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# Secrecy in intimate relationships: Rethinking transparency and deceit in monogamies and non-monogamies

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sor](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sor)**Christian Klesse and Jenny van Hooff**

Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

## Abstract

This article foregrounds the role of secrets in creating, maintaining and disrupting intimacy. We extend sociological theorising on secrecy by demonstrating the operative role of secrets, across the entire relational spectrum within the non/monogamy system. The focus on non/monogamy is particularly revealing, as questions about secrecy and deceit are intensely charged with moral meanings. Ultimately, we argue that secrecy is an integral and constitutive part of intimate practice. Building on Simmel's work on deceit and lying, and its recent adaptations within the sociology of secrecy and critical theory, we assert that practices of secrecy should be central to the study of intimacy and the sociology of personal life. The distinction between consensual non-monogamy (e.g. polyamory) and non-consensual non-monogamy (such as affairs) tends to focus on mutual disclosure and transparency as key markers of difference. We take an important step in challenging the dichotomy of secrecy and transparency, showing that strategies of secrecy are implicated in the production of both monogamies or non-monogamies, whether consensual or not.

## Keywords

couples, deceit, intimacy, lies, monogamy, non-monogamy, secrets

## Introduction

Contemporary perspectives on intimacy emphasise openness, honesty, transparency and disclosure. Communication, dialogue, mutual understanding and shared knowledge are considered fundamental to fostering the closeness that enables intimate bonds to flourish. In contrast, secrecy – understood as the withholding of information (Ahmed,

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### Corresponding author:

Jenny van Hooff, Manchester Metropolitan University, Geoffrey Manton Building, Rosamund Street West, Manchester, M15 6LL, UK.

Email: [j.van-hooff@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.van-hooff@mmu.ac.uk)

2010) – along with acts of deceit and lying, are typically framed as moral failings that harm and undermine intimacy. This tension is exacerbated in the information age, where technological and governmental surveillance has become a pervasive feature of social life (Broeders, 2016), and individuals have little power to resist (Acquisti et al., 2020).

The role of secrecy in the workings of intimate relationships tends to be understudied and widely neglected in sociological research and theory, with some notable exceptions, such as Simmel's early work (1906). Secrecy has, however, gained attention in the history and sociology of family life, where its multifaceted dimensions – ranging from shame, stigma and identification to virtue, bonding, social mobility and self-fashioning – have been examined considering evolving policies, laws, morals and privacy norms (Barnwell, 2018, 2019, 2021; Cohen, 2014; Kuhn, 2002; Smart, 2011). For Smart (2007), secrecy plays a pivotal role in her proposal for a sociology of personal life, a framework that expands beyond the traditional family concept to include a broader spectrum of intimate and relational practices (see also May & Nordqvist, 2022).

We wish to develop theorising on secrets within the sociology of personal life through an investigation of the operative role of secrecy in a wide spectrum of relations that structure the non/monogamy system in Western societies (Willey, 2016). The focus on non/monogamy is fruitful, because in this area questions about secrecy/deceit are particularly intensely charged with moral meanings. Ultimately, we argue that *secrecy is an integral and constitutive part of intimate practice*.

It is widely acknowledged that questions of honesty and secrecy are of particular significance in the context of monogamy. In the romantic tradition, and in most post-romantic variations of conjugality and confluent love, the unique bond of love is assumed to manifest around a kept promise to emotional and sexual exclusivity. While mutual disclosure is the central discourse of monogamous intimacy in the Global North (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 2002; Layder, 2009), disclosure and honesty also figure prominently in the narrative scripts for negotiated or consensual variations of non-monogamous intimacies (Anapol, 2011; Ferrer, 2022). Secrecy is negatively associated with acts of infidelity, deceit and lying, which are all considered to be major moral problems. In this article, we add complexity to this discussion by showing that certain modalities of secrecy are implied in intimacy, irrespective of the labels which partners may apply to the specific *style* of their attachment (Berlant, 1998). On the one hand, the prevalence of secrecy across the whole non/monogamy system renders the binary between monogamy and non-monogamy untenable (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Ferrer, 2022). On the other hand, it allows for the more abstract insight that secrecy is a *constitutive* element of intimacy as an intersubjective practice.

In this article, we review and critically analyse key research on non-consensual non-monogamies (NCNs) (namely affairs) and consensual non-monogamies (CNMs) in the UK and North America, focusing on discourses and practices of secrecy, deploying a broad range of theories, ranging from sociological classics, such as Simmel, over critical theorists, such as Han, as well as queer and anti-racist thought.

Our article is structured as follows. In the first section, we clarify terminology around non/monogamy. We then provide a theoretical framework for understanding secrecy in the context of doing intimacy. The following two sections trace practices of secrecy within different relationship constellations that are grouped within the categories NCNs

or CNMs to show common challenges across the whole spectrum of intimacies. In the conclusion we summarise our claims, present a qualified rejection of the monogamy/non-monogamy binary and argue that *secrecy plays a constitutive role in all kinds of intimate practices*.

## **The non/monogamy complex: Infidelity, intimacy and secrecy**

Monogamy and non-monogamy are closely interrelated terms, the latter being the negation of the meanings implied in the former. Monogamy has emerged as a cultural blueprint and ethical imperative for modes of coupling, intimate bonding and family formation on a global scale, driven by the interplay of multiple factors, including cultural, religious, economic, socio-legal, biopolitical and geopolitical/colonial transformations, over a period of several hundred years on a global scale (Dabhoiwala, 2013). As feminist scholars have emphasised, the history of monogamy has been closely intertwined with the institutionalisation of heterosexual marriage, the regulation and control of women, and the cultural complex of romantic love (Munson & Stelboum, 1999; Willey, 2016). In its most common contemporary interpretation, monogamy refers to the creation of an exclusive sexual bond in the context of intimate loving relationships. Research indicates that the definition of what exactly is entailed in monogamy differs widely depending on individual apprehension and the cultural context (Weeks et al., 2001; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Non-monogamy resultantly refers to all relational forms or ways of life that involve sexual or loving interaction or partnering with more than one person.

Non-monogamy – in its manyfold forms – has always been an integral element of the wider intimate and sexual landscape, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged (Rubin, 2001). Historically strongly tabooed in the Global North context, non-monogamy was met with stigmatisation and harsh forms of punishment (Brooks, 2022). Over recent decades, processes of liberalisation, paired with the activism of political and counter-cultural movements have made conscious non-monogamous alternatives much more visible and accessible. The word consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has been used as an umbrella term ‘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)’ (Klesse et al., 2024, p. 762). Advocates of consensual non-monogamy may also use the terms ‘responsible non-monogamy’ or ‘ethical non-monogamy’, a usage in which clear value judgements are attached to openness, transparency and disclosure (Cardoso, 2024; Klesse, 2007; Wilkinson, 2010).

More recently, we also find references to ‘non-consensual non-monogamy’ (NCN) in the academic literature to refer to non-monogamies that are not openly communicated within a relational context. ‘NCN’ refers to the practice we typically refer to as ‘infidelity’ or ‘cheating’. In this scenario, ‘one or both partners have outside sexual or romantic partners without permission, knowledge, or consent of their primary partner’, Walker explains (2018, p. xxi). She describes CNM and NCNs as ‘diametrically opposed

practices' (p. xxi). Again, this approach tends to reduce consent to a binary of openness versus concealment, positioning secrecy as the ultimate marker of irresponsibility and unethical behaviour. While not downplaying the harm and injury associated with rule-breaking, lying or deceit in monogamous (or polyfidelitous) relationships, we aim to challenge the reductionist tendency to equate secrecy solely with betrayal by emphasising its constitutive role in all forms of (erotic) intimacy. This underscores the point made by some scholars who have rejected the monogamy/non-monogamy binary in favour of a continuum model (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Ferrer, 2022). We agree with Willey (2016), who speaks of the 'non/monogamy system' to capture the strong interdependence and connection between monogamy and non-monogamy. Our critical reading of the academic debates on CNM and NCM in this article has the ultimate purpose to restore secrecy as a legitimate subject and concern in intimacy studies and the sociology of personal life. This will also help to correct a continuing bias within the sociological theorisation of intimacy, which – despite repeated intervention – has remained wedded to the paradigm of disclosing intimacy, a model largely shaped by humanistic psychological frameworks (Jamieson, 2004; Smart, 2007, 2011).

## Theorising intimacy

Work by individualisation theorists such as Giddens (1992), Bauman (2003), Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) has broadly documented a shift from traditional relationship forms, toward increasing fluidity and freedom in contemporary personal life in Global North contexts. For Giddens (1992), a potential result is the predominance of the contingent, temporal, 'pure' relationship, the foundation of which is 'disclosing intimacy', a practice around the sharing of the self to one another within a couple. Similar assumptions have also structured the intimacy discourse of researchers and theorists working within a detraditionalisation perspective on LGBTQ+ relationships (Weeks, 2010; Weeks et al., 2001). Claims about the extent to which relationships have been detraditionalised have been contested (Gross, 2005; Jamieson, 1999), with research challenging the assertions of gender equality upon which individualisation theorists rely and suggesting that relationships are not as thoroughly negotiated in everyday life as the pure relationship model implies (Gabb et al., 2013; Twamley, 2012; van Hooff, 2015).

In operationalising the term intimacy, Jamieson (2011) broadens the definition beyond 'disclosing' intimacy, or deep knowing of the other person, to a wider understanding of a number of 'practices' of intimacy, which are made and remade within an intimate relationship. Building upon Morgan's (2011) concept, Jamieson (2011, para. 2.1) defines intimacy as consisting of 'practices which cumulatively and in combination enable, create and sustain a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people'. As we will unpack in more detail later, the extensive literature on CNMs has provided similar analytical definitions of intimacy, emphasising communication, active listening, disclosure, mutual support and practices of care to create mutual trust (Anapol, 2011; Emens, 2004).

As we have seen in this brief review of sociological theories of intimacy, disclosure, transparency, trust and openness are treated as core ingredients – the *sine qua non* of

‘true’ intimacy in many mainstream sociological accounts on the subject. Resultantly, secrecy, lies, conceit or concealment are often framed as a problem, which has major implications for the representation of adultery, usually seen as the most despicable *non-ethical* form of non-monogamy.

Before we present a more nuanced and complex discussion of secrecy in the specialist field of NCM and CNM intimacies in the Global North, we would like to first survey some more general sociological theories on the themes of openness/deceit and disclosure to extract fruitful concepts for a more adequate theory of secrecy/intimacy.

## Theorising secrecy and deceit

Lying is an under-researched topic in sociology (Hodgson & Balmer, 2022), and is usually treated as a moral subject in many sociological approaches. The moralistic approach cannot capture the pervasive role that lies, falsities, partial truths or fabrications play in the fabric of everyday life (see Barnes, 1994). Interactionist sociologists have been exceptional in showing how lies, deception or partial truths are often part of ritualised performance and interaction. For example, Goffman (1990a, 2010) foregrounded partial disclosure and strategic deceit as part of active information management in everyday practices of presenting the self. In many cases, such deceptive moves are relatively benign and pragmatic choices of concealment or ‘fabrication’ to appear in the best light, or possibly also to avoid stigma (Goffman 1990b; see also Shilling & Mellor, 2015). As Hodgson and Balmer (2022) argue, Goffman’s approach can be seen as a development of Simmel’s (1906) original claim that lies are best understood as an extension of established modes of sociation and not a deviation from or rupture of them. Concealment and deceit – or more broadly, strategies of secrecy – are thus pragmatic choices in complex negotiations of moral and conversational codes.

Research into the transformation of family secrets underscores this point. Family secrets are a useful example because they open conceptual windows on everyday family life, the micro workings of power, and larger patterns of historical change. Historically, family secrets in the Global North have been a key strategy to navigate rigid moral conventions and the threats of shame and stigma bound up with transgressions by individual family members. Smart (2011) suggests that families tend to proactively cultivate secrets to present a ‘face’ to the outside world, to avoid status-loss, discrimination or marginalisation. Family secrets have revolved around affairs, bigamy, illegitimacy, marriage breakdowns, specificities of filiation, adoption, racial identities, miscegenation, class trajectories, homosexuality or bisexuality, criminal acts, or other misdemeanours (Barnwell, 2018, 2019, 2021; Cohen, 2014; Smart, 2007, 2011). Frequently, the creation of family secrets depends on tacit cooperation of at least a certain number of family members, although not necessarily all. With the progression of time, secrecy may expand within families intergenerationally (Barnwell, 2018). Family secrets thus tend to be hybrid creatures that defy clear distinction regarding inside/outside orientations.

Smart (2011) convincingly described family secrets as an at least partially collaborative crafting of family *narratives* to navigate cultural power relations (see Kuhn, 2002). As such, family secrets are *inseparable* from the kinds of intimacies that emerge as the effect of *narrating*, *making* and *doing* of families. Likewise, Barnwell (2018, p. 453)

suggests that ‘secrets, though unseen, have presence’, meaning that they texture the experience of familial intimate bonds. While family secrets may have a stabilising function, helping families to ward off stigmatisation, to survive or progress (Smart 2007, 2011), they may also unfold in unforeseen and often unintended forms of intergenerational disruption and epistemic violence (Barnwell, 2019).

Moreover, we think that the common connection of secrecy with *shame* and *stigma* highlights the necessity to consider normative power relations as a key ingredient of secrecy as a constitutive function of intimacy. Shilling and Mellor (2015) highlight the reflexive dimension of deceit as a method of stigma management and avoidance. Research into cheating men by Anderson (2013) and cheating women by Walker (2018) also shows stigma avoidance to be a common pragmatic rationalisation for infidelity. If we consider that stigma is not simply symbolic but involves unequal access to material resources (Tyler, 2020), secrecy and deceit appear to be impacted by structural regimes of power and violence (Brooks, 2022). The literature on sexual relations in the contexts of colonialism and slavery has detailed the widespread practice of (gender-based) sexual harassment and rape against enslaved, disenfranchised and subordinated racialised populations as well as the destruction of the families of Black and (colonised) indigenous people (Barnwell, 2021; Davis, 2019; hooks, 2015; Roberts, 2017). In many cases, these acts and relations became subject to practices of secrecy, for example, to protect the reputation and economic interests of the powerful or the survival of those subordinated. Reflecting on the role of slavery for the creation of ‘toxic secrets’ within African American families, Boyd-Franklin (1993) highlights the potential of these histories to cause intergenerational trauma and suffering. While secrecy is best conceived as a process based on agency and a reflexive practice (evolving around interests and at least partially rational goals), it is at the same time subject to intersectional regimes of power around race, class, gender and sexuality (Brooks, 2022).

In the following, we would like to turn to the work of Simmel (1906) and its adaptation by Han (2015) to further substantiate our argument that rather than simply *shaping* intimate practices, secrecy is in fact *a constitutive element* in the creation of intimate bonds.

Discussing secrecy in the context of friendship and marriage, Simmel is adamant that intimate relationships do not simply need ‘reciprocal knowledge’, but also ‘reciprocal concealment’ (1906, p. 448). For Simmel, intimacy was the effect of a complex interplay of closeness, proximity and calculated distances. Simmel was particularly wary of a process of mutual fusion and absorption through over-disclosure, which may result in a loss of excitement and attraction. ‘Relationships of an intimate character, the formal vehicle of which is psycho-physical proximity, lose the charm, and even the content, of their intimacy, unless the proximity includes, at the same time and alternately, distance and intermission’, he argues (1906, p. 448). Secrecy thus assumes a vital role in keeping intimate relations alive. Moreover, even in close relationships, driven by an interest in understanding the whole personality of the other, intimacy is always contingent on the respect of the ‘inner private property’ of this person, which in turn implies a ‘right of secrecy’.

These considerations primarily concern a mutual respect for privacy, boundaries and the keeping of secrets. Yet they also have implications for Simmel’s analysis of lying, i.e.



concealment, even intentional and/or aggressive deceit. While Simmel never condones the latter, he is adamant that we should not conflate strategies of secrecy with immorality or evilness. He suggests that frequent lying is certainly likely to ruin social relations, but that lying may have at times an integrative function (p. 448). Simmel maintains that each social relationship always contains a certain ratio of secrecy, and that all social relations are profoundly shaped and structured by those. This resonates with our argument in this article that secrecy is itself a constitutive element of intimacy.

Han (2015) elaborates Simmel's views and updates them for a social theory of intimacy in the 21st century. Han's (2015) extensive reflections on the value of secrecy in intimate and erotic relations are located within the context of a more comprehensive critique of what he calls 'The Society of Transparency'. In contemporary societies, transparency is an overrated value pushed by economic interests, acceleration and marketisation within neoliberal digital capitalism. According to Han, the individual and collective compulsion to disclose, display and exhibit leads us into a control society and 'digital panopticon'. The ideal of full transparency undermines not only autonomy and democracy, but also true erotics and intimacy.

Drawing on a wide range of philosophers (including Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Sennett), Han turns to Simmel in his treatment of the questions of eros, desire and attraction, adopting Simmel's insight that all attraction depends on ambiguity and opacity, thus creating space for fantasy as self-activity (p. 16). Han declares that ambiguity, enigma, masks, ruse and secrecy infuse embodied encounters with fascination, poetics, metaphor, narrativity and hermeneutics that charge desire with intensity and meaning. He also suggests that compulsive transparency undermines truly intimate bonds, because meaningful encounters need to pay tribute to the non-assimilable Otherness of the Other (p. 4).

We contend that Han expands upon the foundational claims made by Simmel (1906) in innovative ways, embedding them in the context of an analysis of contemporary economic, technological and cultural developments. Han's (2015, p. 35) critique of the compulsion to excessively psychologise and personalise, driven by the self-help and therapeutic culture and social media conventions, which he refers to as 'the tyranny of intimacy', chimes well with poststructuralist Foucauldian refutations of the overemphasis of interiorisation at the heart of the discourse of disclosing intimacy (Probyn, 1996; Rose, 2005).

Contemporary intimacy discourses are further flawed, Han believes, because they lack a proper theory of the unconscious that recognises that 'human existence is *not* transparent, *even to itself*' (Han, 2015, p. 3, italics in original). This is pertinent to the matters of desire and affect that are of paramount importance for our sense of the intimate. In the light of these arguments, key assumptions of the model of disclosing intimacy appear less plausible. We maintain that this has also a major impact on how we may want to theorise intimate interactions in the context of NCNs and CNMs respectively. To sum up: Han actualises Simmel's work and reframes his concerns from within the tradition of critical theory, foregrounding wider social and economic pressures and transformations. This allows also for a more power-sensitive analysis, which we would like to pursue further in the remaining parts of this article.



In the following two parts, we will first demonstrate that secrecy is a pervasive feature of contemporary intimate practices in Global North contexts, spanning intimate styles across the non/monogamy spectrum, even as it is commonly disavowed.

## **Doing secrecy: Secrets and institutionalised infidelity**

In this section, we will look in closer detail at NCNs, aiming to unpack the complexity of the functions and effects of secrecy within dominant cultures of intimacy. We will first explore the damaging effects that secrecy may have on intimate bonds and continue to discuss the constructive sides of secrecy as they have been described by some authors and advocates of certain forms of NCNs. In this context, the section will include a discussion of adultery as a form of rebellion or resistance.

Secret affairs are the subject of major public concern, curiosity and scrutiny, with stories of affairs forming the focus of frequent media attention. They cause excitement, gossip, public outrage and moral condemnation (Brooks, 2022; van Hooff, 2017; Walker, 2018), with infidelity, cheating and adultery being a ‘transparent sign for tawdriness and bad behavior’ (Kipnis, 1998, p. 294).

Most of the research into NCN highlights its damaging effects on long-term relationships and the wider culture of intimacy. We have already highlighted the widespread endorsement of the culture of monogamy, marriage and couplehood in European family sociology (Roseneil et al., 2020). This reflects the powerful operation of an ideological commitment to mono-normativity within the wider assemblage of heterosexual, cis-normative, reproductive family values (Schippers, 2016). From this point of view, NCNs are framed as a deviation from the norm and a failure at monogamy. Researchers and theorists have shown that the failure to be monogamous is commonly seen as the effect of significant moral flaws that are also indicative of a deficient character, indicating a lack of maturity, authenticity, commitment, or the capacity to truly love another person (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Klesse, 2011). Authors who take a more measured or critical stance with regard to these framings are scarce (Robinson, 1997; Walker, 2018).

As negotiated non-monogamy is rarely perceived as an acceptable option within long-term heterosexual partnerships, there is an inevitability about the continuation of this type of deception within relationships. Smart (2007) points out that the types of secrets we keep reflect the social conditions under which they are made. Strict rules about the ‘normal’ expression of sexual desire and the emphasised role of the traditional couple in personal life shape dominant attitudes towards non-monogamy. Rather than being welcomed as a liberalisation of sexual practices, infidelity’s challenge to the couple establishes it as the most ‘critical’ of sexual practices (Kipnis, 1998, p. 295). Just as ‘the couple’ is part of the everyday (Gabb & Fink, 2015), so is ‘the affair’, although within a heteronormative framework the former is socially and institutionally privileged, and the latter remains marginalised and condemned. We thus face the situation of an ‘institutionalised infidelity’ forming an integral element of mononormative cultures of intimacy, which leads Pepper Mint (2004) to speak of the ‘cheating system’.

Adulterous intimacies depend on secrecy (Rambukkana, 2015). The refusal to share knowledge and the strategic everyday efforts to keep information from spilling are taken as indicators of the ultimate betrayal. This in turn contributes to the pain experienced on

discovery of an affair. NCN may be ubiquitous, however the devastation it has the potential to inflict should also be recognised (van Hooff, 2017). However, several feminist scholars offer alternative perspectives, portraying women's adultery as acts of refusal, empowerment and resistance against heteronormative couple culture and the institution of marriage (Brooks, 2022; Griffin, 1999; Kipnis, 2004; Martin, 2018). A feminist critique of monogamy is well-established, arguing that monogamy primarily benefits men rather than women (Klesse, 2018; Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Willey, 2016). From this perspective, non-monogamy can provide women with a means of asserting their agency and desire, challenging institutionalised heterosexuality (Robinson, 1997).

Drawing upon literary analysis and autobiographical reflection, Griffin (1999) presents the figure of the mistress as a symbol of strength, self-ownership and transgressive-ness, rejecting the constraints of married life for women. At the same time, she highlights the difficulty of keeping a check on one's own emotions to maintain a balance that she sees as precondition for the endurance of an affair. Similarly, Kipnis's (2004) polemic attack on the culture of love and romance depicts adultery as 'The Great Refusal' of relationship labour and married drudgery for the sake of stimulation and erotic intensity. For Kipnis, 'adultery is the sit-down strike of the love-takes-work ethic' (2004, p. 31), a promising 'way of protesting the confines to coupled life' (p. 52), which she discusses under the chapter heading 'domestic gulag' (p. 42). Contrasted with the mundanity of coupled life, adultery opens spaces for autonomy, spontaneity, excitement, experimentation and the creation of new ways of life.

Brooks's (2022) recent autoethnographic text provides probably the most complex analysis of the mistress experience to date. Brooks describes mistress-hood as a site of resistance and transgression and the mistress as a queer rebel, tragically misunderstood and ousted. For Brooks, the mistress is both an icon of ultimate resistance and excessive repression. It is through the repressed knowledge and stories of the mistress that we can best understand those multilayered power relations which constrain women's and trans people's sexual and intimate lives in the current sex/gender order within late racial capitalism. In Brooks's analysis, secrecy is the key to both the blissful, orgasmic intensity of the mistress to shake up our taken-for-granted views on hetero-patriarchal intimacy and her (or their) vulnerability to abuse and abjection. Brooks's analysis of secrecy at the heart of the mistress's experience provides both a sexual ethics and critical epistemology of intimacy/sexuality and power.

In all these texts, secrecy is a conscious strategy that facilitates the creation of alternative intimacies within highly regulated and conventionalised cultural contexts. Secrecy thus is not the avoidance, but the *wilful constitution of intimacy*. As a way of and a space for *doing intimacy* it partially exceeds but ultimately remains implicated in multiple power relations and modes of subjectification.

Secrecy allows for an intensification of erotic pleasure, a fact that partially stems from a thrill of transgressing moral rules or the threat of discovery (Brooks, 2022; Foucault, 1979). At the same time, we argue that the intensification of adulterous intimacies can also be explained with Simmel, who suggests that intimacy as a mode of 'psycho-physical proximity' depends on both 'reciprocal knowledge' and 'reciprocal concealment' (all quotes, Simmel, 1906, p. 449). Balmer and Durrant (2021, p. 352) suggest that Simmel's work is indicative of an 'aesthetic of concealment which informs all interaction',

foregrounding ‘Simmel’s positive affirmation of the connecting power of some lies and concealments’ (2021, p. 358). The complicity of embarking on a mutual project of secrecy can be a stimulative force and a boost within adulterous intimacies. At the same time, Walker’s (2018) study of women who use the adultery dating service Ashley Madison indicates that for many deceit is primarily a pragmatic solution that allows them to maintain intimate bonds with their husbands or primary partners (which they found lacking in sexual intensity). In the following section, we show that despite their emphasis of honesty and disclosure, CNM intimacies, too, involve practices of secrecy.

## **Refusing secrecy: Celebrating honesty through consensual non-monogamy**

CNM is an umbrella referring to all kinds of relationships based on fully transparent non-monogamous arrangements as they are commonly practised by those engaged in polyamory, open relationships, relationship anarchy, swinging and other related practices based on the principle of disclosure (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; for an overview of recent research, see Cardoso & Klesse, 2022). While not usually being condoned in mainstream cultural and moral systems, CNM has always been a part of intimate cultures. Ideas related to ‘free love’, secular and religious forms of group marriage, and also ‘open marriages’ or ‘open relationships’ form part of the longer historical legacy of CNMs in the Global North (Rubin, 2001).

The approach is critical of couple culture and mono-normativity (i.e. the naturalisation of monogamy). Polyamory is probably the most publicly known, recognised and debated form of CNM in many societies (Rambukkana, 2015). It is for this reason along with the explicit emphasis on disclosure and openness that we will concentrate primarily on polyamory in the following discussion.

There are manifold definitions of polyamory and different people (or factions within CNM communities) differ slightly in their opinion of what practices to include or exclude, for example, regarding casual sexual or short-term intimate encounters (Klesse, 2007). A definition that is likely to find wide approval can be found in *The Oxford Dictionary* (2022) online edition:

... [t]he fact of having simultaneous close emotional relationships with two or more other individuals, . . . ; the custom of practice of engaging in multiple sexual relations with the knowledge and consent of all partners concerned.

As most advocates emphasise, polyamory comes with a set of rules which are – assumedly – continuously (re)negotiated by the partners involved in a polycule (i.e. the name given to multiparter constellations in polyamorous communities) (Bennion, 2022). As can be seen in the quote above, the ‘knowledge and consent of all partners concerned’ is the core element of polyamorous practice. It is here where its alleged ‘ethical’ or ‘responsible’ qualities reside.

Resultantly, polyamory has rightly been seen as a leading example of the communication-driven mode of ‘disclosing intimacy’ that has been praised by Giddens (1992) to be paradigmatic of the transformation of intimacy. Many have been critical, not only of

Giddens's choice-driven portrait of contemporary intimacies that failed to take account of gender inequalities (Jamieson, 1999), but also of the second-order idealisation of polyamorous relations as the vanguard of diversification and (post)modernisation (Klesse, 2007).

The discourse of honesty and the moral obligation to disclosure within polyamory has been described by some critics as the subjection to a 'Protestant work ethic' of intimate labour (Petrella, 2007). This chimes well with Kipnis's polemical (2004) call for a rebellion against very similar work ethics in monogamous relationships (see previous section). 'Telling the truth', informing one's partner/s of one's past and current relations, infatuations and fantasies, can also be framed through Foucault's analytics of 'confessional power' (Foucault, 1979; Kestilä, 2021).

Our discussion so far illustrates that the assertion that polyamory – and by extension other forms of CNM – are ethical already *qua* their emphasis on a practice of disclosure should be taken with a grain of salt. This is even more important, because unlike Olson and Brussel-Rogers's (2022) reassurance the polyamorous advocacy of disclosure should not be paired with a generalised criticism against those who practise non-monogamy without such an emphasis, polyamory discourse frequently taps into a gesture of superiority. Ferrer (2022) interrogates a common attitude of 'polypride' that goes hand in hand with the denigration of alternative styles of intimacy, mostly monogamy, but also NCNs (p. 41). Ferrer wants to do away with such polarisations, arguing for fluid categories and a relational pluralism that truly values relational diversity. We, too, suggest a more cautious approach that avoids rigid labels and quick moral judgements. After all, as Brooks (2022) has shown, people's positionality or location within an intersectional plane of power relations matters greatly regarding what scope of 'relational freedom' (if any) a person may experience.

Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that only because people identify with polyamory or CNM and advocate for openness, honesty and disclosure, this does not mean that these things are universally practised in CNM relationships. The definitions of what may be interpreted as infidelity and what is a rule break differ widely within and across CNM relationships (Weeks et al., 2001; Wosick-Correa, 2010). In CNM contexts, rules may evolve, they can be over-stepped and broken, and may have to be continuously renegotiated (Deri, 2015; Gusmano, 2019). Because 'most non-monogamous relationships are based on a highly personalized set of agreements' (Cookney, 2019), communication is needed to ensure they are understood in the same way by everybody involved. And they may also be broken, trust may be destroyed, and deep injuries may occur, in a similar way to infidelity in a monogamous context (Perel, 2007).

We would like to further develop this argument. The practice of negotiating 'a highly personalized set of agreements' (Cookney, 2019) for practising CNM can itself be seen as a technique of producing intimacy in the form conceived by Simmel. It manifests a 'play of proximity' (a term coined by Balmer & Durrant, 2021, p. 353) that creates an open space for the experimentation with parallel – and only partially overlapping – intimacies, necessarily involving distances and secrecies. Negotiating CNM intimacies includes working out agreements regarding both 'reciprocal knowledge' and 'reciprocal concealment' (Simmel, 1906, p. 449). Such agreements may confirm mutual commitments to *disclosure* and/or *non-disclosure* of engaging in certain acts or relationships

(Wosick-Correa, 2010). Mutual agreements often aim to create spaces, knowledges and practices that are supposed to remain ‘private’ and exclusive to the negotiating partners. Consequently, they may remain *secret* to others (i.e. lovers or partners of variable statuses). We argue that in particular CNM intimacies based on the assumption of ‘primaryness’ or ‘precedence’ (Klesse, 2007) depend on the cultivation of a certain dynamic of secrecy, as it has been described by Simmel (1906) or Han (2015). Secrecy is therefore also an integral and constitutive element of CNM intimacies.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that practices of secrecy occur across a wide field of intimate styles within the non/monogamy system that characterises intimate cultures across the Global North. Intimate practices may not conform to labels or declared intentionality and commonly held assumptions about the character of certain forms of NCN or CNM.

The common distinctions between CNM and NCN tend to focus on mutual disclosure and transparency as key markers of difference. The lack of disclosure is read through morally charged concepts such as lying, deceit or betrayal. NCNs, and in particular practices of infidelity as the most publicly debated form of NCN, are framed as irresponsible, harmful and destructive of the intimacy of established partnerships. Adulterous relationships themselves are seen as instrumental and necessarily shallow. We argue that this view cannot be upheld in the light of some feminist and queer-feminist research and both theoretical and autobiographical writing on women who engage in adulterous relationships (Brooks, 2022; Griffin, 1999; Kipnis, 2004; Walker, 2018). Some women appreciate affairs precisely because of their peculiar intimate texture, and secrecy is a practice that is conducive of adulterous intimate intensities. Many women further report that having secret affairs is the only pragmatic way for them to *maintain* their primary intimate relations that otherwise are likely to fall apart (van Hooff, 2017; Walker, 2018). Cheating, lying and deceit are without question perceived to be very hurtful by those who have been misled or kept in the dark and may destroy trust in relationships when exposed (Perel, 2007). That notwithstanding, we propose broadening the scope of this reductionist view of secrecy’s role in intimate relationships.

Openly negotiated forms of non-monogamy are often cast as ‘good’ ethical variants of non-monogamy. We have shown that secrecy, cheating and rule breaking also occur in nominal CNM relationships. Furthermore, the culture of negotiating rules within CNM relationships (such as in polyamory) often implies a mutual commitment to certain arrangements of secrecy. In the light of our analysis, a rigid and morally charged dichotomy between NCN and CNM cannot be sustained. It is necessary to reframe the debate by conceptualising non/monogamy as a spectrum and to focus on shared concerns and challenges (Barker, 2018; Ferrer, 2022; Willey, 2016).

Our discussion on secrecy within the non/monogamy complex presents an innovative contribution to the conceptual literature within the sociology of secrets and secrecy, which has so far looked at intimacy, relationships, families and love within a more generic – and implicitly heteronormative and mononormative – framework. Our contribution has further implications for the sociology of intimacy and personal life: the model of disclosing intimacy has been over-used and conflated with intimate and sexual ethics

*per se*, at the expense of a critical investigation of the power relations that structure the terms of disclosure and openness, as well as the conditionality of practices of secrecy, in contemporary societies (Brooks, 2022; Han, 2015; Klesse, 2011).

Following the line of reasoning pioneered by Simmel (1906) and elaborated by others (Balmer & Durrant, 2021; Han, 2015; Hodgson & Balmer, 2022), secrecy can be seen to be *an integral element of intimate practices* that in many cases evolve a caring and benign disposition towards others, manifested in respect for their privacy and boundaries, a wish to protect them from hurtful knowledge or an effort to create intimate spaces of proximity, shared knowledge and enhanced eroticism. We therefore advocate for restoring a focus on secrecy in research within the sociology of intimacy and personal life. This would allow for more nuanced and complex understandings of the ways how we can build and maintain intimate bonds, which are essential for both individual and collective flourishing.

However, we must avoid idealising secrecy as a tool for fostering intimacy. As Brooks (2022) insightfully demonstrates, secrecy can also create vulnerabilities, which are intensified by intersecting power dynamics of class, race, gender and sexuality. These dynamics inevitably shape our efforts to form intimate relationships under the constraints of heteronormativity, cis-normativity, gender subordination, white supremacy and racial capitalism (Holland, 2012; Rosa, 2023; Wekker, 2016). Therefore, the study of secrecy in intimate relationships is most effective when viewed through an intersectional lens that accounts for positionalities and cultural contexts.

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