also be cultivated within some polyamorous or polyfidelitious relationship constellations, in particular if the participants in such polycules apply catgeorizations such as 'primary' or 'secondary' partner. The distinction of primary and secondary partner status is quite common in polyamory cultures, even if it is rejected by some as an inherently hierarchizing, normative or unethical practice, as we will later explore (see Balzarini et al., 2017, Klesse, 2007a; Sheff 2013; Willis, 2019). In its general orientation towards embracing multiple loves, polyamory transcends the couple. Some researchers, though, suggest that many polyamorous relationships still tend towards forms of dyadic confinement, through practices of hierarchy and prioritisation (Finn, 2010; Wilkinson,
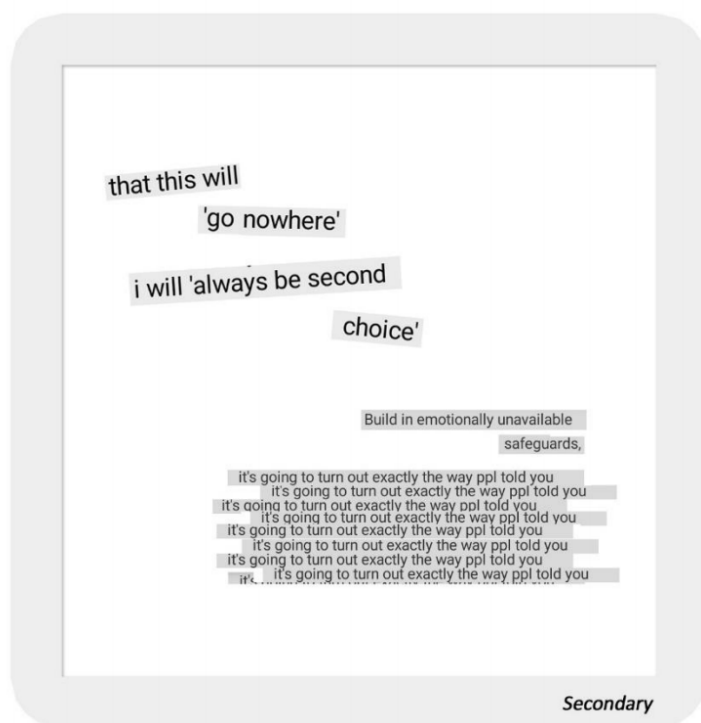
2010).

In lived CNM contexts, divergences regarding definitions about primary-ness or secondary-ness and lack of agreement on precedence or mutual levels of commitments, can lead to a sense of injury and alienation among those placed at the margins (and not in the centre) of a CNM constellation, or designated as "secondary." It can also lead to conflicts about trust, time allocations, parenting rights, property and heritage, depending on context and circumstances (Klesse 2007a; Sheff & Tesene, 2015).

We think it is important to be aware of the debates about the validity and rights and wrongs of primary/secondary relationships, because the contestation of this practice within CNM communities installs something like a disciplinary 'panoptical relationality' (in Willis' (2019) words) among those who practice CNM, linked to practices of self-monitoring and self-scrutiny, and questioning one's own capacity for doing CNM "properly." Willis (2019) links such practices of devaluation or community pressures with poly-normativity or a counter-cultural ethics that, if articulated in judgmental terms, may imply a push towards 'compulsory non-monogamy' (ibid., p. 525). A participant in Jaisie's research, which explored narratives of intimate violence through PhotoVoice with queer non/monogamous communities in Lethbridge, Alberta, describes his experiences of navigating relationship hierarchies with his partners:

Figure 1

Participant PhotoVoice, "Secondary," (Walker, 2020, p.101).

that this will

'go nowhere'

i will 'always be second

choice'

Build in emotionally unavailable
safeguards,

it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you
it's going to turn out exactly the way ppl told you

Secondary

This photo displays edited clippings from conversations I've had over text with my non-residential partner during challenging parts of our relationship. As I navigate both of my relationships, assumptions about primary vs secondary hierarchies often crop up both externally and internally. At times, friends rely on this structure to understand how my relationships work on a functional level. Other times, participants in the relationships experience insecurity as a result of these stereotypes. While I realize that many polyamorous folks do identify with this concept, I try to take a more balanced approach in that when I'm with my partner, they are my priority. Obviously life is complicated, and navigating more than one relationship takes some finesse, compassion, and empathy on the part of everyone involved.

Through their PhotoVoice, this participant describes the mechanisms that encourage primary/secondary dynamics in their life, including not being "out" to certain friends and family, which, to him, is "like you're wearing this monogamous front or something," and the ways in which him and his partners consciously try to build security and reduce inevitable power imbalances between them (Walker, 2020, p. 102). The strong politicisation of styles of intimacy in certain CNM contexts, may cause conflict and/or insecurity (see also Klesse, 2007a) and may surface in multiple ways in therapeutic conversations.

While some CNM constellations may reproduce couple rhetoric and dynamics, others consciously embrace a relationality beyond the couple. This is the case, with polyamory, polyfidelity, and - probably in its most explicit form - relationship anarchy. Beyond this there are manifold styles of CNM that emphasise a strong degree of personal autonomy and individuality around the notion of solo (as in *solo polyamorous*) or that decisively embrace

singleness as a base to enact CNM through more casual or temporary erotic and sexual engagements that are entered without the wish or urge to *build a relationship* (see Barker, 2019).

Polyamory in particular explicitly endorses the creation of multiple loving relationships (Anapol, 2010; Haritaworn et al., 2006). While the ultimate definition of the term differs depending on the cultural context and has been contested among those who use it as a meaningful term to communicate among their relationships and identities (with the questions of which position casual sex may assume within a polyamorous way of life being a main issue of contention) (see Klesse, 2006; Ritchie, 2010), polyamory posits the unbounded nature of love, welcoming on the creation of larger polycules, the number of which is only limited by the evolving consent of the partners evolved, and pragmatic - such as time-related - reasons.

Polyamory provides an umbrella term for various constellations of multi-adult forms of partnerships, with a strong emphasis on love, care and long-term bonding (Anapol, 2010). Additionally polyamory often fosters the creation of intense and significant non-romantic connections, in the form of poly-affective relationships with metamours, whose nature further subverts the centrality of the romantic-couple (Sheff, 2013). Polyfidelity shares the same terrain, but within this approach, partners draw stronger boundaries around the core relationship through a commitment to sexual and romantic exclusivity. Both polyamory and polyfidelity aim to undo couple scripts, but deploy specific techniques of prioritisation and boundary management. Polyamory elevates the idea of (multiple) partnership as a particularly cherished bond, while allowing individuals or the group (depending on the terms of the arrangement/s made) to expand their connections, rendering the polycule open to fluidity, change and potential growth or shrinking, whereas polyfidelity is more invested in the idea of stability, reproducing a

concept of sexual exclusivity, not so dissimilar from the strategy of limitation within monogamy (but going beyond the pair constellation) (Sheff & Tesene, 2015).

Relationship Anarchy is probably the concept that most assertively challenges the normative idea of both couplehood and marriage, plus the manifold emotional and interactional registers they concepts are bound up with. Andie Nordgren (2006/2012) who is credited with having invented the term in a pamphlet in Swedish language in 2006 states:

"Relationship anarchy questions the idea that love is a limited resource that can only be real if restricted to a couple. You have the capacity to love more than one person, and one relationship and the love felt for that person does not diminish love felt for another. Don't rank and compare people and relationships - cherish the individual and your connection to them. One person in your life does not need to be named primary for the relationship to be real. Each relationship is independent, and a relationship between autonomous individuals".

Relationship anarchy is in particular opposed to the assumption that romantic and sexual relations carry more value than friendships, and also that romantic and sex-based partner relationships ought to be prioritised over other erotic or intimate connections such as fuck or cuddle buddies, etc. (see, Kamm & Clements, 2018; Sheff & Tesene, 2015). The refusal of any hierarchization in favour of romantic love had already been articulated in the community-focused proposal of a dyke anti-monogamy position by Becky Rosa (1994) (see quote above), without using the term 'relationship anarchy'. Relationship anarchy tries to overcome these divisions, categories get more fuzzy, and more importantly, they are detached from conventionalised value ascription. Nordgen's (2006/2012) manifesto starts with the claims that 'love is abundant' and that 'every relationship is unique'. Even within relationship anarchy,

love is central to the narrative. Looking at relationships from this perspective allows for the potential recognition and evaluation of multiple forms of attractions that go beyond the sexual and the romantic, like creative or intellectual attraction, which can lead people to create different bonds, connections and relationships with others. Janet Bennion (2020), suggests that cisgender men are often more drawn to the relationship anarchy approach, suggesting that relationship anarchy may also lend itself towards stereotypically masculinist forms of commitment, intimacy or care-avoidance.

Solo, Ace, & Queerplatonic Intimacies

Because of 'solo' styles of intimacy that emphasizes the relationship with oneself as "primary," independence, solitude, and personal space, many people who are single may identify with CNM or any of its particular variations. They may have close and long-lasting intimate friendships, 'friendships with benefits', engage in casual sex, hooking up or sleeping around, be part of group sex, swinger or BDSM communities or other sex-positive circles. Some may also be sex workers or clients of sex workers. The sexual lives of people engaged in CNM may differ widely. Pleasure, sexual exploration and/or the participation in queer or kinky sexual subcultural or community-focused events may be an important factor (Bronski, 2000; Califia, 2000; Poland & Sloan,2006; Sullivan, 2003, 2009). These motivations or values may be relevant for many who are solo or single, but also for many who cultivate lasting relationships of different kinds, shapes and degrees of commitment. We will explore questions of sex and pleasure in more detail in a later section. BDSM practices, too, often involves distinctive erotic practices which may intersect with CNM (for example around dominance/submission), which may give rise to unique constellations of relationships and families (Bauer, 2014; Kaldera, 2013).

A range of authors have stressed how some asexual people are drawn to polyamory (Scherrer, 2010), but also that asexuality in itself has the capacity to destabilitise the normative registers of monogamous intimacy: 'Asexual relationship paradigms posit distinctions between romantic/aromantic and sexual/asexual. That is to say, asexuality problematizes monogamy's compulsory sexuality and its conflation of sex and romance', states Willey (2016, p. 8). Aromantic identifications also tend to cultivate relationships that move beyond couple-centred models (Rothschild & Steinberg, 2018, Steinberg, 2020). Aromantic discourses decentralise romance as the grounds for significant relationships and often reject the couple-form altogether or reconstruct couple-like relationships, which are based on intimate and committed friendships, instead of a romantic connection. Aromantic people have been inventing new terminologies to describe alternative intimacies. One such example is the term 'queerplatonic *relationship'* "used to refer to an intimate, dyadic friendship with commitment resembling a romantic relationship. As stated on the Aromantics Wiki, "a queerplatonic relationship [...] defies the divide between romantic partnership and 'just' friends (Queerplatonic, n.d.)." (Steinberg, 2020, p. 11).

Queer Kinship, Families of Choice, and Polyqueer Relationship Constellations

Many of the taken for granted, temporal and spatial aspects of relationships and kinship forms are contested by queer and CNM constellations. Leehee's current research into polyamorous and queer intimacies, exposes a profusion of attitudes and preferences towards shared living spaces, sleeping arrangements and divisions of intimate and individual times, etc. (see also Sheff, 2013). Feminists have shown the processes of gender subordination and the furthering of women's oppression through heteronormative scripts of monogamous pair bonding also through the specific constructions of love and intimacy (Jónasdóttir & Ferguson, 2014, Garcia Andrade et al., 2018). CNM practices, and often in particular LGBTQIA+ CNM

practices often also reformulate what it means to be intimate or what a loving relationship could look and feel like, if it is freed from the crusts of heteronormative and hetero-patriarchal traditions (Callis 2014). Many queer projections of CNM have also re-assessed the high value placed on such emotions or emotional states/dynamics, grounding relationships on other emotions or practices (Berlant, 1998; Berlant & Warner, 1998).

For many CNM practitioners, queering relationships goes hand in hand with a queering of kinship. CNM practice may entail a radical redefinition, modification and broadening of kinship discourses and practices. In the final part of this section, we would like to show how CNMs have been part of a radical shift in contemporary understandings of who counts as kin and what we may understand as family. In close interconnection with LGBTQIA+ expansions of kinship discourse, CNMs have helped to multiply the meanings of kinship far beyond heteronormative, biological and reproductive definitions of kinhship, that have been deeply engrained in law, culture and convention. Leehee's current research into queer and CNM intimacies, includes, among others, relationships in which people actively sought to separate child-rearing and housing from 'the couple' and share them instead with intimate friends and co-parents, with whom they did not share sexual or romantic intimacy.

In the 1990s, the terminology 'families of choice' or 'chosen kinship' emerged to refer to a vast array of new arrangements beyond the dominant model of the Western nuclear family (which itself rested on the idealised notion of the conjugal couple, heteronormative gender relations, a gendered division of labour, and 'natural' reproduction (conception through intercourse) (Weston, 1997). In the face of social and legal discrimination, which often also implied a rupture if not a loss of queer people's (at times very hostile) families of origin (Schulman, 2012) , LGBTQIA+ people were creating their own families made up of partners,

ex-partners, friends and comrades from within their movements. These developments certainly

implied a queering of family and kinship, although there have also been many queer theorists

and activists to whom the 'family of choice discourse' did not break radically enough with a

privatised vision of personal happiness, which remained stuck in heteronormative temporalities

and exerted an assimiliationist pull (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Edelman, 2004). The strong

emphasis on marriage equality and LGBTQIA+ campaigns around surrogacy, fostering,

adoption and artificial reproductive technologies have certainly restored more normative ideas

of 'lesbian and gay families' (Polikoff, 2008; Heaphy et al., 2013).

　　　CNM relationships, too, have been part of this drive to a diversification of familial

practices through the creation of 'families of choice'. While people who engage in open

relationships may or may not be married (the same may apply to swingers), and while some it is

not unheard of that some people in polyamorous relationships may be in a civil marriage with

one of their partners (Klesse, 2007a), few of those who live in multi-adult CNM relationships

have advocated for plural marriage (or marriage-like legal statutes). Polyamory movements

have so far shown little ambition to jump on the marriage equality bandwagon (Aviram, 2010;

Aviram & Leachman, 2015), although the debate has been growing in some countries (Klesse,

2016). There has been the strong sentiment that demanding legal state recognition would mean

succumbing to normative pressures that undermine polyqueer distinctiveness (Aviram, 2010;

see Schippers, 2016). Deploying the theoretical perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, Jamie

Heckert (2010) believes that CNM can contest and undermine the state-sanctioned compulsory

monogamy. To the extent that people who practice CNM are creating legal frameworks for their

relationships, they are often taking recourse to contract law or power of attorney, although this

is costly and not an option for everybody (Aviram and Leachman, 2015; Palazzo, 2018; Sheff,

2013).

Polyqueer CNM relationships can create complex relationship constellations, involving partners, metamours, friends, and in many cases also children, in the latter case frequently involving practices of allo-parenting (Bennion, 2020; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Sheff, 2013). This radically transforms traditional kinship roles, in a fluid process in which roles and identities evolve with the flow of time reflecting relationship transformations (such as shifts between friendship and lover relationships, non-parent to part-time parent of full-time parent, uncles and aunties to partners and vice versa) (Matlainen, 2012). Speaking further to fluid kinship roles, in Jaisie's research, one participant explains the "fluid level of relationships" that both rope-play and non-monogamy facilitates, including the one they share with their main rope top, who they are not romantic or physical involved with outside of rope: "We sometimes hang out platonically as friends, or go to social gatherings. He ties me in rope, and that's pretty much it. His partner, she also ties me, but we have a bit of a romantic relationship" (Walker, 2020, p.119).

The involvement of non-biological parents in co-parenting is very common in polyqueer CNM, which challenges hegemonic biological definitions of kinship and broadens parenting practices, allowing non-biological parents new experiences or biological parents to step out of the confines of traditional roles or identities. It also puts children in the beneficial situation to engage closely with other adults who may not directly be involved in parenting (as a defined co-parent) (Cardoso, et al., forthcoming; Lahad, 2017; Paine, 2020; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2013; Klesse, 2019; Sheff, 2013).

Many CNM relationships (whether with children or without) are thus involved in creating larger communities of care beyond the traditional notions of the familial (Raab, 2018,

2019, 2020). While the transformative potential of CNM kinship is out of question, it is also important to note that even those who are ethically and politically committed to creating alternatives to heteronormative kinship and family practices, may fall back into or reproduce traditional (gendered) divisions of labour or parental patterns based on biological parenthood in their everyday lives (Raab, 2019, 2020; Schadler, 2021;Sheff, 2005, 2006, 2013).

From a queer perspective, the concept of family is rightly seen as suspect for its over-determination with heteronormative and mononormative baggage (Roseneil, 2007). This is why we consider a terminology of 'queer bonds' of CNM kinship as more adequate to understand the innovative character of LGBTQIA+ and CNM contemporary kinship practices (see Klesse, 2019; Rodriguez, 2011; Weiner & Young, 2011).

While there are many beneficial aspects to Queer CNM intimacies and kinship, which practitioners should be aware of, people who practice them may also face unique challenges that relate to the lack of social and institutional recognition of their relationships. These may include many day-to-day hurdles, such as, for example, having to deal with school or health clinics that do not recognise multiple parents, but also severe responses to one's life choices, such as hostility and disavowal by individual family and friends (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010, see also Moors & Ramos, this volume). Queer people in non-normative constellations may face daily reminders that their relationships or families do not fit the norm, which can be expressed in the smallest of details from Spotify couple accounts that are meant for cohabitating couples to holiday deals, which are meant for couple-centred, two adults families. They are also often faced with the constant requirement to decide whether to be public about their unique relational or familial status.

Pallota-Chiarolli (2010) discussed the tactics that families of bisexual and polyamorous

people employ, when faced with those choices and concluded that there are three prominent tactics that these people use in dealing with their broader social networks - passing, bordering and polluting. Passing refers to those who choose to actively hide their relationship practices, bordering to those who do not necessarily actively disclose it, but are not pursuing a fully closeted existence and polluting to those who actively seek to challenge the social norms, by an open and public display of their relationships. Each one of these paths comes with certain advantages and bears a certain price.

While it is important for practitioners to be aware of the challenges that accompany living outside the relational norm, it is also crucial to avoid pathologisation of queer CNM relationships and families. Individual, relational and familial issues which are not directly related to queer CNM should not be assigned as symptom of certain kinship or relational practices (Barker, 2018).

In the following section, we show that the very act of queering relationships and kinsip also inevitably involves an expansion of emotions through a queering of the world of feelings.

Queering Emotions

Queering the language of feeling, and offering a space to carve out new emotional vocabulary, communities of CNM practitioners are creating language around relationship behaviours that embrace new intimate, emotional, and affective possibilities, such as *sheeptitude*, when you have a romantic or sexual interest in someone but feel reluctance to act on it, especially for people who are newly exploring non-monogamies, or pursuing relationships with other genders for the first time (@chillpolyamory, Jan 1 2021, see also Ferrell, this volume). Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker (2006) have stressed the linguistic creativity of CNM communities to find words for emotions that are specific to CNM dynamics and intimacies,

such as 'frubble' or feeling 'frubbly' (to refer to the joy of experiences a beloved person or partner in love with somebody else) or 'wibble' or 'wibbly' or 'shaky' (to designate a feeling of insecurity or discomfort regarding a partner's other relationships). Activists online are also going beyond heternormative language scripts to define the ways in which power, violence, and intimate privilege show up for non-monogamous communities. Morgan (2020a) for example, defines *seesawing* as "vacillating between commitment and noncommitment in a way that confuses your partners, and between consistent and inconsistent respect of boundaries, in a way that harms your partners;" *polyfuckery* as, "people who claim ethical polyamory but behave in self-centered ways that hurt the people they love," (2020b) and *breadcrumbing* as "giving intermittent positive rewards that may keep people in otherwise unhappy dynamics" (2020c). Communicating consent violations or non-negotiated shifts in expectations, Amy Gahran further coined the term *sneakiarchy*: when a self-proclaimed non-hierarchy engages in undisclosed or unexamined hierarchical practices (found in Morgan, 2021).

Affective possibilities for practitioners of CNM include loving more than one person at a time, and 'compersion' (synonymous with 'frubble') - the possibility of feeling good when seeing one's partner with another partner (Barker et al, 2013; Deri, 2015). Scholars have also recognized affective states such as being in NRE (New Relationship Energy) and Shiny New Lover Syndrome (Taormino, 2008, p. 118), terms used to describe the heightened emotional and sexual "buzz" at the start of a relationship, which require emotional management to maintain existing relationships, including the fear of abandonment, agreement violations, and time management. Either in addition or in contradiction to these possibilities, some express feeling "knotted up and tangled," an outward spikeyness and defensiveness, insecurity and vulnerability, terror or loss, "feeling very small as if one might disappear," being uncomfortable

in their skin, or feeling "painfully stretched, and as an almost enjoyable form of self-righteous rage" (Barker et al., 2013, p. 196). New terminologies to describe feelings that do not fall into the normative spectrum of intimate sentiment have also been coined by asexual and armoantic communities. For example, the term '*squish'* refers to a non-romantic crush, while '*WTFromantic"* refers to the inability to strictly distinguish between romantic and platonic feelings (Steinberg, 2020). These expressions can be understood as queering emotional experiences, specifically for queer practitioners of CNM who are coping, grappling, resisting, and celebrating clashes between the familiar and unfamiliar range of feelings as related to safety, expression, and desire.

Theorizing "the managed heart," sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2012) argues that "feeling rules" and "emotion rules" govern how people feel as well as how we express socially mandated feelings. In their proposal of "acting" feelings- a clear nod to Butler's (1990) theoretical intervention of performativity- they discuss "making indirect use of a trained imagination" as an effort to feel something, even if these efforts fail (Hochschild, 2012, p. 38). As a young woman recounts her experience of non-monogamy, she expresses this failure of imagination: "I thought, intellectually, that I had no claim to the man...But I was horribly hurt, lonely, and depressed*,* and I couldn't shake the depression. And on top of those feelings, I felt guilt for having those possessively jealous feelings" (Hochschild, 2012, p. 73). This "clash between the feeling she could muster under the countercultural feeling rule" (p. 74) has been explored through the idea of "inappropriate affect" (p. 59)- the pinch between what someone feels and what they should feel.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) Halberstam traces the long history of association with failure, impossibility, and loss in research and representations of queer desire. The

negativity that failure conjures, including feelings of futility, sterility, emptiness, and loss, are often, as Halberstam explains, also associated with the failures of - or in the face of - capitalism and heteronormativity, i.e. the failures to produce and re-birth particular kinds of civility, citizenry, and social and economic capital. Questions of both belonging and alienation are further also shaped by the cultural reverberations of collective investments in the nation (not merely as bounded geography, but as the continuous articulation and rearticulation of subjective experiences of difference), which are profoundly shaping affective and performative entanglements of community (also in queer settings) (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

For practitioners of non-monogamy, it is crucial to note the ways in which new normativities and hierarchies have emerged in descriptions of what non-monogamies *should* be and feel like. For example, in many self-help style texts about polyamory there is a repeated focus on being in control of your own destiny: "with a bit of time and effort anyone can choose to be 'poly'" (Barker et al 2013, 197). As Wilkinson articulated, "mononormative feeling rules can be understood as linking directly to an increasingly individualised neoliberal capitalist consumer culture, founded upon insecurity, risk and individualism" (2013, p.193). Romantic love based on the couple (and as its extension, the nuclear family) seems, for many, to provide a goal post on the route to a happy life or as a promising ground to address the challenges of insecure labour markets and impeding precarity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2011; Lahad, 2017)

The politics of feeling are also particularly pronounced in instances where the pressure to be an "ambassador," or "model citizen" of queerness and/or non-monogamy can muddy boundaries, desires, and the capacity to consent, particularly in rural communities or contexts with smaller queer/non-monogamous representation, where stigma, complexity, change, and

failure are more challenging to process and navigate (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Walker, 2020). Cultures of blame around promiscuity are also felt amidst various forms of queer citizenship, with impossible demands around both modesty and hypersexuality, as they intersect with gender and race (Deri, 2015; Klesse, 2007a). Shame for what we want, around new kinks and communicating kinky desire, or for what we do not want, such as not wanting hyper-sexual (or any sexual) relationships within a culture of hypersexuality, or a sense of incompetence for not being able to fully articulate needs, wants, and boundaries, can also contribute to feeling 'out of place' within (counter)cultural dynamics.

The term 'relationship escalator' has been termed by Amy Gahran (2017) to refer to a normative sequence of events, behaviours or 'stages' which render a relationship legitimate in the public eye. For those who travel in the 'relationship escalator' dating is expected to lead to the definition of clear relationship boundaries, a decision of monogamy, cohabitation, possibly marriage, the purchase of joint property, the decision to raise children, etc. (see also Smith, 2020). Queer practitioners of CNM are able to resist and experiment with relationship scripts around the "relationship escalator," particularly finding unique ways to either lean into, avoid, or extend the feelings around "falling in love," intensities of feeling (my partner is everything, or feeling "swallowed up"), and "breaking up," all the while facing stigma and invalidation around what relationships we are allowed to grieve, and to what extent. Through the lens of queering emotions, we see the myriad of ways that queer practitioners of CNM are getting unstuck, experimenting, struggling, and flipping normative scripts about how people are supposed to feel, and think about feeling, in intimate relationships.

Queering Sex

In this section, we look at how the specific practices within queer CNMs may also queer sex and eroticism as an embodied, physical, emotional and symbolising interaction. Our daily reality is imbued with a surplus of messages around sex. These messages dictate the who, when, where, why and how of what is considered to be 'proper sex' (Rubin, 2002; Barker & Hancock, 2017; Barker & Lantaffi 2021). Barker & Hancock, (2017) expose some of the normative conceptions about sex, by reflecting upon people's responses when asked to describe what they consider to be 'proper sex' with reference to how bodies and genitals figure into this construction.

> It seems that things that people count as 'proper sex' generally involve genitals, nudity, and some form of penetration. Often the kinds of sex that involve one penis and one vagina are seen as being somewhat more 'proper' or 'real' than those involving different genitals in different combinations, or other parts of the body. Things at the 'definitely not sex' end of the continuum could be done for other reasons than sexual desire, or are generally seen as potentially leading to 'proper sex', rather than being sex themselves. Also, activities that don't involve any physical contact often get placed further, towards the 'definetly not sex' end of the spectrum. (pp. 46-47).

As we have discussed, sexuality, like other aspects in our lives, is socially constructed through an assortment of binary oppositions, such as male/female, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, kinky/vanilla, sexual/platonic. In relation to sexuality, these binaries often lead to pathologisation, exclusion and erasure of those who are located in the in-betweens, like people who are trans, nonbinary, demisexual, bisexual, or intersex.

These binaries are foundational for affirming the power regimes that shape and control our sexuality. Mononormativity for example requires the distinction between the 'sexual' and

the 'asexual' in order to conjure clear separation between romantic and platonic relationships

and in order to define what is and what is not considered as cheating in the relationship (Rosa,

1994). Although, as Barker (2018) argues, these borders are in fact constantly contested and

may change over time in any particular relational context. Queer thinking rejects these binary

categorisations and offer instead to look at sex, gender and sexuality through a range of

spectrums and axes on which individuals are situated, which are bound to changes and

fluctuation (see for example, Bogaert, 2015).

Historically, therapeutic discourses about sex and sexuality have been embedded with

pathologisation and anxieties in relation to sex and sexuality and especially to sexualities that do

not conform with the social norm. Queer and CNM people in treatment may experience scrutiny

for the number of people they have sex with (which can be perceived as either too high or too

low), for the gender of their chosen partner, and for the sexual practices that they engage in

(Barker, 2021;Weitzman, 2006).

Queer and CNM cultures have fostered alternative conceptualisation of 'sex' and the

'sexual' that emphasise fluidity and diversity. In this section we shall diverge from normative

conceptions of 'good' and 'proper' sex and employ instead a sex-positive lens that considers the

variety of ways in which people can have enjoyable and desirable sexual interactions with one

another.

People differ on the level of sexual attraction that they are experiencing. People on the

asexual spectrum may experience lower sexual attraction, no sexual attraction at all, be sexually

attracted only to people with whom they are in a significant intimate relationship with, or only

to complete strangers. Some of them may prefer to avoid sex altogether, while others enjoy a

variety of sexual practices, while not defining their motivation in the terms of 'sexual desire'

(Steinberg, 2020). At the same time, there are people who experience a high level of sexual desire, who feel like they desire more sexual activity than what is considered common or normative (Sheff, 2005).

People may also identify somewhere on the asexual spectrum in relation to some genders, while experiencing more sexual attraction towards others. Moreover, sexual attraction does not always align with other forms of attraction and people may for example identify as biromantic, without being attracted to all genders or to anyone at all (Bogaert, 2015).

Like asexuality, bisexuality also functions as an umbrella term that can refer to a variety of attractions to a multiplicity of genders. Bisexual authors have stressed the potential that bisexual (or plurisexual or pansexual) relational experiences to unsettle normative ideas of binary-coded sexual orientations and desires by transcending gendered scripts of sexual interaction. Bisexuality undoes assumptions of monosexual orientation, gender oppositionality or complementarity that underpin the 'heterosexual matrix' and creates new models (even for cismen and ciswomen) to exchange erotic energy (Eisner, 2013; Queen & Schimel, 1997; Vassi, 1997, see also Butler 1990). Malena Gustavson (2009) suggests that bisexuality provides ground to challenge both dominant ideas of sexual orientation as a matter of gendered object choice and gender ontology in itself. Bisexual CNM enhances the experiential space for erotic exploration and queer performativity. There is a long tradition of bisexual feminist and queer-feminist writings that highlights the gender-queering potential of (bisexual) CNM (see Klesse, 2021). Moreover, as CNM does not limit people to a single sexual or romantic relationship and many CNM forms allow for more diverse sexualities, it can provide people with the opportunity to explore their multisexual attractions and bisexual tendencies. This phenomenon tends to be

gendered, with more encouragement towards bisexuality on the side of women, femme, and genderqueer people.

The concept of the '*unicorn',* describing the ideal and elusive bisexual woman, who would be the perfect match for a couple is still prevalent in certain CNM contexts. '*Unicorn hunting'* is often undertaken by cisgender, heterosexual couples, who are making their first intrusion into CNM and specifically polyamory and try not to deflect much from normative relational conceptions. It has the potential of reconstructing normative models of eroticisation of women/feminine bisexuality as centered around men's pleasures, as well as constructing imbalanced power dynamics within the relationship. At the same time, there are bisexual women/queer people, who enjoy the practice of being a unicorn, including those who specifically seek relationships with couples. Those relationships can be joyous and fulfilling for all those involved (Monro, 2015; Sheff, 2005, 2013).

Experiences of sexual attraction are not constant and may differ throughout different time periods, due to internal and/or external factors. People may also experience different levels of sexual attraction within different relationships and with different partners (Manley, Diamond & Van Andres, 2015). CNM constellations can allow partners of different levels of sexual attraction or different sexual desires to fulfill differing sexual needs (Sheff, 2016). CNM environments may also encourage people to expand and diversify the genders that they are attracted to and/or engage in sexual activity with (Sheff, 2005).

What is categorised as sex or as sexual and what type of sexual interactions people would like to pursue is also varied, contested, and diverse. Normative thinking about sex is often focused on an act of genital penetration involving two individuals, leading one or both of them to orgasm. Research into hetereosexual sexuality and intimacy suggests that in practice

cisgender men's heterosexual orgasmic pleasure is focal and prioritised (Van Hooff, 2015, see also Potts, 2000). But even in queer contexts, penetration may be considered to be the peak of sexual interaction and everything leading to it is relegated to the realm of 'foreplay' (Barker & Hancock, 2017). These conceptions have been criticised by feminist and queer scholars, for numerous reasons, including centralising around men's sexual pleasures (Richardson, 2000), limiting sexual potentials, defining the entire sexual act in terms of failure or success according to a single activity and making a specific practice mandatory for the engagement in sexual practices, leading to external and internal social pressures.

Queer and CNM sexual discourses and practices offer a more diversified understanding of sex. The sexual act may involve a single person, acknowledging the significance of solo-sexuality, or multiple partners, rejecting the commitment to the couple-form. Sex can also occur in between individuals who are set apart in different spaces, via, text, audio or video, which can be for example a major form of sexuality in (temporarily or permanently) long-distance relationships or work in various forms of domination. sexual activities that people may refer to as 'sex' ranges from sensual touching, kissing and caressing, grinding and humping, using sexually designated and improvised toys, and various forms of kink and BDSM activities, involving various degrees of genital play (including none and some). Changing the relationship between genitalia and sex legitimacy can also accommodate trans* and non-binary partners whose bodies might be experiencing hormonal changes, surgery preparation and recovery, and may wish to avoid, change, or play with their relationship to their genitalia, including through the use of packers, tape, and strap-ons. Queer and CNM sexual discourses attempt to anticipate and accommodate change and fluidity within the intersections of gender, sex, and sexuality, with people often incorporating caregiver roles and kinky partners in their lives to help support

with gender and identity-based transitions.

Elisabeth Sheff and Corrie Hammers (2011) highlight a close overlap between CNM (namely polyamory) and BDSM communities. While BDSM is also practiced in monogamous couple relationships, BDSM cultures are generally open to erotic exploration, often involving group play (see also Deri, 2015; Vilkin & Sprott 2021). At times, discrepancies in desire for kink between partners may be a motivation for exploring BDSM (Vilkin & Sprott 2021), at times CNM may be a consciously chosen element within BDSM relationship, family or kinship formation (Bauer, 2014; Green, 2007). In the context of this section, we are primarily interested in how kinky CNM may transform sex as an interaction. BDSM practices often draw their central meaning from strategic power exchanges in erotic encounters, and not necessarily from genital stimulation, which - as we have suggested above - is often seen as a core ingredient of 'sexual activity' (Barker & Hancock, 2017). It is not uncommon, for BDSM practitioners to not consider BDSM to be sex at all (Taylor & Usher 2001). Michel Foucault (1996) has famously praised gay male leather BDSM culture for having historically invented new - de-genitalised - pleasures which have the potential do undo what society understands in a normative fashion as sexuality (see also Halperin, 1995; Klesse, 2007a). Robin Bauer (2008, 2010, 2014) has provided path-breaking insights how many queer and trans* BDSM practitioners use BDSM practices strategically to explore different gender presentations or gender identities, within or without longer-term processes of transitioning. Deploying gender play (also in interconnection with age play, etc.) and practices of body modification (such as the usage of dildos and other protheses, potentially with different partners), allows BDSM practitioners to explore different aspects of their gendered being, queering the body, gender performance and 'sex' as a form of eroticised physical, cognitive and emotional communication (Preciado, 2019).

People in queer CNM relationships may experience their sexuality as a site of empowerment and their introduction into queer and CNM spaces as a validating and freeing experience that allows them to communicate and act upon their sexual wants and needs and experience greater sexual subjectivity. CNM environments can encourage people to explore and diversify their sexual attractions and practices and experience feelings of sexual freedom and empowerment. For people who experience gender oppression, including those who face ongoing (trans) misogyny, sexism, and femmephobia, they can also serve as transgressive spaces in which they reshape normative conceptions about their sexuality. At the same time, these can also be spaces in which women and other marginalised groups are exposed to hypersexualisation and undesired sexual attention. CNM spaces are not bereft of gendered, racialised and classist sexual stigmatization, and it is important to find ways to acknowledge power dynamics and complex oppressions, in addition to the liberatory potentials that CNM contexts may facilitate (Sheff, 2005).

At the same time, social stigmatisation and taboos surrounding sexuality may expose people in queer and CNM relationships to social scrutiny, shaming and violent experience relating to their their sexuality. They may also be fostering feelings of internalised shame and guilt, which may limit their ability to express and act upon their sexual desires (Barker, 2021). Fear often rooted in past experiences may also prevent them from sharing and even actively hiding significant aspects of their lives with their social surroundings, as well as from their therapist (Richards & Barker, 2010).

Queer people who practice CNM may be intentionally challenging dominant sexual codes, stereotypes, expectations, feelings and sexual behaviours. This may lead to frictions and pressures in their lives. Despite feeling social scrutiny, social stigmatization, and the feelings

and frictions associated with shame and guilt, it is important to support practitioners of CNM in clinical spaces work through these emergent and complicated emotional spaces as part of their ongoing stories of choice, agency, and resistance.

Queering Consent

Consent is the principle that perhaps goes the farthest towards legitimizing "Consensual Non-Monogamy" in the eyes of its practitioners. Consent designates here the principle that all partners or all people who have an intimate investment in a CNM configuration know about the non-monogamous arrangement within the relationship or the network of relationships or a 'polycule' (a name for a polyamorous multipartner unit). The ethical commitment to an ideal of a mutually shared consent within more complex relational constellations is dependent on honesty, transparency and effective communication (Emens, 2004; Klesse, 2006, 2007). While there is a common acknowledgment within CNM communities that disagreements and painful situations may occur, CNM relationships tend to be based on a mutual commitment to work things out, to treat each other with care and respect and to support each other through difficult stretches.

The commitment to consent is what renders so-called 'ethical' forms of CNM (Lano & Perry, 1995) different from the mononormative practice of cheating (Anderson 2012; Mint 2004). Considering the enormous diversity of different styles of CNM and the potentially quite divergent modalities of duration, intensity, commitment among different bonds within CNM constellations and/or encounters, it is obvious that the processes in which consent is sought, established or revoked may differ depending on the context. Contractarian models of consent are certainly insufficient to address the complexities of lived CNMs. There is no standard way or template for how consent can be achieved and maintained.

Forms of CNM that aim for long-term commitment and durability tend to place a strong emphasis on negotiation and verbal communication. They manifest themselves - at least within this context - as what Jamieson (1998) calls 'disclosing' intimacy. Disclosure, openness, and communication can manifest themselves as a particular kind of necessary 'relationship work' (Klesse, 2011, 2014; Petrella 2007). The question of 'shared knowledge' about the non-monogamous conditionality of an arrangement and of the nature of the respective bonds, connections and involvements is of course important, but it is only a surface matter of consent in a relational context, at least if we are interested in a consent that is deep and expansive. Consent is bound up with important values centered in people's experiences, such as well-being, emotional and physical safety, integrity, dignity, autonomy (in the sense of the capacity of agency), mutuality, trust, etc., and aims at the prevention of harm, injury, dependency, containment, and all forms of violence. If we operate with such a concept of deep and expansive consent, it appears to be questionable as to whether the emphasis on consent in CNM advocacy always addresses all the relevant questions.

Yet, community members and scholars continue to identify a lack of engagement with power relations as a striking feature of self-help, activist, and academic literature on non/monogamies which often fail to go beyond narrowly defined identity concerns and can obscure critiques of violence amidst oversimplified positivity discourse (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Wilkinson, 2010). Possible consent violations in non-monogamous relationships discussed in mainstream anti-violence resources include situations such as: Your partner has cheated and decides they want to open things up as a result; Your partner wants to be non-monogamous but doesn't want you to have sex with or date anyone else; or You feel like you need to open up your relationship in order to keep it going (Melissa, 2019).

Neoliberal risk management technologies are replicated in popular literature and "how-to" guides for "Consensual Non-Monogamies," where consent is currency: a "sexual contract set up by free individuals" (Malinen, 2019, p, 34). While relationship contracts are drawn up to mitigate harm, they can be manipulated to obscure responsibility, where consent is contingent and always compromised by power imbalances between partners, especially given the tendency in polyamorous communities to reproduce a culture of multiple privileges, namely around class and racialization (Klesse, 2014).

The limits of contractual consent in spaces where understandings of power are still emergent are elucidated clearly in Jaisie's master's thesis. Prompting important understanding and theorizing about the complexities of assault and consent in queer non/monogamous contexts, one participant recounts their assault that took place in a queer venue involving group sex with two of their partners and other venue attendees, where they were assaulted by their metamour without protection, despite previously establishing relationship boundaries (Walker, 2020, p. 107). This participant's former understanding of their assault as "public sex at a party" is a compelling critique of the lack of explanatory power that mainstream (anti)violence narratives hold for many queer CNM people, and the ways in which gender and hypersexualization put demands on identity and the ability to consent, as well as the behaviours that can be legitimized under "queer" and "non/monogamous" when social differences are not attended to (Walker, 2020, p. 107).

Adding nuance to the conversation of consent in CNM spaces, other participants in Jaisie's thesis describe the ways in which new networks of safety are possible within CNM contexts, including a built-in support network of intimate partners and metamours that can act

as a resource for both emotional support and end-of-relationship safety planning (Walker, 2020, p. 120).

Figure 2

*Participant PhotoVoice, "Consensual Violence," (Walker, 2020, p. 118).*

I am intrigued by the idea that I can control the way I perceive a stereotypically violent situation, simply by flipping the viewpoint. Rope for me is a way to get into a meditative state, release the worries of the day, collaborate with another person. It's one of the ways I express intimacy with romantic and platonic partners. Most of the time I don't do a lot of active moving, and someone else has control over my physical body, while I have the freedom to give and revoke any consent at any time. We communicate the whole time. Through rope I've learned a lot of things about what I'm capable of, what I enjoy, what I don't enjoy, and how to express those things so that it doesn't come across as the other person's fault if something is not working. It's been a communication tool, as well as a self care tool. I started it with platonic friends, and then introduced my primary partner to it as well. It opened up the idea that non-monogamies can take place in "vanilla" relationships and "kinky" relationships, and everywhere in between, at any level of intimacy. One has the freedom to establish and maintain any kind of relationships they please, not only the societal norms. It was eye opening for me, and really eye opening for my primary partner as well.

One participant, through their image "Consensual Violence," describes how they shift anger and lack of resolve associated with memories of past sexual assaults, incorporating new approaches to partner safety, and experimenting with consent through (non)movement in platonic spaces of rope-play with their CNM partners- recognizing the possibilities for growth, justice, and understanding, that were previously not afforded to them (Walker, 2020). Another participant discusses how their learned emotional patterns from childhood, and their ideas about

what they should want in queer CNM spaces, interfere with their capacity to communicate consent:

Figure 3

Participant PhotoVoice, "Bed" (Walker, 2020, p. 95)
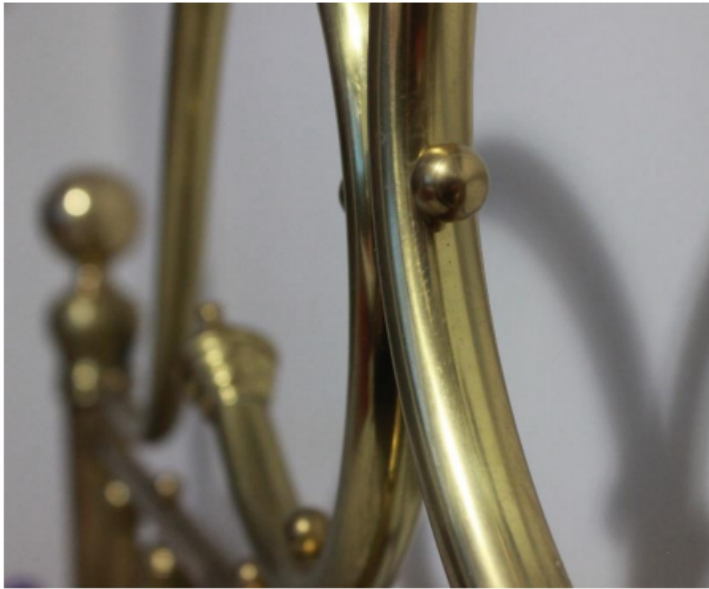
This is my bedframe. My bed represents a place of intimacy and sexuality, but also a lot of unacknowledged feelings. Sometimes when I don't feel like it, I let my partners have sex with me or don't tell them to stop. I don't think I ever learned a language around boundaries. In my adolescence I found emotions very painful so for a long time I didn't really listen to my body. It's hard for me to know, let alone communicate, my boundaries when I don't have an awareness of my body. When did I ever stop and ask myself if I really want this? I guess I have ideas about myself, and what I should want/feel like/be like/do in my relationships.

Read together, their stories delineate how "class, race, and sexual difference are read through the ability to contain oneself and wholeness becomes a primary index of cultural legibility" (Winnubst, 2006, p. 4). Often internalizing big system failures as emotional deficit, while also recognizing these as structural factors, the struggle to identify and communicate their needs, as well as find support, are particularly challenging as successful non/monogamous relationship models are branded through the ability to make legible and verbally communicate all needs and boundaries.

These diverse narratives of consent ultimately complicate our strategies for violence

prevention in queer non/monogamous communities, revealing the inadequacies of an ahistorical and individualized approach to consent and ethical communication.

Conclusion

In this article, we have foregrounded queer CNM experiences by focusing on LGBTQIA+ relationships and sexualities. We have taken reflections of the queering potential or LGBTQIA+ CNM as the starting point for describing cultural shifts around queer CNM practice, zooming in on the effects of normativity and counternormativity, power, pain, creativity, and pleasure in queer lives. We recognise that that queer CNM practitioners and communities are involved in changing relational paradigms, queering in innovative ways relationships, kinship, family practices, emotions, intimacy, gender, sexuality and sex and eroticism. At the same time, we aimed to highlight the potential costs of living one's life and relationships queerly against the grain, which stem from the social objection and censorial approach to queer and trans* embodiment, relational practice, intimacy and sexuality. While consent is a key value in queer CNM culture, uneven power relations continue to shape the lives of those who are committed to challenge intersectional oppressions in their personal and political lives.

We discussed many relational approaches, identities and gendered, erotic or sexual ways of life under the umbrella of 'queer'. Among others we explored various styles of CNM and the literature around lesbian, gay male, bisexual, plurisexual, pansexual, asexual, trans*, queer, queer-feminist and kinky aspects of CNM. We hope that our discussion has shown that while it is possible to point to *tendencies* that may set apart different styles or types of CNM, there are also strong overlaps between discourses and communities. The boundaries between them are fluent and the meanings and values attached to these concepts are continuously contested and

reinterpreted in different communities (see also Cardoso & Klesse, this volume). We reject the idea that an abstract comparative discussion of the relative queering potential inherent to these respective approaches (detached from concrete settings and lived experiences) is helpful in any way. This would also feed into a politically damaging culture of competitive scoring and self-righteousness. We think it is more useful to focus on the lines of conflict, challenges and contestation that are opened up through such approaches, and to then aim at identifying the frictions, emotional turmoil, contradictions, traps, and clashes that are likely to emerge in the lives of those who are involved these differing CNM projects. It is of course also important to keep in mind that these always play out differently in the lives of people depending on their respective social positioning on intersectional (queer) cartographies.

It has become more common in the literature on CNM to acknowledge that shared emotional grounds and challenges that both monogamous and consensually non-monogamous people work through in their relationships. This shift has given rise to the usage of the couplet non/monogamy, emphasising how with all the oppositional rhetoric monogamous and non-monogamous problematics may flow into each other (Barker & Langdridge 2010a, 2010b; Ferrer, 2018; Frank & DeLamater, 2010). Such an approach would hopefully provide a more thorough understanding necessary for an affirmative therapeutic practice.

To queer involves collective political challenges and contestations, and it implies interrogations of the status quo through problematisation or by rendering unfamiliar the familiar. The spirit of queer is wary of providing ready-made answers. Queering is about raising difficult questions and tackling taken-for-granted knowledge. We would like to utilise the critical energy residing in queer intellectual and political ambition, by inviting our readers to enter a queer space of reflexive self-questioning, turning the knowledge gained from the

engagement with queer literature on queer CNM lives into a ground for further questioning. As Igi/Lindsey Moon (2008, 2010) and many others have shown, queer critique and queer interrogation provide indispensible intellectual resources and a promising method for counsellors and therapists. Following this reasoning, we started to raise a number of questions that to you may want to ask yourself as a therapist working with LGBTQIA+ non-monogamous clients, as a starting point for queer(y)ing your own practice:

- What assumptions do I hold about my clients relationship to kinship, desire, sexuality, and gender? What assumptions do I hold about LGBTQIA+ communities and non-monogamous intimacy? Which of my peers can I turn to for support in working through these assumptions?

- How can I hold space for clients whose relationship style, sexuality, or gender, might be evolving, often simultaneously?

- How can I honour the complexity of the shame, guilt, embarrassment, or confusion that my client might feel? How can we create space for processing these feelings alongside celebrating accomplishments, good feelings, and exploration?

- What further learning do I need to do to connect what I'm reading in these chapters to how I feel, react, and process both during and after speaking with clients? How can I embody this theory?

- What tools can I use with clients to help empower them to make choices, come to realizations, and honour truths?

- How can I adapt existing tools I have to affirm diverse genders, sexualities, and non-monogamous identities/ practices, including removing gendered, heteronormative, or mononormative language?

- How can I normalize queer kinship, including non-monogamies, in my practice? How do I demonstrate effective allyship and reduce the emotional burden of my clients in "coming out," or having to explain their intimate relationships?

Some other key points readers may want to consider in your practice with LGBTQIA+ non-monogamous clients are the following:

- Become familiar with the terminologies relevant to your clients' lives. Learn how to accurately pronounce the words that they are using to describe themselves.

- It is important to pursue affirmative practice that validates marginalised genders, sexualities and relationship formations.

- Address people according to the way they identify, use their pronouns, respect their gender.

Queer lives are a journey. Therapy is a journey. Adventurous journeys involve travelling bent and rocky paths.

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