

Understanding Non-Monogamies

Edited by Meg Barker and
Darren Langdridge

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2010
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

First issued in paperback 2012
Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Sabon by IBT Global.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Understanding non-monogamies / edited by Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge.
p. cm. — (Routledge research in gender and society ; 23)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Non-monogamous relationships. 2. Bisexuality. 3. Group sex. I. Barker, Meg. II. Langdridge, Darren.

HQ980.U63 2009

306.84'23—dc22

2009012268

ISBN13: 978-0-415-65296-4 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-80055-6 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-86980-2 (ebk)

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Part I

Situating Non-Monogamies

1 Introduction

Meg Barker and Darren Langdridge

General and academic interest in openly non-monogamous styles of relating have exploded in the past decade, as many of the contributors to this book document. There is a burgeoning 'self-help' literature on open relationships (e.g. Easton & Liszt, 1997; Taormino, 2007), and newspaper journalists and documentary-makers have shown considerable interest in polyamory (Chapter 5, this volume) and swinging (Chapter 7, this volume). While barely researched and rarely acknowledged, the number of websites available for couples seeking singles (and vice versa) for sexual encounters is huge and ever-expanding, as is the related activity of 'dogging' (Bell, 2006). Following the previous silence in academia surrounding open non-monogamy, there are a small number of academic articles about gay open relationships and swinging (e.g. Adam, 2004; Ringer, 2001; de Visser & McDonald, 2007) and rather more on polyamory, including the recent collection by Haritaworn, Lin & Klesse (2006). However, very few academic, or non-academic, texts have brought together perspectives on different forms of non-monogamous relationships in one place. This was our aim while editing this book. In 2004 Duncombe, Harrison, Allan, and Marsden, brought together academic research and theory addressing 'infidelities'. We hope to do the same here for openly non-monogamous relationships.

Of course, as the first authors included in this book, Frank and DeLameter, point out, the distinction between 'monogamy' and 'non-monogamy' is a contentious one. Indeed Duncombe et al.'s (2004) collection included two chapters about open, and polyamorous, relationships. The kinds of negotiations around commitment and fidelity documented in the current book are also happening within many monogamous relationships as people explore and police boundaries around emotional and sexual intimacy with partners and others. This all occurs within a context of new ways of relating that has developed with increasing gender equality, recognition of same sex relationships, and related moves towards seeing relationship partners as equal with autonomous goals (Giddens, 1992) alongside powerful societal narratives of love and romance (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

However, as Pieper & Bauer (2005) made explicit when they coined the term 'mono-normativity', the dominant discourse in 'Western' cultures is still one of monogamy, where certain rules and assumptions are taken-for-granted including those of coupledness, privileging of love relationships over others, sexual exclusivity, and prohibition of relationships outside of the couple. Calls for various forms of relationship recognition for same-sex couples have been seen, for example, as part of a continued marginalisation of those who practice their relationship in less 'traditional' ways, with Michael Warner, and others, arguing that such drives towards normalisation reify dominant and 'damaging hierarchies of respectability' (1999, p. 74). It is for these reasons that it is particularly interesting, at this point, to explore the experiences and understandings of those who explicitly position themselves outside of mono-normativity.

We are now seeing a move towards academic theory and research which acknowledges the existence of openly non-monogamous relationships without pathologizing them. However, there is still a polarisation in much scholarly work between that which celebrate non-monogamies as a potentially feminist, queer or otherwise radical way of structuring and managing relationships (e.g. Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; Robinson, 1997) and that which highlights their limitations, and the ways in which they may reproduce and reinforce hetero- and mono-normativity in various ways rather than challenging them (e.g. Finn & Malson, 2008; Jamieson, 2004).

Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks (2004) argue that people in non-heterosexual relationships are involved in 'constructing their relationships from scratch' (p. 168) and this includes having the freedom and flexibility to create their own rules and guidelines around monogamy, blurring boundaries between love and friendship and creating 'families of choice'. While any notion that such socially constructed phenomena might escape tradition is somewhat naïve, the notion that people in non-heterosexual relationships have been creative in fashioning new ways of relating is worth acknowledging. Robinson (1997), Jackson and Scott (2004) and others furthermore put non-monogamy forward as a way for heterosexual women to challenge the monogamy inherent in heterosexuality which 'privileges the interests of both men and capitalism, operating as it does through the mechanisms of exclusivity, possessiveness and jealousy, all filtered through the rose-tinted lens of romance' (Robinson, 1997: p. 144). They argue that monogamy benefits men rather than women, keeping women in unpaid domestic labour, increasing their dependence on men, allowing them little autonomy, and separating them from friendships and support networks with other women (see also Barker & Ritchie, 2007). Pallotta-Chiarolli (1995) and others have argued for the queer potential of non-monogamy to break down or transcend either/or dualities around sexuality and gender (for those in relationships with people of more than one gender) and romantic love and friendship, as well as proposing that non-monogamous

relationships have the potential to reveal the constructed and relational nature of 'the self' (Barker, 2004).

Others are sceptical of the various liberal-humanist, feminist, Marxist and queer claims for the radical and resistive potentials of non-monogamy. Finn & Malson's (2008) research found a primacy of the couple and a 'monogamous-style' regulation of time, resources and emotion among their non-monogamous participants (p. 149). It does seem that many authors on open non-monogamy (such as Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks, 2004) still assume the naturalness of 'pair-bonds', and much research (e.g. Adam, 2006; Jamieson, 2004) has found open non-monogamy to equate to dyadic relationships which are, to some extent, open to third parties. For example, Adam's (2006) gay non-monogamous couples employ rules such as 'don't ask, don't tell', 'three-way or no way' and sex/love distinctions to 'curb the destabilizing potential of a third man' (p. 17). The swingers mentioned by de Visser and McDonald (2007) similarly draw distinctions between sexual and emotional exclusivity such that they are allowed to have sexual, but not love, relationships outside the main couple. Finn & Malson's (2008) couples insist that both are present during sex with a third party, or construct this person as simply a 'plaything', or keep extra-dyadic sex at a distance from the couple. Jamieson's (2004) polyamorous participants are all in a primary couple dyad and are rather apolitical in terms of motivation, and Jamieson is sceptical about the ability of such relationships to remain 'open' once children are involved (although see Iantaffi, 2006; and Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006; for challenges to this view).

Klesse (2006a) agrees with the importance of such caution over the radical and alternative potentials offered by non-monogamous relationships. However, his extensive study of UK polyamorous communities finds multiple overlapping discourses suggesting a more complex picture than that presented by Finn and Malson and Jamieson. Klesse highlights ways in which his participants critique binary hierarchical distinctions between love and friendship, and how some construct polyamory within a sex-positive, sex-radical politics rather than one opposed to this view. Primary/secondary models are complemented by group marriages, triads, quads, V-structures, poly webs and various other models, many of them non-dyadic (see Labriola, 2003). Klesse concludes that the form of open non-monogamy that he studied 'seems to be positioned ambiguously in the conjuncture of diverse normative and counter-normative discourses on sex and relationships' (p. 579).

If the research presented above does anything, it cautions against taking one group of non-monogamous people, practices or ideologies as representative, and highlights the multiple meanings and understandings both between and within groups and individuals practicing openly non-monogamous relationships. It also warns of the dangers of vanguardism on the part of the intellectual elite. That is, as Graeber (2004, p. 11) puts it (drawing on an anarchist perspective): 'the role of intellectuals is most definitively not to form an elite that can arrive at the correct strategic analyses and then

lead the masses to follow'. If we stay local and seek to understand the lived experience (and indeed, practical wisdom) of people engaged in different practices then we will be much better placed than if we pontificate on the basis of high theory or through the strategic use of limited data informing our own prejudices. As Barker (2004) found within just one polyamorous Internet community there are multiple different stories about how people came to open non-monogamy, how they practice it and what it means to them: hence the use of the plural 'non-monogamies' rather than the singular 'non-monogamy' in the title of the current book.

In editing this collection we have aimed to give space to both celebratory and critical voices, encouraging authors to engage with the complexities and multiple understandings of non-monogamies. We are lucky to have been able to include several of the authors previously mentioned presenting further research findings and engaging with some of these tensions. We have also attempted to weave in the reflexive voices of academics who are also personally involved in non-monogamous ways of relating, as well as the voices of activists working within communities, and of therapists facing the challenges of working with an increasing range of ways of relating among their clients.

We have divided the book into six parts. Part I situates non-monogamies, setting the scene in the current chapter and then presenting Katherine Frank and John DeLamater's chapter which compares the boundary-setting agreements occurring in married couples who regard themselves as monogamous or as secretly, or openly, non-monogamous. Following this, Part II explores representations of non-monogamy. Esther Saxey (Chapter 3) describes the role of monogamy, and deviations from it, in literature from the 17th century to the present, highlighting the cultural mono-normative backdrop within which non-monogamous relationships take place. Following this, Angela Willey (Chapter 4) analyses non-fictional literature aimed at people in non-monogamous relationships, attending to their universalizing tendencies, particularly in relation to race. Ani Ritchie (Chapter 5) then interrogates media presentations of polyamory for the problematic distinctions that are drawn between different forms of non-monogamous relating and the voices that may be silenced, as well as encouraged, by these.

Having set out the ways in which monogamies and non-monogamies are frequently represented, Part III of the volume presents research and reflections on some of the most commonly presented forms of non-monogamy. Barry Adam (Chapter 6) presents his important study on non-monogamous gay men and their understandings and negotiations around non-monogamy. Dee McDonald (Chapter 7) gives a detailed overview of the swinging 'scene' as it exists today, and she and Shalanda Phillips (Chapter 8) both argue that this may be more challenging and radical than it has often been perceived. In Chapter 9 Hadar Aviram gives an overview of polyamorous relating in the San Francisco Bay area (arguably the area where polyamory