

Labels and expectations for polyamorists

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Abstract:

From March until August 2017 I used ethnographic and autoethnographic methods to research how polyamorists experienced intimacy in the Netherlands. Polyamorists consensually engage in multiple romantic, sexual, intimate and/or affective relationships. By zooming in on how respondents dealt with labels and expectations this article sheds more light on the intricate ways in which monogamous normativity, mononormativity, influences polyamorists' everyday lives and experiences of "intimacy". Mononormativity was still present in their relationships, which became particularly apparent from the monogamous understandings of romance and sex they expressed in contingent ways through their use of labels and expectations. This article aims to inspire other academics to rethink the boundaries of monogamy and polyamory.

Keywords: autoethnography, polyamory, labels, expectations, mononormativity

In this article I aim to shed some light on the ways in which polyamorists in the Netherlands dealt with labels and expectations in their intimate relationships based on anthropological fieldwork I undertook in the spring and summer of 2017. Throughout this project, I wondered how polyamorists experienced "intimacy". Even though this term can seem clear, referring to closeness and connection, I noticed from literature and empirical data that it was an elusive concept. I thought focussing on intimacy could help me understand how polyamorists experience different relationships, without being restricted by monogamous terms. This became a very insightful way to observe how these people dealt with relationship categories and the related expectations. In this piece, I argue that polyamorists cannot be free of monogamous understandings, which influenced the experience of their relationships.

Polyamory, or poly for short, is popularly understood as a relationship style in which you can love (*amory*) multiple (*poly*) people. Academics describe poly as the possibility and/or practice of having multiple romantic, sexual, intimate and/or affective relationships that are based on the consent of all parties involved (Klesse 2011, 4; Sheff 2011, 488; Haritaworn et al. 2006, 515). As a polyamorist and anthropologist based in the Netherlands, I set out to do my Master's research on these individuals and how they experienced intimacy. For this project I not only included newly acquainted polyamorists but also my personal acquaintances, friends, a partner and myself. Thus, I combined an ethnographic and autoethnographic approach.

In this article I will first give some societal context. Then I shall delve into the topics of labels and expectations for

polyamorists by sharing the stories of three respondents who exemplify patterns found in the wider group of participants that I met up with during fieldwork. I interviewed 17 different polyamorists and met around 90 polyamorists at discussion groups, focus groups or more informal events during fieldwork. All participants apart from my partner Hector and myself have been anonymized to protect a number of individuals who wanted to stay anonymous. Two thirds of my interviewees wanted to be open about their personal identity, as they wanted to be open and honest about being a polyamorist. Polyamorists try to reimagine relationships and intimacy to fit and make space for their desires and interactions with others. Polyamory could be seen as countercultural to monogamy, implying an opposition and separation between the two, but what Louise, Belle and Cora's stories, whose names have been anonymized, discussed here show that there is a complex and intricate relationship between monogamy and polyamory observed in the labels polyamorists used and expectations they felt.

Societal context for my poly respondents

In the Netherlands monogamy is currently the main and ideal relationship style. This can be deduced from 'polygamy' or officially marrying multiple partners being illegal, the understanding that having multiple partners is analogous to "cheating" which is unethical, and the observation that the ideal and "normal" way of conducting romantic and sexual relationships is with one partner exclusively. This monogamous normativity, or mononormativity, can be understood as the "dominant assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy" (Barker and Langdridge 2010,

750). In the everyday lives of my respondents, polyamorists experienced discrimination, judgment and general confusion from novices to the relationship style. For example, respondents had difficulty with buying a house with multiple people as the contract was made for a couple or experienced judgement from their families or parents which resulted in some respondents not having contact with certain family members anymore.

However, respondents generally were positive about the acceptance of polyamory in the Netherlands. From different organizers of poly events and people connected to the Dutch polyamory foundation, I heard that much has changed in the past years: in the past, people had to find and build a community whilst there was little general information about polyamory. Many respondents say that the Internet has helped their search for information and community over the years, which has improved since they started. According to my informants, nowadays there is much more understanding and acceptance for polyamory than a decade ago. It is important to state that more research is needed to discover how other polyamorists in the Netherlands experience acceptance in their everyday lives.

The history of the movements for sexual freedom and gender equality in the Netherlands are related to polyamory's local history and its current interpretation. According to a number of sociologists researching polyamory (Sheff 2012; Klesse 2011, 7; Haritaworn et al. 2006, 518), the histories of polyamory in the United States and Britain are grounded in twentieth century counterculture movements. At the time, couple-based monogamy, the nuclear family and private property were criticised by different people. Aspects of these

movements that these sociologists discuss are also free love, the emergence of communes and swinging in the 1960's, and feminist movements in the 1970's. In my field, different respondents also referred to this period when discussing polyamory's history in the Netherlands. But more importantly, respondents mentioned constraining aspects of monogamous relationships in addition to the freedom, equality and the non-possessive nature of polyamory in interviews and more informal conversations, which echo notions observed in the previously mentioned social movements.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the diversity amongst my respondents. I focused on people who identified as polyamorous, called their relationship style polyamorous or were in relationships they called polyamorous. For my respondents, polyamory meant having multiple, consensual relationships or partnerships, which could be romantic or sexual, but did not need to be. This can be seen as the basic definition. Although this was the case, respondents talked about their open, "non mono", non-monogamous, or poly relationships using these different terms depending on the relationships and experiences, but also on whom they were talking to and how familiar these persons were with the terms. The people I talked to changed it to fit their experiences and desires in which ethics, honesty and openness were important aspects.

Polyamorists I spoke to varied along many other axes of identification and personal contexts. Among interviewees there were nine who identified as male and nine who identified as female, all men and four women were heterosexual, with two men saying they were "bi-curious", "*bi-schierig*", four women were bisexual or pansexual¹ and one woman was

solely attracted to women. In the focus groups this was different, with one group having half of the participants state their sexual orientation as bi- or pansexual with a mix of men and women. With this I do not wish to imply that there are more bi- or pansexual people in polyamorous relationships as some academics have found (Barker & Langdrige 2010, 757), I solely wish to show the diversity and remind the reader to refrain from making conclusions about the entire polyamorous populous in the Netherlands on this small dataset. People ranged in their different relationship constellations² and types of polyamory from triads to single poly³, in age from 23 until 68 years, nationality and ethnicity. For instance, I interviewed a number of American polyamorists, a Canadian polyamorist and many Dutch polyamorists, two of which talked about their Surinamese identity and background. A few examples of professions were: student, translator, secondary school teacher, IT worker, coach, graphic designer, care worker, post-doc, entrepreneur and pensioner. Outside of the interviewees I met around 90 other polyamorists some of which were for example gay men, transgender men and women, non-binary persons, Chinese, Indian, French, Swedish and Peruvian nationals, vegans, people who were interested in BDSM, had not studied after secondary school or had longer careers in academia. Some people had small incomes whilst one couple lived in a very expensive area in Amsterdam. Thus there was a vast range of people I talked to and met, yet one cannot generalize about demographic patterns in the larger polyamorous public in the Netherlands as this is not a representative sample, due to my selection method of using myself as a key informant, snowball sampling and having a number of respondents become key

informants during fieldwork.

Louise: with polyamory you throw away the rulebook

At the first discussion group meeting I went to during fieldwork in April 2018, one where I had been with my partner Hector a number of times beforehand, I met Louise Tromp. Louise was 28 years old, identified as female, was mostly straight, had started with polyamory a few years ago and was finishing up her PhD in geology. At the time Louise was vegan, living with her partner Jeroen and dating Glenn, and enjoyed philosophical discussions. Louise was triggered by my introduction at the beginning of the meeting in which I explained that I was focussing on intimacy and how polyamorists experienced that in all kinds of relationships from partners to friends and family. She told me that she experienced a special kind of intimacy when a close friend of hers started being with her partner Charlie at the time. It felt “safe” and “close”, *hecht*, as though “we would all be there for each other, somewhat like a family”, she told me. I was intrigued by her story and exchanged phone numbers to meet up in her hometown.

A few weeks later, we met up at the local train station and talked whilst walking to her favourite café. There, Louise explained that she “had always been good at monogamy” and never wondered about anything else, until the close friend that I previously mentioned, asked her about polyamory. It then became clear to Louise and Charlie that this relationship style seemed to fit them well as they thought it was very logical and not at all scary. For Louise:

“polyamory is that you think or come to realize, that having a valuable relationship with someone... that there are less assumptions concerning relationships than you are told, that you do not have to be exclusive, emotionally speaking, that it does not have to be sexually exclusive, that there do not have to be strict patterns like in two years we want a house or want to live together or have kids or go to my parents for Christmas [...] For me polyamory is that you say that your relationship does not have to adhere to that (*dat je relatie daar niet aan hoeft te voldoen*).”

By saying this Louise implied that for her relationships did not have to fit the “patterns and assumptions” that were part of monogamy: that “valuable relationships” did not necessarily need to be romantically or sexually exclusive. Additionally, Louise felt that thanks to polyamory, she was “open towards different kinds of intimacy, and [was] no longer looking for that one perfect image which combines everything” (Louise 2017). Here she was talking about how she used to look for a monogamous partner who could meet all her needs and desires, but now with polyamory that was not the case anymore. This also gave Louise space to value all kinds of intimate relationships on their own terms. Louise argued that concepts like love and relationships are constructed in monogamous ways that people have learnt from a young age through their portrayal in Hollywood films that are based on the ideas of a certain society. She also used the term mononormativity when reflecting on what ‘cheating’ means and how this is “guided by a societal image” of what someone “has to do” in this situation (Louise 2017). This intrigued me

as I had seen the term mononormativity as an academic concept, but not yet noticed it being used by respondents.

Over the years, Charlie and Louise ended their romantic relationship, but remained very good friends. At the time of our interview, Louise had started dating Glenn and with him she began to notice that certain labels were not working for her anymore. In explaining what Louise shared with Glenn, she said it was hard to find the right words, as there seemed to be no words for what she shared with Glenn. Louise did not “like-like” him straight away, but at the time of fieldwork it felt like a deep connection to her, “not at all superficial” (Louise 2017). Louise said “it was not romantic”, nor “traditional”, like “your typical boy-girlfriend-relationship in which you hold hands and see grandma at Christmas”, but it was friendship and there was sexual attraction (Louise 2017). This relationship with Glenn made Louise realise something:

“apparently I can also find someone sexually attractive, for example, but totally not romantically attractive. So there are more configurations of having a connection (*klik*) with someone for which I kind of have no words. So that was quite an eye-opener.” (Louise 2017)

This echoes what Louise said earlier on about feeling that polyamory holds more space to value diverse intimate relationships. On the other hand, she said she had rationally accepted that connections did not fit strict “*hokjes*”, labels or boxes, but she told me her hopes and feelings still moved to fit into those moulds. At times she wondered about herself and Glenn: “maybe I’ll feel differently in a while, but why do I actually want that?” Louise’s relationship with Glenn shows

that even though she could reflect on and let go of some mononormative labels and expectations, this could not happen all the time.

Louise’s story echoes the experiences of other respondents who felt that monogamy was a cultural construction, which they had learnt to believe and live through near-constant socialisation. It was the dominant structure that set the ground rules and ideal situations for relationships from which these polyamorists actively took a step back and chose different avenues. Some called monogamy a “*denkraam*”, a frame for thoughts, or talked about “conditioning” since childhood. Not only is mononormativity an abstract and ideal structure that holds power over people’s personal lives, as Barker and Ritchie show, it is also constricted by the language available to describe identities, relationships and emotions, which is why polyamorists coined new terms for certain relationships (2006, 596). Words like “relationship”, “cheating”, “jealousy” and “friendship” revolved around monogamous understandings for my respondents, so they constantly had to renegotiate the meanings of these words to make space for polyamory. Louise did this by using air quotes at times or explaining what she meant when saying something was a “relationship” or “a thing”, as did other respondents. This shows a critical awareness of mononormativity, but this was not always present, as her critique of mononormative labels and expectations did not always fit with her feelings that sometimes, as she stated, moved according to mononormative patterns.

Belle: a complex relationship with labels

Louise's story already pointed towards the complexities surrounding labels and their mononormativity, but with Belle Martins's story this will become even more crystalized. At the time of writing I consider Belle a close friend, we see each other nearly every week and I will join her and her partner Simon with other friends, family and partners for their non-marriage party this month, which I will also discuss after delving some more into Belle's life at the time of fieldwork. Knowing Belle now for a year has added more context and understanding to that which we discussed in our interview in 2017, and has shown me how Belle has a puzzling relationship with labels, not much different from how other polyamorists, anthropologists and other academics deal with all kinds of categories.

In the summer of 2017, Belle was 23 years old, pansexual, studying neurolinguistics, and identified as queer⁴ mostly due to their gender identity, poly relationship style and sexual orientation. Additionally, they had been in polyamorous relationships for a few years although they did not use or know of the term when they started exploring the possibilities with their partner and new love. For Belle it was solely a matter of being able to be in love with two people at the same time. This went "step by step" to fit with what their other partner felt comfortable with and eventually their relationship with their new love Simon turned into a "complete relationship" as well (Belle 2017). At the time of writing Belle is still with Simon and has a number of divergent polyamorous relationships with different people. Things have changed quite a bit, but I will focus on how Belle has dealt with labels connected to relationships.

One thing Belle (2017) often said and still said at the time of writing this article, was that "people love to categorize" mostly because this is how their brains work. Belle was no exception to this during our interview, but this did not mean that these categories were easy, fit every experience or were in any way static. Belle used terms like a "*relationeel ding*", relational thing or object, "complete relationship" or "becoming 'serious'" or "*vaste relaties*", steady relationships, but also "relationships" or "relating" in general referring to all connections they shared with people (2017). Belle said they were open to diverse relationships with others. Like their partner Simon, Belle too wanted relationships to be "independent from the constructs that surround them" revolving more around the feelings and desires of the people involved. But this made relationships and categories vague and at times confusing to Belle, which was not something they were able to "solve" (2017).

Zooming in on what "relationships" meant to Belle we come to "expectations" or in fact the, at times developmental, assumptions respondents held in the relationship categories available to them. Belle said that even though they do not want to be this way, the moment

"I have the conversation of 'do we have a relationship?' [...] then all of a sudden a wave of expectations arrives: 'I want to introduce you to my parents, you have to come to my grandma.' Relationship has become a kind of holy word." (Belle 2017)

They added thoughtfully. These expectations fit into what Belle called a "classical expectation scheme" where people

date, have a monogamous relationship, move in together, have children and live together for their entire life (2017). Each stage is considered a sequential step in the linear development of a romantic and sexual relationship, where every stage is valued hierarchically on that ladder. This is a mononormative ideal, which Belle wanted to be free of, but still influenced their expectations, feelings and at times desires. On the other hand, they explicitly said “plateauing” on a certain level was fine, dating someone forever for instance without moving in together (Belle 2017). Belle considered change in relationships not as going up or down a ladder or escalator, but as change without the desire for a specific next step.

In our interview (2017) Belle mentioned that they might one day want to do some kind of love celebration with a partner or a non-marriage party like a friend had done. As I said earlier this is going to happen this month. In their e-mails Simon and Belle called it “a party in which they celebrate [their] love for one another” (Simon and Belle 2018). At times when I have discussed “the party” with Belle (2018), we talk of “the wedding” to differentiate between other parties and because we both know that it entails a polyamorous festivity, where Belle and Simon’s other dates and/or partners will also be present. When I asked Belle if I could include this here, they agreed and added that they tell their colleagues about “the kind of wedding” and people they do not know well or do not feel like explaining things to about “the wedding” (2018). Simon and Belle will also have a “bachelor party” (Belle 2018), but the notion of being a bachelor and a spouse is quite different in polyamory as there is no exclusivity. Additionally, as Belle said, they and Simon acknowledge that their relationship can change in ways that could consist of a “break-

up” even though that would not be considered as a failure or would not mean they could not be friends or not kiss from time to time (Belle 2018). What these uses show, is that polyamorists such as Belle and I, used monogamous concepts in diverse ways depending on the people and situation to talk about our non-monogamous experiences even though they cannot completely contain the polyamorous reality. Additionally, this shows how mononormativity constantly influenced how polyamorists experienced their relationships.

In general, respondents found labels useful whilst also constrictive. This echoes Belle’s experiences, in which labels helped to give meaning and legitimacy to their interactions, were influenced by mononormativity and could not always contain their polyamorous experiences. In Meg Barker and Ani Ritchie’s article, these academics explain how mononormativity is part of language by referring to Judith Butler when stating “language functions to enable (or constrain) our ability to ‘do’ or to experience” (2006, 586), which is exactly what my informants noticed with labels for relationships. In a discussion group I went to during fieldwork, respondents discussed this point and I wrote their insights down afterwards:

“Labels work to constrain your behaviour and expectations as they are connected to stereotypes, but they can also give people a sense of security and understanding of what you share with someone. Unfortunately, they can then become hierarchical or static, making you less open towards other people and change.” (Fieldnotes, 2017)

The constant tension between conveying the changing complexity of these poly relationships, and the threat of mononormative reductionism is something clearly shown in respondents' dealings with the term "relationship".

One last note before moving to Cora's story revolves around the ambiguities and the essentiality of relationships. Respondents said things like: "we have something", *we hebben iets*, or "it might become something", *het gaat misschien iets worden*. Another construction polyamorists made was "we are a thing", *we zijn een ding*, and at times air quotes were added to "thing". During fieldwork I came across the same constructions amongst monogamists and in popular media. The use of these constructions signifies indefinability yet also some tangible connection. This shows how hard it can be to define the kind of connection people share. Yet, the available labels for polyamorists are full of mononormative meanings and expectations, which they have to deal with, deconstruct and at times find new labels and uses for.

Cora: Ladders, escalators and queerness

Belle also referred to developmental stages expected in monogamous romantic or sexual relationships which polyamorists called "relationship ladders" or "relationship escalators". Cora's story will show some overlap but also add new meanings to these escalators. Cora Mollevanger was 26 years old, lesbian, poly, a biology student whom I met at a conference in Vienna about, amongst other things, polyamory. We met up in the summer of 2017 for an interview. She identified as a queer woman as her gender expression and identity deviated from the norm surrounding femininity. Additionally, Cora had just started exploring her "a 'slash'

grey sexuality", *a/grey-sexuality*, and *a/grey-romanticism* (2017), which I discuss in the next paragraph. Cora felt that with polyamory she could have more space for these aspects of herself and value her different relationships, which she called "intimate friendships" (2017).

Even though Cora was the only respondent I spoke to who discussed their *a/grey-sexuality* and romanticism with me, her story shows some issues that hold for many respondents. For Cora, her experiences of romance and sexuality were different than how people described these concepts: "Thinking about the words *a/grey romantic* and *a/grey sexual* is quite new to me, but when I hear others speak about sex, I do think they have a different drive than I do. Earlier I had already begun to think about the word *aromantic*. This slowly got the ball rolling" (Cora 2017). At the time of the interview these romantic and sexual desires and experiences were "modular" for her, which meant "that it can happen but does not mean that it happens again" or that "everything is in one package" with one person (2017). "Love and sex are incidental" in Cora's experience (2017). They do not "necessarily stay and [...] it wouldn't be considered a loss when it would disappear" (Cora 2017). Cora called the poly relationships she had with women "intimate friendships" and she felt that polyamory gave her the space to appreciate and engage in these relationships in ways that fit her desires (2017).

Cora critiqued notions that valued certain relationships, interactions and physical contact more than others: in short, she called herself a "relationship anarchist" (2017). Cora discussed these points when reacting to "relationship ladders" and "touch escalators". For example, living together was not

connected to romantic relationships for her and being partially nude with someone and kissing their skin was not per se sexual to her. Additionally, she did not see certain interactions as stages that develop to a certain goal such as physical contact culminating in sex or a romantic relationship becoming sexual. Being intimate with someone or “sharing intimacy” (Cora 2017) was not always connected to sex or romance for her and not only restricted to one person. Furthermore, Cora valued non-romantic, non-sexual relationships or interactions equally, which according to Cora was not the case in monogamous relationships but was the case in polyamorous relationships.

Cora told me that in her relationships it was important to talk about interpretations, expectations and “monogamous baggage”. Polyamorists took monogamous baggage into their poly relationships, according to Cora. For Cora these are “all those normative ideas, examples, concepts, feelings and thoughts that you take into non-monogamous relationships. If you do not deal with that consciously, a lot of pain and difficulties will arise” (Cora 2017). According to Cora, the choices she made were rooted in those normative conceptions. Thus, Cora would reflect on her choices and looked critically at herself, which she also did with others. Not only was this reflection necessary for Cora, communicating about one’s desires and expectations was crucial when engaging in her poly relationships. This way Cora could navigate novel relationships and make space for her intimate friendships with different individuals.

Polyamory made space for Cora’s intimate friendships, but at times mononormativity revolving around sex and romance tugged at people’s expectations. Christian Klesse also says that there is space for asexuality or non-sexual

relationships to be valued in polyamory (2011, 13). Many respondents appreciated intimacy as deep connection that could give space for diverse relationships, which echoed their views of polyamory in which one could have all kinds of relationships with people. Although intimacy was also used as a euphemism for sex or at different times connected to sex, which shows the valuation of sexual interactions. Even though Cora felt more space in polyamory for her queerness, mononormativity was still there through the “monogamous baggage” she mentioned and the expectations surrounding sex and romance in relationships. Diverse respondents explained for instance that polyamory was a romantic and/or sexual relationship style, not including their friends or some family members. Additionally, many other respondents dealt with expectations surrounding relationships and physical interactions in the shape of relationship ladders and touch escalators. Thus, even though my respondents wanted to be free of mononormativity, it still influenced their expectations and interpretations of labels and interactions.

Conclusion

The stories of these three respondents highlight different aspects of how the polyamorists I spoke to dealt with labels and expectations. For Louise this was specifically connected to the labels she used and feelings she experienced in her polyamorous relationships, which were still influenced by mononormative expectations even though she could critically reflect on mononormativity. Additionally, with Belle’s story, one observes how mononormative assumptions were part of the labels polyamorists used and were difficult to not employ in daily life. The discussion of the non-marriage of Belle and

Simon, especially, shows the ambiguous relationship polyamorists have with mononormativity in their everyday lives. Lastly, Cora's experiences show how mononormativity influences expectations of certain interactions and feelings in "relationships" which in her opinion polyamorists take to their poly relationships. With these three stories, one can observe how mononormativity impinges on the everyday experiences and possibilities of polyamorists surrounding their relationships. These stories show patterns shared by the wider group of participants who, although they felt they wanted to be free of mononormativity, were influenced by it through the labels and expectations surrounding relationships. Even though polyamory is sometimes seen as a counterculture in opposition to and separate from monogamy, it is far more useful to see it as a "borderlands" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 18). One in which, polyamory and monogamy are interrelated, and polyamorists deal with this "monogamous baggage" Cora talked about. In an ideal poly world, my informants could have relationships with whom they wanted on their own terms, not being influenced by mononormativity. The polyamorists I spoke to thus wanted to appreciate connections in a more fluid style, but they could not do this without being influenced by mononormativity connected to labels and expectations that affected their understandings of relationship, romance and sex in contingent ways.

Notes

¹ Bisexuality implies being sexually attracted to both people with male and female gender identities. Pansexuality does not consider this binary distinction. For my respondents this meant feeling attracted to people in general without taking gender into account.

One respondent also mentioned being pan-romantic, which meant that she could fall in love with diverse people. She made this distinction to be considerate of people who are asexual or aromantic, similar to how Cora (26) identified as a/grey-sexual and a/grey-romantic which I discuss when talking about Cora's experiences.

² "Relationship constellation" is another term for a polycule or a polyamorous network, as the graphic visualization can remind one of constellations in space or a molecule.

³ A triad is a relationship in which three people have a relationship together, this can be defined differently implying shared homes, separate living spaces, occasional or regular sexual encounters with all members and probably much more. Single poly is a term for someone who is autonomous and perceives their relationship style as single and dating for instance, but again informants interpreted these labels differently. These terms are in this case meant to broaden your perspective on the kinds of relationships informants could have.

⁴ Queer is a contested and indefinable term with a complex academic and social background (Gamson and Moon 2004, 48). During fieldwork some respondents used it to signify their nonnormative and more fluid relationship styles and identities, which echo academic and social uses of 'queer' (Boelstorff 2007, 20).

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