# MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

## Dynamics of Transitioning to Consensual Non-Monogamy: A Qualitative Exploration of the Ambivalence of Its Subversive Potentials in the Era of Neoliberalism

verfasst von / submitted by

### Emma Maria Lakkala, BA M.A.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Consensual non-monogamy (CNM) is far from a new phenomenon, but if we are to believe the many headlines, self-help books, podcasts, and articles emerging around the topic within the past few decades, it seems to have gained almost trend-like visibility among the general public, popular media, and academic research (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Moors, Gesselman, et al., 2021). A brief look at Google Trends statistics shows us an increase in search interest for keywords such as *polyamory*, *non-monogamy*, and *open relationship*, and in addition to embracing the plurality of sexual and gender identities, online dating pools are growingly filling the gaps in consensually non-monogamous dating spaces as well; The 2010s saw many individual multi-partner dating apps being developed while other dating platforms have also started to expand the possibilities for their users to explicitly communicate non-monogamous identities to each other. And while general research on relationships continues privileging monogamous partnerships, scholarly attention on CNM has been on the rise, too, especially in the fields of gender and sexuality studies and psychology (Brewster et al., 2017; Klesse, 2018a).

In a society where monogamy appears nearly unquestioned as the only legitimate and 'natural' form of intimate relationship (Pieper & Bauer, 2014, para. 3), even those of us in non-monogamous relationship configurations have most likely been monogamous at first. Indeed, a common way to end up practicing CNM is to open an initially monogamous relationship. The present study aims to explore the process of negotiating CNM as perceived and narrated by couples who have consensually moved from a monogamous relationship to a non-monogamous one and continue sustaining a 'primary' or 'nesting' relationship of any kind. Through a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of four Vienna-based, both queer and cis-heterosexual couples, I studied the meanings that transitioning to a non-monogamous relationship has for both the individuals involved in these relationships and the couples as units.

The two primary questions guiding my thesis are: 'How do couples negotiate the opening of their relationship, and what kind of motivations lie behind the process?' and 'What kind of developments or changes in terms of sexuality, intimacy, sexual practices, and understandings of one's self and relationships in general take place in it?' I aim to discuss the emerging topics by placing them against the backdrop of a hetero- and mononormative, neoliberal capitalism and thus critically reflect on the extent to which CNM can be considered a socially and politically transformative practice, resistant rather than susceptible to self-commodification in the neoliberal sexual market and beyond. I thus pose a third, more speculative question: 'Do

non-monogamies also receive meanings other than simply being an alternative to monogamy, and can they contribute to enhancing an individual's sense of social worthiness and serve as means of constituting self-empowered and self-sustaining unique neoliberal subjects?'

I begin my thesis by first explaining its key concepts and terminology in Chapter 2. I then introduce the chosen theoretical framework in Chapter 3, which comprises roughly three central bodies of theory. To better understand the hegemonic status of coupledom and its many gendered dimensions, I start off by giving a selected overview of feminist and decolonial critique(s) of the institution of monogamy. Subsequently, I will elaborate on queer theoretical notions of sexual normativities. I then draw on intimate citizenship theory to highlight how our sexual, intimate, loving, and familial ways of relating to one another are shaped by social, cultural, and political power dynamics. Finally, I move on to problematizing CNM by using the concept of sexual capital and assessing patterns of social exclusion within CNM through a critical, queer-feminist lens. Chapter 4 sets out the used research methods, semi-structured interview and focused analysis, and gives a short description of the data and participants. In Chapter 5, I present the main findings before finally giving my interpretation and conclusive commentary in Chapters 6 and 7.

## 2 Key Concepts and Terminology

In the forthcoming chapter, I will briefly introduce the four most central concepts to this study: *(compulsory) monogamy*, *consensual non-monogamy*, *polyamory*, and *open relationships*. Because their definitions vary depending on the context in which they are used and whether they are used as self-definitions or external designations, it is essential to clarify how exactly and from which perspective I continue deploying them myself. I have adapted the chosen definitions from previous academic work on CNM while bearing in mind that they should suit the particular ways that the people I interviewed for the present study had chosen to practice CNM themselves.

Considering the Whiteness[1] of the academic discourses, mainstream media, and CNM communities within which the said concepts and their meanings are most notably discussed (Johnson, 2019; Rubin et al., 2014), it may be easy to assume that all things around CNM would be new or specific to some recent developments in sexual cultures among White people with progressive, sex-positive attitudes and liberated lifestyles. However, plural structures of sexual desire and intimacy, as well as systems of caring and making kin beyond the biologically reproductive, heterosexual couple, reach far back into history before the distinct terminology that is in use today took shape. Most notably, non-monogamous practices have a long tradition among Indigenous and Black communities and communities of Color (TallBear, 2018; Smith, 2016; Picq & Tikuna, 2019), which precede both the colonial erasure of non-normative sexualities and kinship systems (non-normative as in from the perspective of White Europeans) as well as the growing interest in- or what may seem like a 'rediscovery' of CNM in the White-dominated mainstream.

What I am trying to emphasize above is that although the language used in the context of CNM may be new or arise from predominantly White discourses, the practice of CNM is neither new nor specific to White people. Accordingly, it is worth noting that the concepts I am about to introduce below may be applicable to only a limited set of CNM relationships and the specific "cultural and political fabric they represent" (Picq & Tikuna, 2019, p. 60) for Western/White conceptual frameworks may not suit spectrums of sexuality, gender, and kinship that exist beyond or independently of their confinements (see Picq & Tikuna, 2019; TallBear, 2018).

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[1] I capitalize *Black*, *Indigenous*, *... of Color*, and *White* to denote them as "historically created racial identities" (Appiah, 2020, June 18). I thought long about lowercasing *White*, aware that some White supremacists have capitalized it to 'ennoble' themselves (see ibid.). However, in this study, capitalizing *White* serves as a reminder that Whiteness, too, is a social construct and that its racialization "occurs through a shared relative position of privilege as compared to another group(s)" (Sirleaf, 2023, p. 484) – a position that has been historically defined as the default and, as a result, rendered invisible, even in our language.

## 2.1 (COMPULSORY) MONOGAMY

Monogamy, once meaning to have only one marital relationship, is now most commonly used to refer to relationships where romantic, intimate, and sexual exclusivity is practiced between two people (Rothschild, 2018, p. 29). I understand monogamy as a historically established construction that has been imposed as the most 'normal' and 'natural' way of organizing our sexual, intimate, and romantic lives. It involves the culturally, economically, and socially enforced idea "that as adults we should primarily bond with one person, meeting most of our needs from them (sexual, emotional, physical, etc.)" (Rosa, 1994, pp. 107–108). As the concept of monogamy is rooted in the institution of marriage, which according to the prevailing cultural understandings still consists of a coupled relationship and an according living arrangement between a cisgender man and a cisgender woman (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010, p. 30), it is also entangled with heteronormative conventions of intimacy[2] deriving from the apparent givenness and righteousness of privatized heterosexual relations (Berlant & Warner, 1998, pp. 553–554) and the gender binary established and maintained within them (Rothschild, 2018, p. 29).

In this context, we can talk about *mononormativity* or *couple-normativity* as one of the central principles regulating how and in which constellations we come to relate to one another. Here being a monogamous couple has been "institutionalized, supported and mandated by a plethora of legal regulations, social policies and institutions, cultural traditions and everyday practices" (Roseneil et al., 2020, p. 4), thus creating a social norm so deeply normalized that we rarely come to question, challenge, or imagine alternatives to it (Willey, 2015). By adding the word *compulsory* in front of *monogamy*, we can critically scrutinize monogamy's hegemonic status, its supposed naturalness, and, most importantly, underline its patriarchal characteristics, as has been done by generations of feminists before (see Chapter 3.1). This way monogamy can also be reassessed as a choice or an alternative form of relationship, whereby we can analyze the reasons why it yet does not appear as such to most of us.

Monogamy often gets confused with long-lasting sexual or romantic fidelity even though neither acts as a condition for the other (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010, pp. 30–31). For example, a person in an officially monogamous relationship may act non-monogamously by pursuing

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[2] I use *intimacy* in reference to deep closeness, familiarity, or connectedness a person feels for another person, other people, or themselves. In Ken Plummer's (2003) definition, it comprises "a complex sphere of "inmost" relationships with self and others. Intimacies are not usually minor or incidental [...], and they usually touch the personal world very deeply" (p. 13). Intimacy may or may not be associated with sexual desire or romantic love, as it can be realized within all kinds of relationships: between friends, family members, lovers, and sexual partners, or with the self and one's body (Plummer, 2003, p. 13). It can be physical, emotional, or both at the same time.

extradyadic sexual, intimate, or romantic relationships without their partner's agreement. Such behavior will most likely be considered cheating. Also, the ideal of *the* one life-long monogamous relationship (or marriage) has had to give way to one of the most common ways of actually having more than one partner throughout our lives today, namely *serial monogamy*. Enabled through the decriminalization of adultery and acceptance of divorce and remarriage, it is serial monogamy that, despite practically being a form of non-monogamy, can retain its respectability in the eyes of society, for relationships indeed are allowed to be multiple as long as they come one after another, sequentially rather than simultaneously (Santos, 2019, pp. 713–714).

Altogether, the line between monogamy and non-monogamy may be more blurred than we often realize, and the meanings ascribed to monogamy are perpetuated through a great number of other, most of the time unremarked performances that go beyond mere sexual, romantic, or intimate exclusivity; For instance, we engage in certain rituals and acts to formalize our coupled relationships, have or strive to have children together, share finances with our partners, follow a gendered division of labor, date according to gendered scripts designed for heterosexual encounters, and are generally expected to devote extra much of our resources such as time and energy toward maintaining monogamous unions (see Rothschild, 2018, pp. 45–46). Clear is that monogamy is not just about having one partner at a time. On the contrary, what comes with it is a whole life design and a repertoire of expected behaviors, desires, and dreams, as well as gendered obligations, reproductive roles, and financial pressures. Whether we want to embrace them or not seems like a question that need not be asked.

## 2.2 Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM)

Consensual non-monogamy can be considered "an umbrella term for relationships in which all partners give explicit consent to engage in romantic, intimate, and/or sexual relationships with multiple people" (Moors, Ramos, et al., 2021, para. 1). Unlike in monogamous or unethically non-monogamous relationships, non-exclusivity is negotiated willingly and by mutual agreement in CNM. Therefore, those who engage in CNM can openly explore extradyadic relationships without being defined as unfaithful. There are countless ways of doing CNM, perhaps the best known of which are swinging, polyamory, and open relationships (Scoats & Campbell, 2022, p. 1). Open relationships and polyamory are particularly central to my research, my understandings of which I will introduce in Chapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 below.

When placed next to monogamy, the 'gold standard' of doing relationships in a mononormative society, CNM may appear abnormal, unnatural, unhealthy, and immoral to many. Despite the fact that CNM may be culturally interpreted as inferior to monogamy at large, I do not treat it as a necessarily or automatically marginalized relationship practice or identity. To consider CNM generally marginalized or marginalized under all circumstances does not comply with the notion that practicing CNM affects different people and groups of people differently.

> Even though polyamorous [and, if I may add, non-monogamous] social actors in many cases deviate from normative systems with their lifestyles and structures of desire, they often occupy privileged positions in social space due to their status, which is to be determined intersectionally. (Boehm, 2012, p. 11, translated by EL)

Accordingly, the potentially marginalizing effects of engaging in CNM, as well as their particular severity, arise from the complex interplay between CNM, further social categories or identities (class, race, gender, disability, and family status, for instance), as well as contextual factors (time and place), rather than the mere fact of doing CNM alone. As becomes evident throughout this study, in certain spaces and among certain social actors, CNM can even contribute to a higher social status, an increase in a person's *sexual capital*, as opposed to social stigma or marginalization (see Chapters 3.3.2 and 5.2.1).

### 2.2.1 POLYAMORY

The term *polyamory* emerged throughout the second half of the twentieth century from the combined effect of several counter-cultural discourses among which we can find, for instance, gay, feminist, and socialist critiques of monogamy, commune movements, and ideologies central to the so-called sexual liberation of the 1960s and 1970s (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 518). The term is more than often traced back to the context of New Age spiritualism and Western esotericism where it is believed to have been first coined by a Californian neopagan priestess and community leader, Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart, in her article *A Bouquet of Lovers* from 1990. By the early 2000s, polyamory had found its way into the German-speaking mainstream – leftist, feminist, gay, and lesbian print media in particular – whereby today's discourses around it continue gaining visibility and recognition almost exclusively online through social media, podcasts, and blogs (Raab & Schadler, 2020, pp. 22–23).

There are surely just as many ways to live and love polyamorous as there are people involved in polyamorous relationships. Definition of polyamory, too, have become many; They vary from relationship praxis to relationship philosophy, from mere practical label to one's core identity, from style of loving to sexual orientation, and from self-designation to designation

ascribed from outside (see Ossmann, 2020; Klesse, 2014b). Generally, polyamory goes by the underlying assumption "that it is possible, valid and worthwhile to maintain intimate, sexual, and/or loving relationships with more than one person" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 518). Considering my research interests as well as the kinds of polyamorous relationships represented among the couples I interviewed, I have adopted Francesca Miccoli's (2021) definition according to which polyamory is a "practice of engaging in multiple romantic and potentially sexual relationships with the awareness and consent of all the partners involved" (p. 362). I chose the definition because it specifically refers to romantic relationships that are being pursued while leaving sexual relationships optional. Indeed, as suggested by the name *polyamory*, translating to 'many loves' or 'more than one love' from its Greek origins (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010, p. 26), love does play a fundamental role in many understandings of the ethics of polyamory, sometimes to the point where sex without love might become de-emphasized or even devalued among some poly-identified people (ibid., p. 35).

Apart from love, the ethics of polyamory are also grounded in other core values and principles such as self-possession and -knowledge, honesty, integrity (Klesse, 2014b, p. 89), conscious and reflective confrontation with feelings of jealousy (Klesse, 2018a, p. 1111), negotiating personal boundaries and needs (Rothschild, 2018, p. 44), and – when thought together with positions from queer, feminist, LGBTQIA+ and BDSM communities – critical questioning of hegemonic, capitalist, and patriarchal structures as well as naturalized conventions relating to kinship, family, sexuality[3], partnership, friendship, and love (Schadler & Villa, 2016, pp. 12–13).

Some polyamorists may strive for no hierarchical valuation of their partners whatsoever (*non-hierarchical polyamory*), while others maintain one or more *primary relationships* that are considered to have a higher or the foremost importance and/or longevity within a perceived order of precedence among all relationships (Flicker et al., 2021, pp. 1401–1402). A primary relationship may pre-exist the opening of a relationship and be preserved during and/or after it, as is the case with the relationships I focus on in my research. Although all couples responded to my call for participants in which I explicitly addressed that I was looking for non-monogamous people in primary relationships, some rejected the term *primary relationship*

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[3] *Sexuality* encompasses the composition of "one's sexual desires, erotic attractions, and sexual behaviors, or the potential for these; physical acts and emotional intimacies that are intended to be pleasurable" (Fitzgerald & Grossman, 2018, p. 30). As the definition indicates, sexuality is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be pinned down to a single element that would define its meaning on its own. I envision it as a complex, mosaic-like structure made up of various pieces of different shapes and sizes that reflect different aspects of a person's overall individual perception and expression of their sexual self. These pieces may or may not include, for instance, sexual acts one enjoys or desires, preferred relationship types, attraction toward specific individuals, sexual identity or self-identification, and sexual fantasies, to name a few.

during the interview and told me that they preferred alternative definitions such as *nesting partners* or *domestic partners* instead. These definitions were considered more appropriate because they were thought to serve as descriptions of the couples' living arrangements or life situations as opposed to a hierarchical ranking of the significance of different partners within a relationship network.

In this study, attitudes toward potentially romantic or emotionally intimate extradyadic relationships turned out to be the main differentiating factor between interviewees in self-identified polyamorous relationships and interviewees in self-identified open relationships. Accordingly, I have drawn the line between polyamory and open relationships in their emotional openness/exclusivity. By the chosen definitions, polyamory opens up the possibility for love, emotional intimacy, and romance outside of a coupled relationship. In contrast, open relationships are theoretically limited to sex or sexual relationships. This can lead to the phenomenon where people in polyamorous relationships tend to have more than one long-lasting partner simultaneously, as opposed to open relationships where extradyadic relationships often remain shorter, once-only, and/or sequential.

### 2.2.2 OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

*Open relationship* could be used as an umbrella term to refer to all kinds of consensually non-monogamous relationships, for they all are more or less 'open' to the idea of having more than one partner at the same time. Nevertheless, as explained above, I have chosen to use it in reference to relationships "in which couples typically retain emotional intimacy within a primary relationship and pursue additional casual and/or sexual partnerships" (Levine et al., 2018, p. 1440). This is the most common type of open relationship in that it follows a so-called *primary/secondary model* (Labriola, 1999). The coupled relationship serves here as the primary relationship that is privileged with emotional exclusivity, while other relationships are considered secondary, meaning that they are expected to center more around sex and pleasure than love, emotional intimacy, or friendship (Miccoli, 2021, p. 362).

Couples often negotiate open relationship arrangements by setting up rules that at least theoretically forbid both partners from pursuing, maintaining, or prioritizing romantic, emotionally meaningful, and/or long-lasting relationships outside of the coupled one. It can be decided, for example, that the primary relationship must always have precedence over any other relationship, that the primary partners must not move in, form a family unit, share finances, go on a holiday, or spend the night with any of their secondary partners, or that

secondary partners should have little to no power over decisions affecting the primary relationship (Labriola, 1999, pp. 218–219). Some couples may require full disclosure of any 'outside' relationships, forbid having second dates and bringing other partners home (Adam, 2006, pp. 19–20), or restrict the kind of sexual acts that are allowed to take place with secondary partners (Wosick-Correa, 2010, p. 50). This kind of regulation of the kinds of sexual and emotional engagements outside of the primary relationship arises from the idea "that the establishment of rules and contracts will help ensure commitment, trust and the stability of a relationship by minimizing undesirable emotions such as jealousy, and reducing fear of the unknown" (Finn, 2014, para. 4).

# 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The grounds for the hegemony of couplehood have been defined in many different ways depending on the chosen (feminist) perspective. The first segment of this chapter focuses on three of them: socialist feminism, lesbian feminism, and decolonial feminist approaches. Each of them is not a wholly isolated current of thought in itself, as they all overlap on some issues and partly build on top of each other, sometimes by further developing each other's ideas and other times by criticizing or opposing each other's positions. In any case, each perspective, with its specific emphasis, has made an essential contribution to the general series of feminist objections to monogamy. Socialist feminism (Chapter 3.1.1) discloses the institution of marriage as a site of women's[4] oppression and exploitation of their reproductive labor within capitalist patriarchy. Lesbian feminism (Chapter 3.1.2) scrutinizes the link between heterosexuality's compulsory status and women's androcentric socialization while disrupting culturally ingrained, hierarchical differentiations between different 'kinds' of love. Decolonial analyses of the topic (Chapter 3.1.3), led by Black and Indigenous feminists and feminists of Color, have most notably pointed out how sexualities and relational practices privileged with a normalized and/or naturalized status – the practices of monogamy and 'chastity' included – are not merely products of patriarchy, but of colonialism, too, and have been crucial instruments in maintaining and justifying White supremacy, racism, and European imperialism.

The second part of the chapter centers on queer theory. Queer theory is powerful in that it challenges the binary thinking that underlies many aspects of our lives related to gender and sexuality. It explores how our identities and desires, often perceived as something 'innate' or 'natural,' are constructed and negotiated under the influence of societal power dynamics and according processes of normalization. Through the concept of charmed circle (Chapter 3.2.1), I discuss how sexualities, intimacies, and sexual and relational practices are socially assessed and, hence, privileged and disadvantaged according to a hierarchical value system that operates by hetero- and mononormative moral codes. After that, I explain what it means when I write that monogamy and sexuality generally are constructed through discursive means (Chapter 3.2.2). Lastly, by drawing on intimate citizenship theory (Chapter 3.2.3), I further illustrate how

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[4] In the first part of the theory I introduce feminist positions that draw from a binary understanding of gender, likely to reveal differences in social positions between 'men' and 'women' in capitalist, racist, and heterosexist patriarchy. The difference between 'men' and 'women' is mostly fixed on biology and/or the re/productive roles assigned to 'men' and 'women' in it. Although such a binary (and partially also bio-deterministic) conception of gender does not align with my own, in the first part of the theory, I will stick to language that corresponds with the respective feminist perspectives addressed rather than imposing my conceptualization of gender, which they might not necessarily agree with, onto them. This means I will temporarily utilize the terms 'women' and 'men' with the meanings ascribed to them by the authors I cite.

hetero- and mononormativity are encouraged by social and cultural expectations and nation-states' legal frameworks and institutions while rendering non-monogamous and queer existence marginalized and invisible.

In the third and concluding section of my theory, I intend to challenge the concept of CNM as an essentially egalitarian and socially transformative practice by drawing attention to the potential differences in experienced stigma related to being non-monogamous as well as the different ways racist, sexist, ableist, and classist exclusion mechanisms might actually manifest within CNM- and other non-normative sexual and/or intimate subcultures (Chapter 3.3.1). With the help of the theory of sexual capital, I will also evaluate CNM in the context of neoliberalism and speculate whether modern non-monogamies can be (or perhaps already have been) transformed into personal selling points that can boost an individual's social status and desirability in and beyond the sexual sphere (Chapter 3.3.2).

## 3.1 Feminist Critique of Monogamy: Sexual Power Relations and Gender

I want to preface this chapter by briefly recalling that opposing ideas to monogamy and the institution of monogamous marriage in particular go back a long way and have been developed both parallel to and independent of explicitly feminist critiques. Indeed, since the introduction of the core principles of freedom, equality, and personal autonomy during the era of European Enlightenment, there have been various currents and social movements that have advocated for the idea of *free love* as opposed to (forced) marriage (Kuhn & Kohser-Spohn, 2001, p. 489).

Before the late seventeenth century (in the Western/White context), the purpose of marriage had been primarily social, economic, and political, and marrying for love a radical idea, which started to change throughout the eighteenth century, as marriage became reconceptualized as a more love- and emotional fulfilment-based private affair, especially among the middle and upper classes (Grossi, 2014, pp. 29–30). The idea of free love started to find resonance in philosophical discussions, poems, utopian novels, and other literary contributions, some of which entailed even early drafts of what we know today as polyamory (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010, pp. 112–115). Meanwhile, a small number of early nineteenth-century socialists had started to argue for the abolition of marriage: the bourgeois marriage model was considered essentially forced and not grounded in free choice or love, but in economic considerations and women's dependency on it as their sole providing institution (ibid., pp. 113–114). Those women who were not incorporated in wage labor but first and foremost in bearing and rearing heirs to their husbands' assets were thought to be forced to serve both their 'masters' (men) and the

system of inheritance of private property under capitalism; The pre-requisite for demolishing such patriarchal dynamics then was located in women's participation in wage labor and the proletarian revolution of overthrowing capitalism (Hartmann, [1979] 2022, p. 158).

By the time of the First World War, free love had become a topic of growing interest in most countries in Central and Northern Europe as well as in Russia and the United States: feminists, writers, artists, scientists, and especially theoreticians from the emerging disciplines of sexology, psychology, and psychoanalysis thought and wrote about love and marriage publicly, calling for a reform of the prevailing sexual morality (Kuhn & Kohser-Spohn, 2001, p. 491). It was in this cultural climate of the turn of the century and its following decades that the assumption of a sexuality repressed by the capitalist society took hold (Raab & Schadler, 2020, p. 16). The core thesis was that "the libidinal impulses of the sexual are [...] incompatible with the requirements of the industrial society, and for this exact reason, capitalism has to suppress sexual drive and direct the associated energies to productive work" (ibid., pp. 16–17, translated by EL). The idea that sexuality and love and, as a consequence, society as a whole needed to be liberated carried on into various movements of the 1960s and 1970s: The New Left, student movements, the so-called sexual revolution (Kuhn & Kohser-Spohn, 2001, pp. 506–507), as well as non-monogamous life experiments such as open marriages, hippie-communities (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010, p. 120), and polyamory within New-Age spirituality and Western esotericism (Klesse, 2007b, p. 316).

Various efforts to abolish (forced) marriage and spreading the message of free love did not necessarily lead to a radical pluralization of relationship structures, but set off a new norm that persists to this day, namely, that of monogamous marriage and coupledom based on the feeling of love (Schroedter & Vetter, 2010, p. 115). Indeed, if we look at contemporary Western societies, we can see that romantic love between two people has asserted itself as one of the main, if not the main, motives for marriage (Grossi, 2014, p. 29). Also, many (not all) of us are not necessarily *forced* to marry or couple up due to financial, political, or social reasons anymore (as in marriage contracts that forge certain social ties or secure wealth or inheritance), and if we were to marry or become coupled, we would probably say it was because of love and our freedom to act upon the feeling. Thus, the prevailing consensus is that we engage in monogamy not out of obligation but rather because we desire it. Forced monogamy has been replaced by free monogamy. We are not coerced into being monogamous but do it willingly, as if there was no place more natural for love than within the monogamous couple.

It is evident that that neither marriage nor the exclusive couple can exactly deliver what they promise. Many marriages do end in divorce, and coupled love cannot be proven to protect people from either infidelity (Luo et al., 2010; Mark et al., 2011; Hemmelmair, 2022, August 19) or intimate partner violence, Austria's alarming rates of femicide and gender-based, domestic violence being an unfortunate yet not unique example of the latter (Autonome Österreichische Frauenhäuser, 2023; Statistik Austria, 2022). Love might be free in theory but as we take a closer look at the social context where it takes place, namely patriarchy and the public-private division in capitalism, it shows itself as oppressive and not quite so free anymore (Grossi, 2014, p. 33). In light of this, it has been queer, feminist, and decolonial thinkers, theorists, and activist who have developed perhaps the sharpest analysis and criticism of the heterosexual, monogamous couple.

### 3.1.1 SOCIALIST FEMINISM

The distinction between public and private sectors within capitalism has puzzled many, including feminists who have succeeded in "re-insert[ing] questions of family, sexuality, children, and domestic life into the heart of progressive political discourse" (Rose, 1987, p. 61). Many may remember or have heard about the famous second-wave feminist slogan "The personal is political" or "The private is political," pleading for the recognition of women's apparently 'private' roles and issues as both politically relevant as well as essentially interconnected with the relations of production and what has been called the 'public' sphere or sphere of production within capitalism. While some have sought to locate the roots of power dynamics exclusively in socioeconomic class positions and others in patriarchy, at the heart of socialist feminism[5] was (and still is) to understand the distribution of power, privilege, and disadvantage as deriving from the inseparable coalition between capitalism and patriarchy, *capitalist patriarchy* (Eisenstein, 1999, p. 198).

Already during the nineteenth century, representatives of the proletarian women's movement began cultivating a broader and more coherent analysis of the links between gender inequality, social reproduction, and economic production (Armstrong, 2020, para. 6). They no longer saw their core issues represented by other organized movements; On the one hand, the realities of

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[5] I have chosen to use the term *socialist feminism* very loosely in this chapter by including under it political movements and philosophies that are united by their simultaneous focus on gender oppression and class oppression and, as is the case with Black socialist feminism, racism. Consequently, under the definition may also fall feminist figures who, after closer consideration, could be characterized instead as Marxist, anarchist, or materialist feminists, for example. I acknowledge that there are differences between the said perspectives, but I do not see myself able to give the topic the attention it deserves in such a limited space.

life of working-class and impoverished women differed from those of bourgeois and wealthy women, which was an issue that middle-class first wave feminists had not covered adequately in their aspirations for gender equality (Zetkin, [1896] 1984). On the other hand, although socialist feminists shared many of their central ideas with Socialism and Marxism, they also diverted from these ideologies by more or less decentering (not ignoring!) capitalism in their analysis of power and oppression. Namely, alongside the notion of class exploitation came the realization of the monogamous family unit as a site of women's oppression, which through the exploitation of their reproductive labor (mostly uncompensated domestic work, care work, emotional labor, bearing children, etc.) contributes to the upholding of capitalism (Armstrong, 2020, para. 5).

> In the era of private property and the bourgeois-capitalist economic system, marriage and the family are grounded in (a) material and financial considerations, (b) economic dependence of the female sex on the family breadwinner – the husband – rather than the social collective, and (c) the need to care for the rising generation. Capitalism maintains a system of individual economies: the family has a role to play in performing economic tasks and functions within the national capitalist economy. (Kollontai, [1921] 1972b, para. 3)

In the more recent history of (Western) feminism, socialist feminism took off most notably in the 1960s as a part of second-wave feminism and was linked to emerging international leftist and Marxist student movements, the civil rights- and Black Power movements in the United States, as well as independence/decolonization movements in countries that at the time were still under the rule of their European colonizers (Haug, 2010, p. 52). Socialist feminists of the second half of the twentieth century had inherited the key concern over the value of reproductive labor from their predecessors: with no overthrowing of capitalism in sight, women's domestic work had yet to (fully) enter the sphere of financial and social recognition as 'real work,' continuing to uphold the material conditions for women's secondary status in society (Benston, [1969] 2019, pp. 2–3). Meanwhile, Black socialist feminists, whose participation in feminist movements had long been averted through the movements' internal racism and elitism (The Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977, para. 4), stressed how the analysis of power had to be extended beyond class and gender. Where White socialist feminists had argued class oppression and gender oppression to be inherently intertwined, Black socialist feminists and activists pointed out how Black women, exploited by capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy simultaneously – a phenomenon coined by Louise Thompson Patterson ([1936] 2015) as *triple exploitation* –, had to endure unique forms of oppression irreducible to those affecting the lives of both Black men and White women.

In terms of women's emancipation, some socialist feminists have emphasized the potential that they saw in changing or ending marital relations. Alexandra Kollontai, a revolutionary, women's rights advocate, and a central figure within the communist movement in Russia, denounced the moral norms regulating sexual life of her time – the 'indissoluble' monogamous marriage included – as leading the humankind "in the path of degeneration" (Kollontai, [1911] 1972a, para. 6). She imagined a future under communism where the subjugation of women would be over and marriage altogether abolished. According to her, since the material and economic foundation on top of which the family in capitalism is founded would no longer exist under communism (the family would not carry its former economic functions) and everyone's value would be based on similar parameters (through obligatory work within the national economy), there would be no gendered division of labor nor an institutionalized family unit as we still know it today (Kollontai, [1921] 1972b, para. 5). Kollontai thus presupposed the dissolution of capitalism for the abolition of monogamous marriage to take place.

In Kollontai's communist utopia, sexual relationships would not be regulated by law but by a strong collective morality built around a positive and destigmatizing view on sexuality that would no longer benefit the patriarchal family and the capitalist principles of private property (Kollontai, [1921] 1972b, para. 11-12). The idea of virginity would no longer exist, for its grounds in men claiming ownership over women and their bodies would neither, sex would be separated from the deep-seated shame governing it, and monogamy would lose its morally superior status (ibid., para. 12-14). Moreover, Kollontai makes an observation that is yet to lose its relevance to this day, namely that non-monogamous behaviors do occur within monogamous relationships, and having multiple partners does not have to have anything to do with 'immoderate' indulgence in sexual activities:

> This concern for the health of the human race does not establish either monogamy or polygamy as the obligatory form of relations between the sexes for excesses may be committed in the bounds of the former, and a frequent change of partners by no means signifies sexual intemperance. (Kollontai, [1921] 1972b, para. 15)

A part of this vision was also a progressive social care system less centered around the nuclear family. It would include maternity support and protection provided by the state (ibid., para. 8) as well as collective childcare and education where mothers would "learn to be the mothers not only of their own child but of all workers' children" (ibid., para. 17). Extending child-rearing past the heterosexual couple toward more state-funded, community-based structures has since become a stable part of socialist feminist visions of a just society. For instance, under *revolutionary parenting*, bell hooks ([1984] 2015) advocates for small, tax-funded, easy-to-access, community-based care centers and the sharing of responsibility over children beyond bio-

genetic ties. Also, unlike Kollontai, who may have forgotten the role of fathers in her concept of childcare under communism (see quotation above), hooks demands for inserting men back into childcare and for deconstructing the highly romanticized, at its core essentialist and sexist notion of 'innate' motherhood and femininity (hooks, [1984] 2015, pp. 139–140). Communal childcare would, so the author, unburden both women and the nuclear family, provide children with a more fulfilling social network of care less dependent on the socioeconomic position of the biological parents, and discourage parents' possessive attitudes about their biological children as private property (see ibid., pp. 143–145).

At the couple level and especially in relation to monogamous marriage, Kollontai identified two underlying issues, namely the ideas of 'foreverness' and 'property': "[l]egal marriage is based on two equally false principles: that marriage should be forever and that the partners belong to each other and are each other's property" (Kollontai, [1911] 1972a, para. 10). Kollontai did not believe that it was reasonable to expect people to find only one person to spend the rest of their lives with and to choose that person, in some cases, without barely knowing them. She also did not think that the legitimation to possess each other in marriage or, in other words, the unquestioned entitlement of partners to access each other at all times, even at the cost of one's own will, time, and privacy, was realistic, prompting us to think about the following question: How are two people, each with their complex personalities, supposed always to suit, be present to, and commit all their resources to each other? (see ibid., para. 11-13).

Socialist feminist critique of monogamy and marriage has also influenced more liberal strands of feminist thinking. The latter of Kollontai's false moral principles (the idea of property) finds resonance in Marilyn Friedman's notion of love as a *merger of identities*. Although a much later article and not written from a socialist feminist perspective, Friedman's *Romantic Love and Personal Autonomy* (1998), too, questions the idealized concept of two individuals 'becoming one' in marriage or partnership. She demonstrates how the merger has become deeply embedded in our philosophies and common thinking about romantic love; Partners commonly experience their needs and interests as the same or intertwined and end up aligning their personal values and perspectives even at great personal costs (see Friedman, 1998, pp. 167–168). Friedman considers the merger potentially problematic and reductive of personal autonomy, for it rarely occurs under fair conditions. "Lovers may be very different from each other in the resources, capacities, and commitments they bring to their love. These differences can create imbalances of power, authority, and status within a romantic relationship" (ibid., p. 189). Kollontai would most likely have agreed with Friedman when she furthermore argues that the

merging of identities in heterosexual relationships is often asymmetrical and more likely to happen at the cost of the woman's agency, as love and marriage are influenced by traditions, values, and institutions based on gendered norms, stereotypes, and practices (ibid., p. 173). For instance, traditional marriage still favors the premarital identity of the husband, meaning that the bride is expected to abandon or change their public identity to match that of their husband's, and because women can often bring less economic or social capital into their relationships, they may be encouraged to 'marry up' to someone with more resources, who then can claim power over them on the grounds of 'bringing more' into their union (see ibid., pp. 173–174). Consequently, men and their identities often come to represent the norm within a relationship into which women must merge, rather than the other way round.

So what is it then that makes people, especially women, stay in marriages and other monogamous arrangements if these end up disadvantaging them? Many have argued the ideal of romantic love to be a decisive factor here. Even though love is associated with a great deal of suffering, we live collectively under the assumption that we must seek and succeed in maintaining it (Illouz, 2012, p. 3). Besides, feminists have asserted that men and women are brought up differently when it comes to approaching love and its potential miseries. Conceptualized as an ideological weapon of patriarchy, romantic love is believed to trap women into the legal institution of marriage and other unequal, dependent relationships with men that are economically, sexually, and physically detrimental to them (Smart, 2007, pp. 60–62). The same does not apply to men, as sexual desire and assumptions about how many and what kind of relationships we should want and pursue are constructed in a gendered way (Willey, 2016, p. 6). Where men's sexuality and sexual behavior revolve around a supposedly high sex drive and finding multiple partners, women are socialized to seek romantic love and thus monogamous relationships (ibid., p. 6). As reflected in the upcoming chapters, sexual moral principles such as chastity and committedness are closely tied to femininity, which is why 'promiscuity' might come at a higher cost for those of us who perform it or are expected to perform it.

The problem with romantic love is that it has become both privatized and individualized. This means, first, that through the public-private division in capitalism, women have been confined to the private sphere due to its association with all things love and emotional and thus 'feminine': affection, care, intimacy, family, children, procreation, and reproduction. Through the naturalized and highly idealized role of women as some special 'guarantors of love' or 'administrators of family and intimacy,' women are deceived into believing in having actual

power in the private sphere (Pulcini, 2000, pp. 34–35). Elena Pulcini (2000) calls this *the power of love*, which, despite surely being a power of some sort, is very much hidden and only limited because it does not apply beyond domesticity (p. 42). Second, in the current age of neoliberalism, characterized by its obsession with individual responsibility, we repeatedly mislocate the miseries of love in our private selves: in the weaknesses of our psyche, bad personal morals, faults in our character, or our dysfunctional family histories (Illouz, 2012, p. 4). The individualization of love as a mere inner ability diverts much-needed attention from the underlying systemic issues behind its pains such as economic exploitation, oppressive institutional arrangements (ibid., p. 4), and patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving. Under the disguise of love or personal 'inability' to love, all of these can easily take foot in our most intimate relationships.

### 3.1.2 LESBIAN FEMINISM

Lesbian feminists have eminently focused on observing the linkage between monogamous love and heterosexuality as a political problem. Adrianne Rich, who is known to have coined the term *compulsory heterosexuality* in the 1980s, argued that heterosexuality is set as a norm in patriarchy, according to which women are 'by nature' sexually oriented toward men, rendering lesbian existence sexually deviant, despicable, or completely invisible. A central concern of Rich and many of her colleagues was that "women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives" (Rich, [1980] 2003, p. 20). As a result, women are socialized or, as Rich puts it, their consciousness is controlled (ibid., p. 20) to unquestioningly partake in inherently power-imbalanced relationships where the power of men over women and their sexualities manifests. In compliance with Kathleen Gough, she identifies a cluster of forces regulating women's sexuality and autonomy within patriarchy, most of which are more or less directly related to heterosexual marriage: segregation of women from paid labor, exploitation of their domestic work and reproduction, marital rape, women's economic dependency of their husbands, denying women access to domains outside of domesticity, and forced marriage including child marriage, just to name few (Gough, 1975, cited in Rich, [1980] 2003, pp. 18–19).

Many have stressed how the idealization of falling in love with one man for the rest of our lives benefits men at the disastrous cost of not only lesbian existence but collective ties between women in general (Willey, 2016, p. 7).

> Monogamous love, eulogized in our society, is the tool by which women are controlled. The familiar idealised pattern of falling in love and living with the man of our dreams for ever and ever (we hope) has infiltrated our thinking. It is no accident that 'love is blind' and leads women into an

irrational loss of control. It leads us to making men the centre of our world, re-directing our energies and severing ties with others in an all-consuming fashion. (Tsoulis, 1987, cited in Robinson, 1997, p. 145)

In her biographical article *The Wedding* ([1983] 2000), Beverly Smith shares her diary entries from a time when a friend of hers, J., was entering a heterosexual marriage while Smith herself was realizing that she was lesbian. The entries exemplify, on the one hand, the social hegemony of heterosexuality, its compulsory and glorified status, and, on the other hand, the abovementioned all-consuming nature of heterosexual marriage that leads to the deterioration of intimate bonds between women. A few days before the wedding of J. and her future husband H., Smith writes about a dream she had had about J. and herself sharing a moment in a car. In the dream, J. hugs Smith and gives a kiss on her face, and just when the two of them are about to start a conversation and drive away, they are interrupted by a man figure, Terry, whom Smith happens to know from real life (Terry had once gone out with another friend of hers, Barbara). For Smith, the dream resembles herself mourning the loss of yet another meaningful bond with a woman to heterosexual marriage:

> Of course he [Terry] represented men in general and more specifically H. [...] I realized that Terry was the first male to come between Barbara and me.... I remember how hurt I was by all those goings-on. She [J.] is irretrievably lost to me and I to her. She's getting married and since I'm a dyke I am anathema to her. (Smith, [1983] 2000, p. 166)

The author, however, recalls not being the only one more or less conscious about the sacrifice many women are about to make regarding their other relationships when committing to a heterosexual marriage. The night before the wedding, Smith witnesses J. telling her three bridesmaids the following: "It seems strange. We've been together all our lives [...] and after tomorrow we won't be" (ibid., p. 166). The bridesmaids try telling J. otherwise but Smith in her head knows the statement to be true. "Ha! I know better. She'll be H.'s chattel from now on" (ibid., p. 166), she writes down in her journal.

Smith's insight raises the question of why there must be a sacrifice to begin with in a situation like hers. Why is it so that we potentially lose meaningful friendships when someone close to us enters a romantic coupledom? Becky Rosa (1994) locates the reason in the very premises of monogamy: the widely propagated, hierarchical distinction between different *kinds* of love, sexual/romantic love and nonsexual love in particular (p. 109). "Once this division has been established, different types of relationships with different roles and positions in our society are created as separate and distinct from another. Romantic love is given precedence over platonic love" (ibid., p. 109). Hence, for monogamous love to serve as this all-consuming, 'superior' form of love, we must believe in feeling different 'loves' for different people and that these 'loves'

differ in value and must therefore involve different intimate and sexual practices[6] (ibid., p. 110). According to this logic, only the 'special' kind of love (romantic love) can be privileged with the 'special' act of sex, on top of which women are expected to either be in or want to be in such a 'special' relationship (ibid., p. 110) – with men, of course. No wonder, then, that relationships between women, whether platonic or not, are automatically expected to give away to heterosexual monogamy.

Let us return to *The Wedding* and Smith's thoughts on the discrepancy between the social recognition of straight and homosexual/lesbian relationships. While sitting alone on the bathroom floor at her friend J.'s wedding reception, feeling out of place and wary of the ongoing celebration of one more heterosexual union, Smith is reminded of the unquestioned normalcy and visibility, if not hyper-visibility, of heterosexual coupledom and how it overshadows the lives of those who do not have the privilege of founding their sexualities and intimate relationships on an already acknowledged, institutionalized, and widely celebrated social norm.

> I am so overwhelmed by the fact that heterosexuality is so omnipotent and omnipresent (though certainly not omniscient!). Not only is it casually taken for granted but it is celebrated as in this bacchanal, announced in the *New York Times*. And homosexuality is so hidden and despised. Homosexuals go through torturous soul-searching, deciding whether they should come out. Heterosexuals get announcements printed.... (Smith, [1983] 2000, p. 167)

Although most of the lesbian feminist criticisms presented above are not explicitly directed at monogamy, their analysis of compulsory heterosexuality and its unquestionable connection to coupled marriage has valuable implications for creating women-defined sexual cultures that further women's agency and erotic autonomy and provide alternative models for thinking community, family, and caring beyond coupled, romantic love (Klesse, 2018a, pp. 215–216). Indeed, lesbian feminists have been recognized for having reworked gendered sexual norms also in practice, the 1970s United States being a notable example of this. During this time, when identification as lesbian was strongly linked to feminism (more than often radical feminism, to be precise), lesbian women started actively developing their own unique countercultures, the purpose of which was to resist patriarchy comprehensively through every aspect of their lives

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[6]*Intimate* and *sexual practices* pertain to *how* sexuality is lived out individually and in interaction with others. I leave the definition intentionally quite open so that it can include everything between specific acts and behaviors that are performed for the purpose of sexual/intimate pleasure or arousal (kissing, touching, using sex toys, phone sex, role play, rimming, bondage, etc.) and the general organization of the situations or constellations in which people engage sexually/intimately with themselves and others (exclusively coupled sex/intimacy, solo sex/intimacy, sex/intimacy with multiple partners, group sex, cuddle parties, non-monogamous arrangements, etc.).

(Wandrei, 2019, pp. 490–491). For example, all-women communes were established upon the conviction that "only other women working and living with other women could truly liberate women and create a feminist cultural revolution" (ibid., p. 491). In such communes, lesbian women indulged in an "exploration of community, privacy, and coupleism" (Siegel, 1999, pp. 126–127) through different ways: they shared and redistributed resources like food, land, capital, income, and businesses; produced and exchanged knowledge by writing, publishing, teaching, and organizing workshops together; built 'unconventional' families and intimate bonds by sharing children, living space, and partners; and created spaces for researching, expressing, and sharing sexuality beyond patriarchal conventions (ibid., pp. 126–127).

In her biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Audre Lorde writes about women loving women under the same roof and beyond coupledom. Her memories, however, already date back to New York in the 1950s, a time and place where, according to Lorde's own description, no one was talking about women living together or having sex collectively (Lorde, 1982, p. 212). In one of the stories, Lorde captures her 21-year-old self desiring a friend whom she and her girlfriend at the time, Muriel, had taken in to their home to live with them one summer. Eventually, all of them enter a sexual and intimate triad together: "Muriel and I decided that nothing could break the bonds between us, certainly not the sharing of our bodies and our joys with another woman whom we had come to love, also" (ibid., p. 212). In line with the meaning of *zami*[7] from the title of the publication, for Lorde and her partner(s), experimenting with an intimate triad represented a new possible world of women working, living, and loving together, "a chance to put into practice the kind of sisterhood that we talked and dreamed about for the future" (ibid., p. 211).

Lesbian women have sought sexual autonomy by focusing on their inner desires and exploring ways of relating that may have been previously unrecognized or unarticulated. In her reading of *Zami* by Lorde, Krystal Ghisyawan (2016) points out that Lorde and other 'gay girls' were creating communities of care and sexual spaces for which they had neither a language nor normative guidelines at the time (p. 20). With next to no social representation of the kinds of sexual and intimate practices they explored, some of which we might label as polyamory or open relationships today, the women had no choice but to turn to themselves: "we had no patterns to follow, except our own needs and our own unthought-out dreams" (Lorde, 1982, p. 211). We can thus interpret lesbian feminist narratives as inventive and imaginative, which

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[7] "A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers." (Lorde, 1982, p. 253)

counters the common, heterosexist perception that lesbians, just as pretty much anyone else under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, can only replicate or conform to predetermined relationship structures modeled on the heterosexual couple (Ghisyawan, 2016, pp. 21–21).

The provided examples offer insight into the fact that that lesbianism or women loving and/or desiring other women does not have to translate to sexuality or sexual orientation alone. On the contrary, it can have equally as much to do with political aspirations of transgressing mononormative culture and the boundaries between romantic love, love for friends, and their respective implications for the presence or absence of sex and/or intimacy in them. No matter how 'successful' or long-lasting the presented attempts at lesbian non-monogamy may have been, I see them as essentially disruptive of the patriarchy, not only based on the sometimes radical absence of heterosexual behaviors and men, but also due to the (partial) rejection of the relationship dyad as whole. As opposed to striving to normalize lesbians and women loving and/or desiring women by inserting themselves back into an institutionalized relationship structure based on ownership, values perpetuating men's dominance over women, and the nurturing of capitalism, some lesbian feminists opted for more self-determined or, as the feminists in question may have had labeled it, 'women-determined' approaches instead. Perhaps, as suggested by Martha McPheeters (1999, p. 202), abolishing marriage and monogamous love altogether poses a greater threat to patriarchy and the heterosexual nuclear family than the mere reproduction of the couple-norm within lesbian and other LGBTQIA+ relationships.

### 3.1.3 Decolonizing Monogamy and Sexual 'Morality'

I have so far addressed the idealization of monogamy by amplifying its meaning as an institution built to sustain patriarchal power dynamics. Monogamy, as the symbol of the most 'natural' and 'ethical' form of sexual and intimate relationship, pertains at least equally much to White supremacy and the invention of racial differences by European colonizers. One critical connection between compulsory monogamy and colonialism is that European colonial powers often imposed monogamy as a form of social control over colonized populations while at the same time restrained and demolished non-monogamous practices, marriage customs, and kinship structures that were present in many of those cultures (Carter, 2008; Eni, 2020; Hall, 2008; TallBear, 2018). Racist and sexist ideologies that depicted non-monogamous practices as 'primitive' and 'immoral' were legitimized through both the European religious doctrine (Christian marriage) as well as sexual sciences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that further consolidated monogamy as *the* building block for love and family (Willey, 2016).

The imposition of monogamy was accompanied by other significant impacts on the social organization of colonized societies, many of which initially embraced non-heteronormative sexualities and non-binary understandings of gender and social roles (Picq & Tikuna, 2019). In her assessment of the colonization of what we know as the United States of America today, Kim TallBear (2018) asserts that monogamous practices introduced by White settlers often led to the reinforcement of patriarchal power structures and gender roles within Indigenous communities, including private property systems dominated by men, which then helped eliminate and assimilate Indigenous peoples into their colonizers' nation-state structures as well as steal and transfer Indigenous land to the hands of settlers:

> So marriage was yoked together with private property in settler coercions of Indigenous peoples. The breakup of Indigenous peoples' collectively held-lands into privately-held allotments controlled by men as heads-of-household enabled the transfer of "surplus" lands to the state and mostly European or Euro-American settlers. (TallBear, 2018, pp. 147–148)

TallBear highlights that such targeting of Indigenous kinship systems came to the evident detriment of Indigenous women's authority, power, and control over property within their communities, subjugating them to economic dependence within heterosexual, monogamous marriages. "The colonial state targeted women's power, tying land tenure rights to heterosexual, one-on-one, lifelong marriages, thus tying women's economic well being to men who legally controlled the property. Indeed, women themselves became property" (ibid., p. 148).

Black feminists, above all, have disclosed another significant link between compulsory monogamy and colonialism, namely that the standards for 'normal' or 'acceptable' sexualities are inextricably connected to Western/White constructions of 'respectable' womanhood, which as such have been historically influenced by racism and specifically the marginalization of Black and Indigenous women as well as women of Color as racialized, sexually 'deviant' Others. Amid rising European nationalism, women, their sexualities, and specific versions of femininity carried a vital role in construing hierarchical images of European nation-states and their colonies. As Patricia Hill Collins (2004) writes, a superior image of the former (and their women) was created through discourses around the inferiority of the latter (and their women):

> In the nineteenth century, women stood as symbols of race and women from different races became associated with differentially valued expressions of sexuality. [...] Ideas of pure White womanhood that were created to defend women of the homeland required a corresponding set of ideas about hot-blooded Latinas, exotic Suzy Wongs, wanton jezebels, and stoic native squaws. Civilized nation-states required uncivilized and backward colonies for their national identity to have meaning, and the status of women in both places was central to this entire endeavor. (Collins, 2004, p. 30)

Depicting Black people and Black women in particular as sexually 'promiscuous,' 'deviant,' 'primitive,' and 'uncontrolled' has been a crucial element in enabling the constitution of its

supposed opposite, the sexually 'chaste,' 'civilized,' 'pure,' and 'respectable' White woman (Collins, 2004; Hammonds, 1999). Accordingly, as illustrated by Evelynn M. Hammonds (1999), during the nineteenth century, Black women came to embody "the antithesis of European sexual morals and beauty" (p. 95). While White women were 'de-sexed,' hence, associated with all things 'respectable' like sexual control and 'purity,' Black women were saturated with sex and thereby rendered pathologically 'promiscuous' and 'hypersexual' (ibid., p. 96). *Black* and *White* became constitutive of one another: the White woman and her body were 'purified' through the constructions of an 'impure' Black woman and her body (Daniels, 2010, p. 62). This, among other things, contributed to the colonial imaginary of racial difference as sexual difference, which was further deployed to uphold White supremacy during slavery and deny non-enslaved Black people the right to citizenship (Hammonds, 1999, p. 95). The historically grounded hypersexualization and sexual dehumanization continue shaping present-day perceptions, sexual images, and stereotypes attached to racialized groups, Black women in particular (see Anderson et al., 2018; Leath et al., 2021; Stephens & Phillips, 2003)

Due to their subjugation to multiple layers of oppression under enslavement, including sexual exploitation and violence, Black women were placed beyond the scope of prevailing Wester moral standards and conceptions of femininity (Collins, 2004, p. 30; Moultrie, 2018, p. 232). Under enslavement, they could rarely hold more flexible, higher, or better-compensated positions off plantations, unlike some Black men could, and when required to perform labor, they did not have the safeguard of femininity to protect them from it (Davis, 1972, cited in Lindsey & Johnson, 2014, p. 178), for femininity was exclusively reserved for White women. As a matter of fact, within the already othered category of *woman*, Black women were not really considered women to begin with, but rather an aberration to it, which positioned them as an 'othered Other' within the White-supremacist patriarchal order (Daniels, 2010, p. 62).

The Eurocentric and racist opposition between 'progressive' and 'primitive' sexualities and relationship structures is also evident in discourses around *polygamy* (the practice of marrying multiple people) and its difference from polyamory. The topic has become most visibly contested concerning Islam, even though countless cultures and societies across the globe have engaged in the practice of multiple marriages (Ali, 2012, p. 182). Indeed, it can be shown that for centuries, polygamy within Islam has been deployed as a prime example of racial 'backwardness' of the 'East' in efforts to demonstrate the superiority and modernity of the 'West' and thus of Christianity and Whiteness: "Polygamy is represented as both as a marriage

practice allowed by Islam and prohibited by Christians *and* as a manifestation of atavistic sexual tendencies of the biologically inferior" (Willey, 2016, p. 30).

It is then not surprising that polyamory, which does share some elements with traditional forms of polygamy, is often distinguished from polygamy based on the claim that it is a more gender-neutral and egalitarian form of non-monogamy (Miccoli, 2021, pp. 363–364). Actually, many Western polyamorists have put great effort into proving this point to be true, especially by opposing their practices to those of polygamous Muslims (Vasallo, 2019, p. 684). In contrast to polyamory, framed as being grounded in individual choice, consent, and moral ideals such as honesty and sexual freedom, polygamy in Islam is depicted as fundamentally patriarchal, oppressive, and involuntary, and thereby incompatible with the democratic ideals of liberty and equality of Western/White societies (Park, 2017, p. 305). The Western/White entitlement to determine what is ethical love (or love at all) and whose multiple relationships eventually matter manifests itself much visibly in the consensus on polygamous migrant families. Even among 'progressive' Westerners or Western polyamorists, it can be widely accepted that such families can be separated at the borders of Europe, with only one wife granted legal recognition and others disregarded under European laws, often dividing entire families including children (Vasallo, 2018, February 1, para. 14). Although there is no question whether patriarchal polygamy has been and continues to be practiced, the contrast made between 'good' (White) and 'bad' (non-White) non-monogamies continues resorting to "neocolonial discourses of racial difference that suggest *liberty can only be afforded to those who are (properly) white*" (Park, 2017, p. 306).

It might be tempting to conclude that since monogamy is a historically established construction and an important vehicle of colonialism, non-monogamy would then be a more just and inherently natural system for us to live our lives and that relocating non-monogamy in human nature would guarantee a way out of socially enforced relationship dyads toward more 'original' or 'liberated' sexualities. Angela Willey (2016) convincingly reminds us why this is not the right way to challenge compulsory monogamy. First, such argumentation relies on the same naturalizing and universalizing principles that underpin scientific claims endorsing monogamy, namely that humans are inherently sexual beings and that sexuality functions as a natural organizing force in our relationships (ibid., p. 76). Second, attempts to renaturalize non-monogamy, so as to counteract the naturalization of monogamy, employ the idea of a 'primitive' human sexuality that is to be "recovered from our evolutionary past" (ibid., p. 79), evoking the notion of cultured/civilized sexualities and natural/uncivilized sexualities that can

be located on an evolutionary continuum – a notion that takes root in the very same European/White narratives about racial differences as those that have been illustrated in this subchapter (see ibid., pp. 79–80).

## 3.2 QUEER THEORY: CHALLENGING (MONO)NORMATIVITY

Queer theory emerged around 1990s on top of gay and lesbian studies (Giffney, 2004; Jagose, 1996), countercultural political movements resisting heteronormative assimilation politics and the marginalization and misrepresentation of queer[8] identities (Kirsch, 2000; Mendez, 2018), as well as decades-long intersectional thinking of Black and Indigenous women and women of Color about sexuality, gender, race, and class (Hames-García, 2020, p. 43). It also arose from criticism directed toward some feminists' underlying assumptions about gender (Liljeström, 2019, p. 24) in that it shows high skepticism toward the gender binary, which has remained a core element in many (if not most) feminist approaches to this day (see McCann, 2016, pp. 227–228). Queer theory explores sexual desire in its whole complexity by destabilizing alleged relations between gender, sex, and sexual desire (Jagose, 1996, p. 3), problematizes persistent and dichotomous identity categories such as man/woman, masculine/feminine, or gay/straight (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014, p. 450), and supports an anti-essentialist understanding of gender deriving from the concept of *performativity*. This means that rather than being a stable, pre-given, and 'natural' identity from which various gender-specific behaviors originate, gender is considered a social construct that takes shape over the course of time through "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 519); Through our language, bodily gestures, movements, and other kinds of symbolic enactments we (re)produce an illusion of a gendered self which appears as permanent and long-lasting to us (ibid., p. 519).

For monogamy, queer theorists and feminists place a significant emphasis on questioning its normativity or normalness (Klesse, 2018b, p. 220). As suggested by the adjective *queer*, once used to degrade lesbian, gay, trans[9], and gender nonconforming people and now reclaimed as a political self-designation and practice of collective resistance by queers themselves (Rand, 2014), queer theory departs from the idea of one supposedly normal and natural, 'good' and 'clean' human sexuality or gendered existence. "Queer Theory does not want to 'straighten up and fly right' to have the kinks ironed out of it: it is a discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a

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[8] I use *queer* as a broad term that covers all sexual orientations, gender identities and -expressions that do not conform to the normative and binary constructs of gender and sexuality embodied by cisgender, straight 'men' and 'women.'

[9] Following Christina Richards' (2010, p. 122) definition, I understand *trans* to signify anyone who transgresses binary gender norms, whether or not this includes physiological interventions and whether or not the person conforms to the gender norms conventionally associated with their gender, which may not align with their assigned gender at birth.

discipline with a difference, with a twist if you like" (Sullivan, 2003, p. V). Consequently, sexuality, gender, and the many everyday phenomena impacted by them are regarded as infinitely plural. They exist beyond the moral constraints imposed on them by hegemonic systems of power. Michael Warner (1999) sums this up in an exemplary way when describing sex within the ethics of queer life:

> In those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn't pretend to be above the indignity of sex. [...] Sex is understood to be as various as the people who have it. It is not required to be tidy, normal, uniform, or authorized by the government. (Warner, 1999, p. 35)

It was in this context that the concept of mononormativity (see Chapter 2.1) was articulated for the first time and the linkage between mononormativity and heteronormativity established (Klesse, 2018b, p. 220). *Heteronormativity* is a central term of queer theory that describes the hegemonic social system as one that "shapes people into two physically and socially distinct genders whose sexual desire is directed exclusively to the other ['opposite' gender]" (Wagenknecht, 2007, p. 17, translated by EL). Heteronormativity is not a mere ideology or way of conceptualizing gender and sexuality, but a powerful organizing element of our social lives that reaches way past the spheres of sex and sexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 554). It governs, among other things, the distribution of resources in society, knowledge production, division of labor, and political action (Wagenknecht, 2007, p. 17). Queer theory is known for its profound occupation with mononormativity as an intrinsic part of heteronormativity, thus expanding the term *heteronormativity* to not only refer to the normative regulation of the 'objects' of our sexual desire or our sexual and gender identification, but also of the types of sexual, intimate, and romantic relationship configurations we end up engaging in (Klesse, 2018b, p. 220).

### 3.2.1 The Charmed Circle: Locating CNM Within the Sex Hierarchy

Engaging in sexual activities or intimate relationships with multiple partners is conventionally considered a freedom of singles whereby 'promiscuity' and couplehood are construed as two mutually exclusive things. At the very least, having multiple partners is often assumed to pose a threat to the seriousness, committedness, and validity of a coupled relationship. Hence, not all forms of relationships savor the same amount of acknowledgment and respectability in the eyes of society. According to Gale Rubin ([1984] 2007), sex – including how, where, when, and with whom we have it – is assessed on the basis of "a hierarchical system of sexual value" (p. 151). Within this sex hierarchy, sexualities are located either in the so-called *charmed circle* that is privileged with the attributes 'good,' 'normal,' 'natural,' and 'blessed' or the marginalized

*outer limit*s containing sexualities deemed 'bad,' 'abnormal,' 'unnatural,' and 'damned' (ibid., p. 153). Together with, for instance, non-heterosexual, non-procreative, casual, or public sex, as well as sadomasochism and fetishes, non-monogamous sexual activities, too, are culturally interpreted as belonging to the category of the less respectable, 'deviating' sexualities.

> According to this system, sexuality that is 'good', 'normal', and 'natural' should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is 'bad', 'abnormal', or 'unnatural'. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in 'public', or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles [...]. (Rubin, [1984] 2007, p. 152)

'Good' sex, sexualities, and sexual practices are defined most noticeably along the lines of an assumed gender binary as well as a heteronormative conception of human sexuality. Here, sexual or intimate activities are expected or preferred to take place, firstly, between no more than two people, secondly, between heterosexual cisgender women and men who, thirdly, sexually perform in conformity with the desired gender roles expected of 'women' and 'men.' The idealized context for sex therefore is heterosexually coupled and, in a way, privatized too: the most conventional place for the enactment of sexuality and intimacy remains in the privacy of one's own four walls/personal space without the involvement of any third parties from outside. Should the sexual however enter the public sphere, we can expect it to present itself, again, in a coupled form.

Since the introduction of Rubin's sex hierarchy almost four decades ago, the lines between the charmed circle ('good sex') and the outer limits ('bad sex') within the sex hierarchy have shifted. In a case study from 2011, Monique Mulholland revisits the sex hierarchy by highlighting how some sexual acts, expressions, and performances, as reflected through pornification, have changed positions toward a more charmed status. Among other things, promiscuous, non-procreative, casual, and solo sex, as well as manufactured objects have made their way into (or at least closer to) the more respectable sphere of 'good' sex (Mulholland, 2011, p. 132). However, there is a difference to be made between the sexual *acts* or *practices* that become destigmatized and the *identities* performing them. The latter, Mulholland argues, "remain normalised and privileged" (Mulholland, 2011, p. 132) for the most part. If anything, her study shows how the very core of the sex hierarchy remains "attached to a normative heterosexual identity, striving to achieve the best possible sex, flirting with public displays of raunch and promiscuity as long as they are 'respectable', and remaining true to highly codified and standardised gendered conventions" (Mulholland, 2011, p. 131).

Indeed, as pointed out by Warner (1999) and Rubin ([1984] 2007) herself, clear distinctions between 'good sex' and 'bad sex,' do not exist to begin with, "for these distinctions [...] do not necessarily come as whole packages; most people tend to mix traits from each [category]" (Warner, 1999, p. 26). They instead depend on both the kind of sexual practice and the identity (or identities) of the person performing it, meaning that sexual shaming and stigmatization for the same sexual practices apply differently to different subjects or groups of people (see Mulholland, 2011, p. 121). Some sexual activities may be considered scary, bad, or unacceptable for everyone regardless of their identities, whereas other sexual activities may suddenly fall on the 'good' side of the sex hierarchy when performed, for instance, by subjects with non-normative or marginalized sexual identities.

> Some acts such as blood-letting or hard-core BDSM are not culturally legitimised whether practised by non-normative or normative identities. Other acts, such as the use of strap-on dildos, are deemed more acceptable when practised by non-normative sexualities and decidedly strange when practised by heterosexual couples. (Mulholland, 2011, p. 121)

The meaning of sex, sexualities, and sexual practices are thus negotiated on an "ever-shifting continuum of more or less serious deviation" (Warner, 1999, p. 27) where the lines between 'good' and 'bad' sex are continuously redrawn depending on multiple factors such as time, place, and, as addressed above, the identities involved (see ibid., pp. 27–29). This applies to CNM and 'promiscuity' too. As I argued at the very beginning of this chapter, a person who identifies as single may very well be able to pursue several sexual, intimate, or romantic partners simultaneously without being morally questioned for it by their environment. A person known to be in a coupled relationship, however, will most likely face a more negative reception for the same behavior, even if the relationship in question has been opened consensually. Further, there are countless examples of gendered double standards regarding 'promiscuous' behavior. Let us consider, for example, the wide-spread image of daring, sexually adventurous men driven by their supposedly endless libido, the stereotype of a chaste and thus respectable woman craving for stability and commitment, the concept of 'fuckboy' or 'stud,' the assumed gender-specific importance of a so-called 'body count,' or the practice of slut-shaming deployed against sexually active women, femmes, and feminine-presenting individuals. As Willey (2016) reminds us, such sexist portrayals feed off of naturalized gender differences backed up by scientific and especially evolutionary-biological descriptions of mating strategies and sexual selection that claim 'men' and 'women' to be fundamentally differently dispositioned toward monogamy (p. 12).

Marginalized sexualities do not receive the same or similar kind of privileges to those that stand higher within the sex hierarchy, and they are sanctioned, among other things, through

the loss of respectability and institutional support, stigmatization, psychopathologizing, criminalization, and economic disadvantages (Rubin, [1984] 2007, p. 151). In comparison to monogamy, CNM relationships are often viewed as less moral, 'natural,' sexually satisfying, meaningful, and committed (Conley et al., 2013; Rodrigues et al., 2021), and individuals in them are rated as more 'promiscuous' and sexually unsafe (more likely to have an STI) than their counterparts in monogamous relationships (Balzarini et al., 2018). Even though CNM is not necessarily tied to a specific gender identity or sexual orientation, and such devaluation and stigmatization can generally apply to anyone practicing it (Moors et al., 2014, p. 40), "[f]or those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ) who also engage in CNM, additional layers of sociocultural marginalization and discrimination are present, along with vastly different experiences of stigma" (Cassidy & Wong, 2018, p. 120).

As a matter of fact, an association between non-normative sexual or gender identities and CNM has been made both in a positive and negative sense. On the one hand, many people from queer feminist tradition and the BDSM- or tantra-scene feel a belonging to the CNM or polyamorous scene (and vice versa), and a sharp critique of monogamy as well as the embracement of plural structures of desire have been considered an integral part of feminist, queer-feminist, and sex-positive feminist movements, as well as lesbian and gay traditions (Boehm, 2012, pp. 23–25). On the other hand, the linkage between non-normative identities and CNM has also been informed by homo-, bi-, lesbo- and transphobia. Stereotypes about gay men being sexually promiscuous and sex among gay men particularly high risk (Moors et al., 2014; Ross, 2002; Rice et al., 2020) have contributed to the assumption about gay men being especially inclined to engage in CNM (Moors et al., 2014, p. 42). Some studies have also suggested that lesbian women – some subgroups of lesbian women more than others – are perceived as 'hypersexual' or 'sexually deviant' (Geiger et al., 2006) and become associated with sexual 'promiscuity' more than heterosexual women (Pinsof & Haselton, 2016). At the same time, lesbians may find themselves under higher pressure to adhere to the heterosexual imperative of long-term monogamy, so as to vindicate their already norm-breaching relationships perceived as 'deviant' in a heterosexist society (Loulan, 1999; Rosa, 1994). And while non-monogamy can offer a way of exploring and expressing one's bisexuality or gaining visibility and recognition as a bisexual person (Robinson, 2013), stereotypes of bisexuals as undecisive, as 'attracted to anyone,' and consequently incapable of monogamy may compel bisexuals to stay monogamous, to demonstrate that they, against all (imagined) expectations, *can* (Halpern, 1999).

In one of the rarer studies on trans and non-monogamies, Christina Richards (2010) argues that non-monogamous relationship structures, with their increased role flexibility and allowance for individuated sexuality, can offer a space that is affirming of some trans-identified people's gender identities, especially when those identities are fluid and/or embody a variety of gender expressions within and/or beyond the gender binary. Richards also acknowledges the difficulties that society poses for trans people when it comes to their sexual, intimate, and romantic relations. For instance, the choice for trans women to be non-monogamous can bear a difficult dilemma: in a monogamous setting, a trans woman may be construed as inferior to a cisgender woman based on her lack of reproductive capacity or her embodied representation of womanhood that is regarded as 'atypical' or 'deviating' (Richards, 2010, p. 130) in patriarchy. On the flip side, she may be construed lesser than if she chooses non-monogamy, for chastity is an attribute strongly attached to femininity – or a certain idealized version of femininity – and thus demanded of 'good' and 'respectable' women (ibid., p. 130).

In some cases, being monogamous or coupled can push otherwise marginalized sexualities (long-term lesbians and gay men couples, for example) higher on the sex hierarchy by granting them some social recognition because of checking the box for *monogamous* that is, of course, located in the charmed circle (Rubin, [1984] 2007, p. 151). Meanwhile, heterosexuals, whom we usually find at the very top of the sex hierarchy, may lose some of their respectability for being promiscuous and yet continue hovering above most other groups due to checking the desired box for *heterosexuality* (ibid., p. 151). Then, "it is not 'promiscuity' per se that is usually condemned within normative discourses, but rather, the promiscuous sexuality of specific cultural groups" (SantaMaria, 2022, p. 8).

'Promiscuity' and non-monogamies may generally be considered more or less 'bad,' 'abnormal,' 'unnatural,' or 'damned,' yet are expected of and tolerated from some of us more than others. It is thus reasonable to ask: Who, despite being non-monogamous, can maintain their respectability and sexual desirability in the eyes of society? To whom does 'promiscuity' or non-monogamy apply as a naturalized, tolerated, or even positive trait of character, and who must face its negative stigma and most discriminatory consequences? What kind of different meanings does crossing the lines between 'good' and 'bad' sex or, respectively, monogamy and non-monogamy have for different people? As demonstrated above, answers to these questions are situated, gendered, and very much dependent on the level of normative conformity of the sexual and gender identities of the individuals engaging in non-monogamies or 'promiscuous'

behaviors. Moreover, further layers of inequality are to be unpacked when both race and class are brought into the discussion about CNM (see Chapter 3.3).

### 3.2.2 SEXUALITY AS A CONSTRUCT: THE MAKING OF (NORMATIVE) SEXUALITIES

By relying on poststructuralist and discourse-theoretical (Butler, 1988, 1993; Foucault, [1976] 2020) perspectives on knowledge, power, language, and subjectivity, a queer theoretical lens enables us to consider sexuality a phenomenon that does not necessarily reflect on some already-existing, directly observable natural order of things, but instead comes to be experienced as such through discursive, historically, and socio-culturally informed processes (Thuswald, 2021, pp. 98–99). By understanding sexuality as a discoursive effect, we can look into the reasons why certain forms of it have become naturalized, institutionalized, and embodied to the point where they are privileged with a socially dominant default status. In other words, we can scrutinize the hegemony of heterosexual monogamy and the mechanisms of power that regulate sexual desire "based on the insight that social power relations are perpetuated through control of the production of meaning in cultural practice" (Klesse, 2007a, p. 191, translated by EL). We can thus ask, according to which knowledge is sexuality defined and what are the meanings attached to it? What or whose lives and subjective experiences does it validate or make socially intelligible? What or whose lives and subjective experiences does it invalidate or leave completely unarticulated and thus in the realm of impossibility? Whose knowledge is it that is authorized as valid in declaring 'truths' about sexuality?

When we talk about sexuality being produced through discursive means, we can use the term *discourse* to refer to a group of statements, texts, or expressions on a specific topic "that have meaning, power, and impact within their social context" (Mills, [1997] 2007, p. 13, translated by EL). Discourses function as socially important patterns of interpretation (*Deutungsmuster*) (Thuswald, 2021, p. 99) that give form and meaning to our experiences in the world. They mark the "boundaries within which we can negotiate what it means to be gendered" (Mills, [1997] 2007, p. 19, translated by EL) or 'have' a sexuality. Even though social context and institutions play a significant role in creating, maintaining, and circulating discourses (ibid., p. 11), people cannot be considered as passive subjects here who simply adopt whatever discourse is imposed on them. Instead, through reenacting or not reenacting discourses, they actively contribute to either upholding or destabilizing them. Subsequently, we can consider individuals as both the effects of discourses and "instrumental in creating the discourses they use to define themselves" (Lock & Strong, 2010, p. 7). One does not then necessarily *have* a sexuality in the sense of an

internal component of the self, but rather *does* it in reliance on the available discourses around sexuality, some of which are socially more dominant than others.

In his highly influential first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault ([1976] 2020) conceptualizes sex as a topic subjugated to the Western 'search for the truth' taking off in the early eighteenth century, a time when sexuality as an object of enormous interest and a channel for the exercise of power was brought into existence as such. Contrary to the prevalent assumption that the past three centuries would have marked a time in history where human sexuality became essentially repressed by the powers of society (*repressive hypothesis*), Foucault diagnoses this era as one characterized by a growing social, political, and economic incitement to talk about, study, and monitor sex (Foucault, [1976] 2020, pp. 23–24). This approach challenges the very premise of the repressive hypothesis, namely that of one pre-social, originally free and 'natural' sexuality, which is to be (and can be) liberated (Wagenknecht, 2007, pp. 25–26). Sex became, so Foucault, a matter of policing rather than repressing, and an according expansion of discourses around it took place, which were to modify not only the way we think or talk about sexual desire but also the way we come to experience it (Foucault, [1976] 2020, p. 23).

So what was this 'discursive explosion' around sex all about exactly and what did it have to do with sexual norms, including that of the heterosexual couple? Foucault describes that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were two central 'modifications' that took place in the field of sexuality, one that standardized certain forms of sexuality as 'natural' through reduced attention to them, and another one that drew so-called 'unnatural' dimensions of sexuality into the spotlight of social scrutiny. The first established heterosexual monogamy as the norm, a state of sexuality so 'normal' that it needed not to be marked anymore:

> Of course the array of practices and pleasures continued to be referred to it as their internal standard; but it [heterosexual monogamy] was spoken of less and less [...] Efforts to find out its secrets were abandoned; nothing further was demanded of it than to define itself from day to day. The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps, but quieter. (Foucault, [1976] 2020, p. 38)

In the latter case, a whole new world of perversion and peripheral sexualities was created: an array of 'deviant' sexualities were increasingly studied, defined, differentiated, and recorded (ibid., pp. 38–39). Significantly, the interpretative authority over these had slowly been handed over to the practitioners of medicine, psychiatry, and pedagogy during the nineteenth century. Where formerly the discourse on sex had been pronounced by the church, especially in the practice of Christian penance, the power over the 'truth' about sex had now been passed on to

the realm of scientific knowledge production, the science of sexuality, and its many new experts and authorities (ibid., pp. 63–64). Hence, 'wrongful' or 'abnormal' sexual behaviors became reassessed as inferiorities or illnesses of the mind and/or personality as opposed to sins against God and the bible (Rubin, [1984] 2007, p. 152).

Sex also became a central aspect of the newly proclaimed political and economic problem of *population*, which required public regulatory measures of (heterosexual) couples' sexual behavior through close supervision of marriage statistics, birth rates, fertility, frequency of sex, and birth control practices, so as to ensure that each citizen employed their sex and reproductive capacity in a manner that favored the whole nation's economic and political welfare (Foucault, [1976] 2020, p. 26). Such processes where administering life itself becomes an instrument of political power Foucault called *biopolitics*. Biopolitics operate largely through population research and nation-states' population policies based on it and have been assessed critically for giving not merely descriptive but in fact highly normative statements about the state of affairs regarding the population (how things *should* be rather than just how they *are*), thus subjugating individuals to the nation-states' political and economic interests (Wintzer, 2017, pp. 360–361). In view of this, many have noted with concern how scientific knowledge production on population and according policies have real-life consequences that at times strip individuals of their bodily autonomy and human rights. We are talking here about, for instance, the regulation of who, under which circumstances, can or cannot decide for themselves to have or not have children (ibid., p. 360), an issue that is strongly linked to state-mandated regulations such as anti-abortion legislations, forced transgender and intersex sterilization, unequal access to reproductive health care, (neo-)eugenic politics, or the lack of officially acknowledged parental rights in queer and/or non-monogamous family contexts.

The role of the scientific discourse in the making of sexualities has yet to lose its importance in the contemporary Western sexual landscape. Let us consider, for example, the power that medical and psychological discourses have had over the definitions, treatment, and social acknowledgment of marginalized sexual and gender identities (Mathias, 2021; Stone, [1988] 1992), which more often than not have been classified as mental disorders in some of these fields' most influential and widely used manuals such as ICD (*The International Classification of Diseases*) or DSM (*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). The attribution of mental illness to queer people has left its mark on the overall social consensus about gender and sexuality and, as demonstrated by Alexa Mathias (2021), continues enjoying popularity

within queer-hostile rhetoric deployed for the purpose of dehumanizing members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Likewise, the prominence of monogamy as the most 'natural' form of human life takes root in the very same sexual sciences, their efforts to stabilize heterosexual desire coupled with the gender binary, as well as their investments in colonial projects of racialization and nation-building (Willey, 2016). Legitimized by its claim to 'objectivity' and thereby also 'universality' and 'value-neutrality,' the scientific study of the natural world has established monogamy as an a priori assumption based on the evolutionary narrative about the primal goal of humans being that of passing down their genetics and protecting their offspring best by forming a parental couple (ibid., pp. 11–12). That being said, monogamy in itself no longer represents a matter worthy of critical investigation and thus of potential questioning, for it has already been set up as an unwavering starting point for nothing more than human life itself. Interestingly, despite the fact that no evolutionary grounds for fidelity or coupling actually exist (passing down genetics can function just fine without either), the conviction about their fundamental indispensability for human relations has sent some scholars as far as in search of a monogamy gene (ibid., p. 12).

On a more positive note, to think of sexuality and monogamy as discursive phenomena formed by power dynamics is to think of them as changeable and, hence, receptive to being redesigned or even overturned. As briefly mentioned above, subjects themselves, with their practices and languages, can give rise to new perceptions of reality that have a destabilizing effect on socially dominant discourses. The point may be, as suggested by Foucault, that when those whom others have always spoken *about* and *for* start speaking for themselves, they establish a counter-discourse, a discourse against the powers that confine them to invalidating and oppressive narratives about themselves (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 209). Through counter-discourses, one can claim the subject position in telling and living out one's own story and gain agency over the definition and meaning of one's own identity, as opposed to remaining the object of somebody else's narrative. In Sandy Stone's ([1988] 1992) words, one can "begin to *write oneself* into the discourses by which one has been written" (p. 168).

Queer life serves as a prominent example of the above. As reminded by Boka En and Michael En (2020), queer relational practices have transgressed mononormative boundaries long before the advent of the popularized terminology around CNM used today. In comparison to straight life, queer life is less ritualized, institutionalized, and publicly recognized, "each relation [being]

an adventure in nearly uncharted territory" (Warner, 1999, p. 115). They exhibit a variety of different intimacies, often demonstrating remarkable flexibility: relationships can develop from friendships into sexual relationships and back again, they might contain two, three, or more individuals, take the form of life-long companionship, fuckbuddies, best friends, roomies, or lovers, or remain unlabeled whatsoever (ibid., pp. 115–116). Moreover, rules and patterns of queer life are not acquired by the usual disciplinary institutions such as schools, family, or the state, but by other queers and in queer practice itself (ibid., p. 116). Due to what seems like endless kinds of relationship configurations that could exist within it, queer life defies not only hetero- and mononormative ascriptions from 'outside' but any fixed or final definitions altogether.

A further integral aspect of queer existence is the concept of *chosen family*, which represents a strong counterargument to the authority of so-called 'traditional' families. Chosen families have a history of creating supportive social structures among individuals who, on the basis of being queer and often after coming out as such, have otherwise been rejected by their families of origin (En & En, 2020, p. 49). Among LGBTQIA+ communities, chosen family carries the meaning of social and emotional togetherness, consistency and reliability of relationships between friends, lovers, ex-lovers, and children, as well as mutual caring for one another beyond bio-genetic ties, raising a solid objection to the supposed permanence and superiority of the biological nuclear family bound together through 'blood relations' (Nay, 2017, pp. 32–33). Chosen families challenge normative meanings of family and relationality significantly, for the focus in defining *kin* is shifted away from biological family ties – at the heart of which we can find the reproductive couple – toward kin as a social and cultural practice of caring for one another. Kinship as a social practice can serve as a *technique of renewal*, a "process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time" (Freeman, 2007, p. 298). Queer practices of renewal then have the potential to transcend state-recognized, institutionalized forms of social reproduction and their languages that shape our personal, sexual, and familial relations (ibid., pp. 298–299). In doing so, they provide us with invaluable insights into imagining, articulating, and perhaps even practicing ways of living beyond coupledom.

### 3.2.3 INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP

The twenty-first century has come to experience an ever-ongoing proliferation of ways of organizing our personal lives, followed by a multiplication of different 'choices' many of us are able to make in terms of our relationships, families, sexualities, identities, and bodies (Plummer,

2003, p. 4). 'Old' sexualities and sexual patterns that have commonly revolved around the heterosexual couple have come under deconstruction while new "dimensions, intimate relationships, preferences, and sexual fragments emerge, many of which had been submerged, were unnamed, or simply did not exist before" (Sigusch, 1998, p. 331). The Western sexual sphere has thus become majorly reconfigured in that the once big, assumably stable and clear narrative about the linkage between heterosexual marriage, family, sexual desire, and what it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman' has been dispersed into separate spheres that can exist and acquire new meanings irrespectively of another (Plummer, 2003, p. 19). Consequently, "[o]ur language starts to become richer and more complex, allowing us to acknowledge a wider range of possible ways to be a human" (ibid., p. 19).

Such pluralization of the private sphere poses a challenge for the regimes that govern our sexualities and intimacies, for the rise of new forms of life and identities often leads to the demand for newly articulated rights and social acknowledgment (Plummer, 2003, p. 56). So, how do nation-states respond to these kinds of changes through their public policy, law, and discourses? Whose lives do they mark as the social norm, which people then must meet in order to be considered full members of society? To what extent are citizens able to gain agency over their intimate lives within the confinements set for them by nation-states, which more than often operate by masculinist and heterosexist ideologies? To approach these questions and specifically their relevance for CNM, I will draw on the concept of *intimate citizenship* in this chapter.

Citizenship generally can be thought of as belonging and participating in a group, community, or society and having certain rights and obligations within it (Plummer, 2003, p. 50). It is a normative ideal of having a full membership within a community that surpasses its conventional meaning of having the official status of a citizen of a nation-state: it plays out on multiple dimensions of our lives ranging from political, social, and economic spheres to religious, cultural, bodily, and intimate ones (Roseneil et al., 2020, p. 18). Citizenship is closely connected to the personal identities we have through which we make sense and communicate our understandings of ourselves in relation to others, our belonging or non-belonging to particular groups, and our perceived sameness with or difference to others; "Both citizenship and identity highlight the idea that life is lived within certain boundaries and is guided by some sense of continuities, connections, and sameness" (Plummer, 2003, p. 50).

It is essential to note that citizenship does not represent some universal human position with universal rights and responsibilities, but always that of its ideal citizen, a norm subject who is already "encoded in dominant discourses of citizenship" (Richardson, 2012, p. 220). Certainly, nation-states' agenda has generally been to propagate intimate relationships and family values that center around a heterosexual ideal subject and the biologically reproductive couple (Berlant & Warner, 1998). A version of 'normality' thus is established to draw boundaries between those who can and cannot access citizenship and, respectively, between those considered 'good' citizens and 'bad' citizens. Whether people are granted the status of belonging as full citizens and the rights that come with it then depends on whether they live up to their society's normative expectations (Plummer, 2003, p. 52). In this sense, queer existence and non-monogamies pose an issue for citizenship: What is done with those of us who cannot or do not want to live up to the expectations of society, who neither are nor want to be 'normal'? (ibid., p. 55).

Intimate citizenship (also *sexual citizenship*) calls attention to how sexuality, sexual practices, and intimacies interact with and are arranged by social, cultural, and political factors. Sasha Roseneil and colleagues (2020) assert that "[w]hom we are close to and how we conduct our personal, sexual, familial and love relationship are always, unavoidably, political matters, the product of power relations and processes of social and cultural shaping" (p. 19). Intimate citizenship examines how both nation-state policies, discourses, and legal frameworks, as well as sociocultural expectations and everyday experiences of (non-)belonging among civil society, affect the way we can exercise agency over our intimate lives, hence, the extent to which our sexual and intimate relationships, identities, feelings, or gendered ways of existing can uninhibitedly be developed, explored, and lived out both in public and private (Esteves, 2023; Roseneil et al., 2012, 2020; Santos, 2019). It touches on "decisions around the *control (or not)* over one's body, feelings, relationships; *access (or not)* to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc.; and *socially grounded choices (or not)* about identities, gender experiences, erotic experiences" (Plummer, 2003, p. 14).

Mononormativity has set itself as a permanent fixture in the laws and policies of intimate citizenship regimes across Europe: the couple-form is "institutionalized and valorized, systematically expected, promoted and supported by nation states, in preference to non-coupled ways of living" (Roseneil et al., 2020, p. 37). On the one hand, we have legal frameworks and social policies that are made for preserving and protecting coupled unions and families built around them. The Austrian law officially defines marriage as a contract where

"two people legally declare their will to live in an inseparable community, to beget children, to bring them up, and to stand by each other" (§ 44, ABGB, RIS, translated by EL) from which arise, among other things, the marital obligations to cohabitation/joint living and fidelity (oesterreich.gv.at, 2023). Similarly, a registered partnership can only be established between two people (§ 2, EPG, RIS). Marriage is further associated with certain privileges, which include automatic custody of children, the right to insurance through a partner, and economic security (familienrechtsinfo.at, 2019).

On the other hand, we can observe a lack of legal framework and social policy when it comes to supporting non-monogamous forms of life. Even though CNM is not forbidden by law, it is not legally recognized or publicly legitimized either. Similarly to other countries in Europe, Austria does not offer legal recognition to multi-partner relationships (Ossmann, 2021, pp. 130–131) but also does not explicitly sanction people engaging in CNM in their private lives apart from the ban on bigamy (§ 192, StGB, RIS). There is also no legal status for polyamorous or CNM families, as custody laws in Austria do not offer recognition of more than two parents, in addition to such families being invisible in census data and other surveys (Schadler, 2021, p. 2). Consequently, as explained by Ana Christina Santos (2019), CNM falls under the blurry category of 'a-legality,' inhabiting 'a pre-recognition space' where it lacks legal protection and is simultaneously subjected to social ridicule, marginalization, and pathologizing (p. 710). By missing both formal and sociocultural acknowledgment, CNM remains neither institutionalized nor normative (Boehm, 2012, p. 14), which "generates an asymmetry between the 'normal' intimate citizen, who the state is willing to acknowledge, and the dissident intimate citizen – the uncoupled, the non-parent, the non-cohabitant / solo living, the non-monogamous – who remains, at best, an outsider" (Santos, 2019, p. 710).

At the personal level, mononormativity is experienced as both internalized and external pressure to find a partner and be monogamous so as to arrive at what is perceived as a 'normal' or 'respectable' stage of adulthood and to feel recognized and validated by one's social and cultural surroundings (Roseneil et al., 2020, p. 27). Despite their consensual character, CNM relationships are often (expected to be) kept hidden from others (Santos, 2019, p. 710) and become rendered invalid or even non-existent in various situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the couple-norm reared its head through new moral codes and state-mandated measures on sexual/intimate abstinence, which privileged and thus reinforced traditional forms of coupled cohabitation and commitment, while people in non-monogamous relationships were affected by greater social and moral pressure to change their intimate lives

toward a more traditional, monogamy-like direction (Rothmüller, 2021). Personal experiences with these measures were accompanied by the feeling that relationships in which partners neither lived together nor were married/in a registered relationship were not genuinely valued as 'real relationships' during that time (ibid., pp. 1584–1585).

As for polyamorous families, Cornelia Schadler (2021) found out that said families, whether they want it or not, find themselves in situations where their relationship concepts and forms of parenting are misperceived as heterosexual and/or monogamous and are thus 'situationally pushed' into simulating normative family structures. Relatives, for example, may be unable to view and address polyamorous families through nothing else than the lens of heterosexual monogamy: polyamorous relationships that take place simultaneously are misconstrued as temporally separate sequences of serial monogamy, meaning that concurrent partners become misinterpreted as ex-partners and new partners (Schadler, 2021, p. 13). Schadler accounts this to the fact that whether individuals and their self-identifications are truly seen or affirmed by their social surroundings depends on the particular situation, its norms, processes, and discourses that afford (or do not afford) intelligibility to its actors and their identities: "everyday public practices produce parents that maintain traditional structures regardless of their intentions and identities" (ibid., p. 16).

Interestingly, the persistence of the couple-norm remains even as progress is made in queer citizenship rights. The critique of the 'normal gay' phenomenon (Richardson, 2004) illustrates this issue well. The very problem here is that the measure for full citizenship crystallizes in the 'normal' and 'good' heterosexual citizen, and that everyone else should be deserving of the same treatment, same rights, and same responsibilities alongside this heterosexual norm subject (Richardson, 2004, p. 392). And as we know, the 'normal' citizen does not practice CNM but wants to get coupled, married, and procreate (and maybe join the army on the side). So is it then so that only when a queer subject presents themselves as a 'normal gay' or, if you will, 'normal queer' – one that lives and loves monogamously and desires all of the same things that the 'normal' heterosexuals presumably do –, that they are worthy of social acknowledgment and legal protection? While queer visibility, acceptance, and inclusion have expanded through formal steps like same-gender marriage, adoption rights, and access to assisted reproduction technologies and the military, it may also have been achieved at the cost of what some may consider the very core of *queer*: the anti-assimilationist, the unconfined, the not so 'good' and 'tidy,' the non-normal and proud of it. The problem is not so much whether queer people are deserving of certain rights or not but more about the fact that the 'normal gay' is "the sort of

intimate citizen that the state is willing to embrace by publicly acknowledging relational encounters to the extent that they resemble existing (hetero)normative contracts" (Santos, 2019, p. 712).

## 3.3 PROBLEMATIZING CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMIES

CNM and polyamory in particular have often been propagated as essentially egalitarian and revolutionary practices, supporting values such as equality and non-exclusivity as well as positions from feminist and other progressive social movements (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2014a). Although it is true that doing CNM does not necessarily require a particular identity, and that non-monogamies have certainly been practiced by diverse communities even before CNM was popularized among White Westerners, both academic research on the topic and mainstream media tend to link CNM with a uniform identity that presents itself as predominantly White, socioeconomically privileged, well-educated, and heterosexual (Johnson, 2019; Rubin et al., 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011), not to mention nondisabled. Moreover, not enough attention has been paid to the racialized and classist structures of privilege and power and the following patterns of exclusion within and outside of CNM and other non-normative sexual communities (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Noël, 2006). In the following chapter, I intend to bring a few of these to light and explore the possibility that CNM, despite its promised or hoped-for potential to bring about social change, might have been co-opted by neoliberalism.

### 3.3.1 WHITE, WEALTHY, AND NONDISABLED? PATTERNS OF EXCLUSION WITHIN CNM AND POLYAMOROUS LIFE

Discourses around the core values and practices within polyamory have been criticized for mirroring class divisions. Christian Klesse (2014a) argues that a specific kind of middle-class habitus is often cultivated among poly-identified people, especially regarding the special kinds of knowledge, communication styles, and processes of self-reflection attested within said relationship structures. "[T]the endorsement of reflexivity, relationship talk, the rationalisation of emotions and carefully scripted negotiation in polyamory favours particular modes of habitus, which are much more prevalent in middle-class cultures (see Skeggs 2004)" (Klesse, 2014a, p. 207). In a similar fashion, Schadler (2020) remarks how the construction of a 'reflective,' 'knowledgeable,' and 'honest' in-group definition of polyamorists often includes a classist contrast to those of us who are allegedly incapable of polyamory due to being 'uninformed,' 'uptight,' not good enough in communication, or unable to free ourselves from old patterns; According to some, the opposite of the enlightened polyamorist even has an

embodiment: a non-urban, uneducated, unethically non-monogamous, and dishonest person, mostly an 'unattractive' man with an apparently 'wrong' (uncool) choice of clothing (pp. 178–179).

Access to polyamory clearly comes with its own normative requirements that often center around knowledge and communication skills, both of which are unevenly distributed resources among different social classes. Polyamory, for instance, requires a lot of different personal 'investments' like time, energy, and emotional labor, making it more of a luxury rather than a relationship practice accessible to everyone (Patterson, 2018, p. 100). It is therefore important to consider who, under which economic and social circumstances, can begin to engage in the sometimes heavily consuming communicative and reflective processes that come with CNM relationships:

> A few things that polyamory thrives on are energy, time, and emotional bandwidth. There are a lot of moving parts involved in discovering, exploring, and expanding a relationship…let alone, multiple relationships. [...] So, when do you engage in all that valuable relationship-affirming communication? In the limited space between your full-time, minimum-wage shift, and your part-time, minimum wage shift? Do you find time on the phone, while taking public transportation to pick your children up from school or daycare? Do you find the time after you get home from washing dishes…but before you have to write a paper for one class and study for an exam in another? (Patterson, 2018, pp. 100–101)

Moreover, communication is learned and interpreted differently among different cultures and social groups. So what if the communication one has learned and practiced does not fit the expectations set for the 'good' and 'right' kind of communication within polyamorous relationship networks? Who has to integrate into whose way of communicating? Whose communication applies as 'good' communication in the first place? What if the 'differences in communication' -reasoning comes to excuse the negligence of other serious issues? The great emphasis on communication bears a danger, namely that both the problems in communication as well as solutions to them become superimposed on the individual and their personal skills, even if the problems in question might actually be structural, hence, embedded in the ways polyamorous (or CNM) groups operate as whole (Schadler, 2020, p. 184). Instead of directing individuals to attend one more communication workshop or read one more self-help book in order to improve themselves and their personal integration in said groups, problems should be made everybody's business and thus debatable, which might result in some much necessary conversations about the racist, sexist, classist, and ableist power imbalances lurking beneath the surface of many self-declared egalitarian CNM and polyamorous cultures (see ibid., pp. 183–184).

Because of the lack of social networks, visibility, and representation for Black polyamorists in polyamorous communities and the media, an impression has been created that there are not many Black people who are polyamorous, leading many of them to look for community and support in spaces that are – just as mainstream polyamorous cultures and their specific norms, languages, guidelines, and practices in general – predominantly White and consequently oblivious to the experiences of people of Color (Johnson, 2019, pp. viii–ix). In *Love's Not Color Blind*, Kevin Patterson (2018) illuminates how racism, more than often joint with gender and class discrimination, is (re)produced through various ways in CNM, polyamorous, and other non-normative sexual subcultures. Among other things, Black people and people of Color are often excluded from fully belonging in said environments through othering narratives and interactions by which they are treated as "intrinsically different from and alien to oneself" (Patterson, 2018, p. 52) – *oneself* representing here a White subject. Dating preferences can be shown to echo racist stereotypes and the valorization of Whiteness (ibid., pp. 61–62) whereby Black people and people of Color are repeatedly reduced to fetishized and exoticized objects of White peoples' desire and racist imaginary (ibid., pp. 92–93).

Because the concept of White/middle-class sexual respectability and accusations of 'promiscuity' against Black people and other racialized groups have played a significant role in perpetuating racism and class oppression (see Chapter 3.1.3), Black and other racialized people are more likely to become stigmatized when being openly non-monogamous, revealing polyamory a realm marked by race-based privilege and disadvantage (Klesse, 2014a, p. 207). Hence, due to systemic racism and the historically rooted sexual stereotypes prescribed to racialized minorities (see Chapter 3.2.3), Black people, for instance, are often held to a different standard than their White counterparts concerning behaviors regarded as sexually 'deviant' or norm-breaching. The pressure to remain monogamous may thus be greater for Black people and people of Color than it is for White people who, on the basis of being White in a White supremacist society, are privileged with the presumption of sexual morality.

As a response to the historically rooted, racist (and sexist) hypersexualizing stereotypes and to generally survive in a racist society, some Black people have been said to have adhered to the so-called *politics of respectability*, a term coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her studies of the Women's Convention of the Black Baptist Church. The goal of the politics of respectability was "to distance oneself as far as possible from images perpetuated by racist stereotypes" (Higginbotham, 1993, cited in Schippers, 2016, p. 76) through strict self-control and avoidance of violating societal norms (ibid., pp. 76–77). To be initially realized through the

simulation of White, middle-class femininity including sexual 'purity,' the politics of respectability, some believed, ought to bring dignity to working-class Black people, especially Black women (Collins, 2004, p. 72). In other words, in order to gain respect, Black people were and still are under great pressure to conform to the cultural, including sexual, norms of the dominant White group in order to gain safety and respect. Contemporary manifestations of the politics of respectability have been located in the consolidation of the heterosexual nuclear family, in the (attempted) erasure of Black queer identities to clear the way for patriarchal, 'respectable' forms of masculinity and femininity, as well as in the embracement of monogamy as a counteracting practice against the racist narrative about Black people as 'naturally promiscuous' and therefore unable to do monogamy (Schippers, 2016, pp. 77–78).

> The faithful and committed husband challenges the controlling image of black men as incapable of monogamy, ill suited for long-term relationships, and/or passively tolerant of cheating wives, and the sexual purity of the African American wife contradicts racist representations of black women as sexually promiscuous, licentious, and available. (Schippers, 2016, p. 78)

Mainstream non-monogamies have also been criticized for their inaccessibility for disabled people in terms of both the actual practice of having multiple partners and the communities built around the topic. Katie Tastrom, a writer, speaker, consultant, and advocate for disability justice, notes that, for instance, the normative state of polyamorous relationships presumes ableness and neurotypicality, omitting the fact that the resources required for finding and maintaining multiple partners and managing the required emotional labor may be differently or not at all attainable for many disabled and/or neurodivergent people: "There are no guidelines for how to navigate having severely limited energy and multiple partners, or how anxiety may affect jealousy and fear, or the difficulty of getting new partners up to speed on your access needs," Tastrom (2018, July 23, para. 3) reminds us. According to her, alone finding a partner who is willing to understand and accommodate to the relationship-, sex-, and/or body-related needs of a disabled person can be challenging, not to mention when one wishes to find more than one such partner (see ibid., para. 7-10).

Although ableism, just as classism or racism, is not unique to CNM or polyamory, disabled people are frequently made clear that they do not belong in the realm of non-monogamous intimacies. In an ableist society, disability and sex are commonly decoupled, presenting them as two incompatible things and thus making it difficult for disabled people to be recognized as sexual and desirable beings in the first place; Individuals with disabilities are often desexualized and infantilized, hence portrayed as necessarily sexless or asexual and incapable of having full sexual autonomy or reasoning (Iantaffi, 2010; Polyamory and Disability, 2022, March 22; Tastrom, 2018, July 23). Consequently, they are frequently denied access to sexual and intimate

spaces as equals to their nondisabled and/or neurotypical counterparts. The lack of representation of disability in polyamorous communities, ableist beauty standards within them, inaccessibility of the spaces used, and sometimes even the refusal to acknowledge or fulfill access requirements of disabled community members are just some of the things that together convey the message of disability having little to no place in polyamory (Polyamory and Disability, 2022, March 22).

All of the above being the case, we must ask: Who can openly and safely claim a non-monogamous identity associated with 'promiscuity' as an individual rather than as the representative of a whole racialized group? Who has the privilege of not being burdened with sexual stigma *prior* to entering CNM? Who, on the grounds of their class- and race-privilege or ableness and neurotypicality, are more likely to be included and treated humanely in non-monogamous sexual/intimate spaces? Who has enough economic, social, and cultural resources to engage with and defer to the prevailing norms within these spaces? Can CNM even serve as an enhancement of a person's social status and sexual desirability as opposed to (reinforced) sexual stigma? And if so, whom would such enhancement apply?

### 3.3.2 CNM as Sexual Capital: A Revolution Hijacked by Neoliberalism?

In a great contradiction to the politicization of sex and love throughout the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many of which believed free love and non-monogamies to be driving forces in the collective liberation of sexuality and human existence, a consequent radical shift in today's general sexual landscape cannot be proven to have taken place (Exner, 2020, pp. 187–188), except perhaps for its modernization and pluralization. Instead, the central beliefs cultivated within anti-establishment hippie- and other movements have been increasingly taken over by the neoliberal value system since the 1980s, now promoting perhaps a more individualized view on sexuality than ever before (ibid., pp. 189–190). Some of the fundamental positions that guided the hippies and others in the earlier days (self-awareness, exploration of one's own needs, recognition of one's own limits, and the discovery of one's own individuality, etc.) have been conflated into the very core principles of neoliberalism, all of which are, too, more or less focused around the individual: self-realization, self-determination, personal growth and authenticity, individual success, independence, and ongoing self-optimization, just to name few (ibid., pp. 189–190).

The era of neoliberalism is notable for the way it has commodified those aspects of our lives that many of us might consider to be beyond the realm of economic exchange. This means that

sexualities and our intimate experiences, too, are integrated into a system that operates by supply, demand, costs, and benefits, turning our sexual selves into personal assets with which we can enter the competition for social recognition: the more unique, more interesting, more successful, and what not we are, the more likely we will be rewarded with social validation and self-assurance (see ibid., p. 190). In neoliberalism, sexuality thus becomes capital, *sexual capital*, and not only in the sense that it can potentially be monetarized (think, for example, sex work or the market for sex toys) but also in that it can be transformed into an embodied property of a person which can either increase or decrease their perceived social worthiness, sexual desirability, and self-image as an autonomous and one-of-a-kind subject (Illouz & Kaplan, 2021).

The term *sexual capital* is used in sociology and sexual research to "explain how sexual subjectivities, experiences, and interactions, including sexual acts, feelings, and thoughts, are used by social actors to their own advantage in economic markets, marriage markets, or sexual relationships" (Illouz & Kaplan, 2021, p. 33, translated by EL). Eva Illouz and Dana Kaplan (2021) present an understanding of sexual capital that is divided into four further subtypes, two of which I find especially fascinating to think of in the context of non-monogamies. Although historically seen it has been (women's) 'chastity' and 'pure' sexual reputation that have served as the most notable forms of sexual capital in the (bourgeois) marriage market (ibid., p. 58) and patriarchal monogamy, I will concentrate on the categories of *embodied sexual capital* and *neoliberal sexual capital* instead, for both of them highlight the status- and desirability-enhancing possibilities people can experience or strive for through the individualization and optimization of their sexualities, even through CNM or 'promiscuous' behaviors.

In its embodied form, sexual capital functions as a personal social resource regarding an individual's perceived attractiveness, popularity, or desirability in a given social context (ibid., p. 76). Embodied sexual capital can be acquired and maximized, for example, by adopting the right kind of style (clothing and accessories), having the right kind of body figure or posture, or using the right kind of language and expressions that speak to the hegemonic standards of 'sexiness' within a specific sexual field (ibid., pp. 74–75). *Sexual field* refers to "a small-scale economy of social ranking with its own internal rules of behavior organized around the desirability of one's self for others. Sexual fields can be urban spaces, subcultures, nightclub scenes, or university dating regimes" (ibid., p. 73, translated by EL), each with its own specific parameters for attractiveness. A person with a lot of embodied sexual capital in a specific field radiates the right kind of sexual 'vibe,' which is most visibly rewarded with increased attention and more potential partners who desire to have sex or be intimate with them (ibid., p. 72).

So, who exactly can accumulate embodied sexual capital within the sexual economies of CNM dating spaces? Could the capital-increasing 'body figures and postures' mentioned earlier resemble that of an nondisabled, White person here? Does the preferred dress code mediate specific social class affiliations or group identifications? Perhaps those of an urban, well-educated, liberal, and well-off person who most certainly does *not* wear what is reserved for its supposed opposite, the uneducated, rural, and 'backward' monogamist (see Schadler, 2020)? Moreover, do status-enhancing language and expressions within CNM environments derive from predominantly middle-class discourses and literature written by (and for?) middle-class, university-educated, White, and nondisabled people (see Noël, 2006, p. 609; Patterson, 2018, p. 45)? Is the appropriation of this kind of capital linked to people having to conform to social norms and communicational practices centered around self-reflexivity, self-optimization, and individualized relationship 'work' (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 521), hence, values that feed into the culture of neoliberal capitalism and potentially disguise forms of structural discrimination within polyamorous and CNM spaces?

Neoliberal sexual capital concerns a person's individual experience of themselves as a valuable subject when weighed against the moral doctrine of neoliberalism. Illouz and Kaplan define neoliberal sexual capital as "the sum of individually accumulated sex-related affective states that evoke feelings of self-worth and self-determination, especially those related to risk-taking, uniqueness, self-actualization, creativity, and ambition" (Illouz & Kaplan, 2021, p. 88). Remarkable is that the accumulation and appropriation of neoliberal sexual capital have effects that reach beyond the sexual/intimate sphere. It namely contributes to the process of creating a whole ideal neoliberal subject. For instance, sexual agency can be directly linked to professional success (ibid., p. 88). Reaching the ultimate goals of personal autonomy and individual self-expression in the sexual/intimate sphere can feed into a person's self-confidence and -image as a self-mastered and -empowered subject in the working life, a prime example of which is the image of a (conventionally) sexually attractive, self-empowered 'alpha-woman' or 'boss lady' (see ibid., pp. 88–89). In neoliberalism, the sexual self, its identifications, desires, and sexual experiences are transformed into personal commodities that are marketable: they might communicate a cool lifestyle, a desirable set of communication skills and sexual know-how, the image of a unique and passionate workforce, or proof of experience and creativity (see ibid., pp. 93–95).

Out of curiosity and to see whether I could find any implications of Illouz and Kaplan's neoliberal sexual capital finding ground in popular, easy-to-access writings about CNM, I took

a brief look at what is being said about the benefits of CNM relationships in some of the many articles and blog posts that pop up when googling the topic. What I saw, among other things, was that polyamorists and other non-monogamists indeed are often (self-)recognized for being particularly honest people with advanced communication and relationship skills, accompanied by increased personal freedom and autonomy. Their non-monogamous lifestyles are also believed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the self and remarkable personal growth. For instance, a polyamorous blogger named Art writes that

> [...] polyamory has repeatedly compelled me to let go of old ways of being and expand into larger and better versions of myself. After I got married, but before becoming poly, I actually felt relief that I never had to "date" again, but this also meant a part of me was going to sleep. Whether it is being open to flirting or contact improv or staying fit, polyamory keeps me more on my toes, introduces me to new ideas and ways of being, and reminds me to not take any of my relationships for granted. (Art [Conscious Polyamory], 2017, May 1)

As the citation suggests, polyamory serves as a form of personal enhancement that extends beyond being a good or desirable partner. It redefines a person on a seemingly more profound level, just as though practicing polyamory would automatically force ('compel') a person to become a 'better version of themselves,' someone who stays mentally and even physically 'fit' and stimulated by keeping those parts of the self awake and activated that would otherwise have 'gone to sleep' in a long-term monogamous setting. Similarly, Shai, another blogger from the community, describes having grown "exponentially in every way" through their polyamorous loving style, including "intellectually, spiritually, erotically, emotionally, and even professionally" (Leveled up Love, "About us"). Much of this ongoing self-optimization is dedicated to the increased need for communication in CNM relationships and the confrontation with uncomfortable feelings such as that of potentially losing a partner: "The ongoing communication work and natural 'fear of loss' motivate partners to continue working on showing up as their best selves" (Shai [Leveled up Love], 2021, October 21).

A further blogger, Thomas Brand, gives another example of the perceived holistic, all-encompassing self-improvement that is often attributed to doing CNM. Through learning about ethical non-monogamies, so Brand, one can acquire "transferable, universal skills" (communication skills in particular) that can benefit a person as much as in their professional life. The writer thus makes a direct, positive correlation between the intimate self and the professional self and, respectively, the competencies learned in the private sphere (polyamory) and those learned in the professional field (career, management training):

> When I began reading books on communication in polyamory, I realised something. These were the same skills I had learned in the management training I had undertaken for my day job. [...] So the skills I learnt for my career helped me in my relationships. And skills I learnt in my relationships helped me in my career. (Brand [Discovering Polyamory], 2021, May 4)

Likewise, a LinkedIn user's post titled *Polyamory In The Workplace* lists both 'enhanced communication skills' and 'increased creativity and innovation' as special advantages of a polyamorous workforce. The post introduces Sarah, a hypothetical polyamorous project manager who, due to her experience in navigating the complexity of non-monogamies, has grown into a great team player, effective communicator, and productive multitasker that can "successfully manage multiple projects and maintain harmony within her team" (Ferrera, 2023, March 24). Another hypothetical polyamorist and marketing executive, Lisa, has already been well trained in 'out-of-the-box thinking' through managing multiple relationships, thus making her a profitable source of innovation in the workplace whose "ability to think creatively has led to the development of several successful marketing campaigns" (Ferrera, 2023, March 24). The message reads: the customized work put into CNM in the private yields gains in the work life.

If we were to believe the depictions I just presented, CNM never lets you stagnate in your personal development, blending perfectly into the core values endorsed in neoliberalism. Maybe against the general, often negative and stigmatizing view, CNM does in fact draw positive attention to its practitioners, especially when the personal competencies that are reportedly gained through it can be marketed as useful and profitable outside of the context from which they initially arose; When they contribute to the establishment of a holistically optimized, unique self that masters life on multiple levels, and when they help adapting the subject even better into the capitalist work culture by presenting the subject as an ever more efficient, innovative, remarkably skilled, and thus desirable resource in the labor market.

Whether the above is true or not, I cannot help wondering why CNM is so frequently presented as a personal selling point rather than 'just' another way of doing relationships. Why is it that CNM is considered valuable only when proven useful beyond the sexual/intimate sphere? Perhaps incorporating CNM into the neoliberal market logic and framing it as 'hard work'[10] or a part of some personal growth project pertains to the general attempts to legitimize CNM and counteract the social stigma attached to it, so as to prove that it is not *just* about sex, having endless number of partners, or some freaky stuff happening behind closed doors, but something that both requires and results in skills that can elevate a person's social worth as a whole in multiple areas of life and provide them with special qualities that positively distinguish them from everyone else.

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[10] An additional aspect to note is that the personal growth and 'gains' attained through CNM or polyamory are often framed as a result of active, ongoing relationship work or dating, which might convey an impression that polyamorous or consensually non-monogamous people either are or actively aspire to be in multiple relationships. This fails to disclose the fact that a person can be consensually non-monogamous or polyamorous without currently engaging in or 'working hard on' multiple or any relationships at all.

CNM can well provide an emancipatory alternative to patriarchal, heterosexist, and White-dominated versions of monogamy, but whether its modern manifestations represent sexual emancipation for everyone seems highly contestable. In light of the racist, classist, sexist, and ableist exclusion mechanisms that also operate within CNM and other non-normative sexual/intimate spaces (see Chapter 3.3.1), and given the social, sexual, or even professional benefits that an individual can potentially garner through being non-monogamous, it is difficult not to view CNM as a primarily individual project that fosters the constitution of (sexually) self-empowered neoliberal subjectivities rather than a socially and politically transformative, revolutionary practice.

# 4 Methods

The data collection and analysis were accomplished through means of qualitative social research: four *semi-structured interviews* (Meuser, 2018; Misoch, 2019; Strübing, 2013, 2018) with Vienna-based couples practicing CNM were conducted, which then were analyzed by using the method of *focused analysis* (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020). As the goal of the study was not about bringing out generalizing statements about CNM, but to analyze subjective perceptions of it instead, it made sense for me to take up a qualitative approach that regards individual experience as a valuable source of knowledge and embraces the significance of interpretative work done by both the interviewees and the researcher. It was in my interest to let individuals make meaning of their own experiences with CNM and voice their views on the issue as comprehensively and freely as possible.

Qualitative social research generally departs from the idea that individuals and their lived realities are reducible to or alone measurable by the standardized instruments of quantitative research, which often deploy pre-determined categories or question grids which people or the so-called 'test subjects' are then expected to engage with (Mayring, 2023, p. 9). It rather goes by the notion that it is crucial to understand people's social realities 'from inside out' (Flick et al., 2007, p. 14), hence, from the perspective of the people, because they themselves are considered having an active role in the processes of creating, interpreting, and structuring those realities. Based on this notion, representations of reality become tangible in individuals' personal interpretations of it, which are tied to the specific knowledges people hold about the world that are further contingent upon historical, temporal, cultural, and subjective circumstances (Benoliel, 1996, cited in Levers, 2013, para. 15). Empirical material is brought forth and framed by individuals, each with specific intentions and interpretative competencies, and the underlying focus of qualitative social research is to make those intentions, interpretations of the world, and framings analytically accessible (Strübing, 2018, p. 2).

The above is also true for the position of the researcher. I, too, am involved in an intentional, interpretative process as I evaluate the research material obtained through the interviews. My research interests and questions inevitably impact the meanings assigned to the data (Strübing, 2013, p. 24), and the chosen theoretical framework – which is far from 'value neutral' or separable from the specific historical and cultural environments from which it was born – does shape the explanations I am able or willing to attribute to my observations of it. At the same time, whether I want it or not, my view on the world and acquired ways of knowing are

informed and necessarily limited by the social positions I inhabit on the basis of being white, class-privileged, university-educated, and visibly nondisabled. When making meaning of the meanings made by the interviewees, I thus am partial both involuntarily or unconsciously (see sentence above) and by choice, through the deliberate commitment to particular theories or 'truths' about the social world as well as to specific methods by which I believe to find out about the experiences of people living in it.

## 4.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Semi-structured interview is a data collection method that encompasses all kinds of interviews in which the interviewed person is expected to answer a set of open questions on a specific topic or topics (Meuser, 2018, p. 152). There are no predefined answer options given, and the interviewee is allowed enough freedom to answer the questions in their own words and in as much detail as they deem necessary (ibid., p. 152). In German, the method carries the name *Leitfadeninterview*, where the word *Leitfaden* literally refers to the basic guideline, a set of pre-defined questions and main topics according to which a semi-structured interview is organized. This pre-developed guideline fulfills the functions of (1) providing thematic framing and focus to the interview, (2) bringing together all relevant topics to be addressed during it, (3) enabling better comparability of the data, and (4) structuring the entire communication process taking place in the interview (Misoch, 2019, p. 66).

Semi-structured interview is expected to mediate two sometimes conflicting requirements. On the one hand, the interview should follow a structured form which ensures that the gathered materials stay mutually comparable but, on the other hand, it should be open and flexible enough to encourage the interviewees to present their perspectives to the asked questions as freely and exhaustively as possible (Strübing, 2013, pp. 92–93). To ensure the latter, also called *the principle of openness* in qualitative research, the interview guideline is designed in a way that it is adjustable, i.e., open for changes and adaptations during the whole course of the study as well as during individual interviews (Misoch, 2019, p. 67). In my research, for example, the interview guideline had to be changed a bit after the first interview I conducted, for it became clear that some of the questions I had formulated were too long or complex and had to be accordingly either shortened, simplified, or split into two or three separate questions. Moreover, an interview that is organized in an open way provides enough opportunities for the interviewees to say things that were not initially suspected by the researcher (Strübing, 2018, p. 22). Each interview can then adopt a structure and contents of its own, as would a normal

everyday conversation between three people. The same would be hard to achieve with a mere read-out-loud questionnaire.

As laid down by Sabina Misoch (2019, pp. 68–69), each interview consisted of four phases:

(1) *Information phase* – In the first part, the participants were given a brief overview of the research and informed about the general structure of the upcoming interview. They read and signed a consent form, after which I asked if they had any questions on their minds that they would like to ask me or if there was anything they wanted to share with me prior to recording.

(2) *Warm-up phase* – The interview started with one relatively open and broad question to encourage the interviewees to get into talking and to shake off some of the nervousness that tends to prevail at the beginning of an interview situation. The question with which I opened the (recorded part of the) interview was close to the following: *I am interested in hearing about the story of your relationship. Could you tell me about it? Feel free to tell me anything and start wherever you like.* (DE: *Ich interessiere mich für eure Beziehungsgeschichte. Könntet ihr mir davon erzählen? Ihr könnt frei erzählen und beginnen, wo ihr möchtet.*)

(3) *Main phase* – After the interviewees had finished answering the warm-up question, I moved on to asking other questions from my interview guideline. As suggested by the literature on the method, the core topics of the interview and the most relevant questions remained the same throughout all interviews (Strübing, 2013, pp. 92–93). However, the exact formulation and order of questions varied depending on the interviewed couple and the particular needs of each interview situation. If the initial question in the warm-up phase had resulted in the interviewees sharing information that already touched on the topics I had planned to ask question(s) to, I would directly proceed to them. Sometimes, I would also spontaneously ask unplanned in-depth and/or clarifying questions.

(4) *Closing phase* – After the main phase was completed, the interviewees were explicitly asked whether there was any information they thought had remained unmentioned during the interview or if there was anything even remotely relevant to any of the topics of the interview that they would still like to address. Afterward, as the recording had already stopped, I asked a few more questions about the interviewees' demographic and personal details, if these had not already come up during the interview.

During the main phase of the interview, the first questions I tended to ask were about the reasons and motivations for opening a relationship and the meanings attached to such

transformation. The questions then shifted toward the practical implementation of the CNM relationships practiced by the participants. By focusing on the practical aspects, I intended to find out about the types of relationships that the interviewees engaged in, how these were named and described, potential rules regulating what kind of relationships could take place simultaneously, and, again, what kind of meanings the relationships had for the interviewees themselves. I also asked the participants about the challenges/difficulties and the positive aspects they saw in their non-monogamous relationship(s). This also included a query into the interviewees' experiences of communicating about and living out their CNM relationships openly in public. The last focal point of the interview was about the changes that the interviewees had experienced during and after transitioning to CNM in terms of intimacies, sexuality, and understandings of the self and relationships in general.

Because I was interested in hearing about the topics of the interview from both individuals in the relationship, many questions were answered twice, sometimes even more times than that. I often directed the same question separately to both participants and asked for their perspectives on an issue on a personal level as well as on a couple level. For instance, as the wish to open a relationship can be mutual or one-sided and its effects can be felt both individually and in the dynamics of the coupled relationship, it was important to consider both individuals' personal motivations for doing CNM as well as the implications it had for the relationship between them. It was common that the couples managed turn-taking already by themselves and, at least how I perceived it, quite effortlessly without me having to intervene in the conversation or repeat questions too often.

## 4.2 FOCUSED ANALYSIS

Next, the interviews were analyzed following the method of focused analysis by Stefan Rädiker and Udo Kuckartz (2020). Focused analysis is designed for qualitative interviews with an interview guideline, and it is well applicable in working with MAXQDA, a software for qualitative data analysis that I also used to process and evaluate the interviews. The goal of focused analysis is to summarize and reduce the complexity of the gathered data through coding, which in this case serves as a stage of analysis that is oriented toward answering the research questions (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020, p. 14) as well as the theme-specific questions included in the interview guideline, which, of course, are derived from the research questions. Because of this, the method has a deductive component in it: there is a pre-defined set of categories (or codes) that are assigned to the qualitative data. However, it also enables an inductive approach in that the category system is not fixed but stays open for changes until the

very completion of coding. This means that new or unexpected categories can be established, old categories may disappear or merge into other categories, and the definitions of the different categories can be adjusted in the course of the analysis.

Thus, the method seemed persuasive to me, for it simultaneously fulfilled two aspects that I found essential. On the one side, I was able to navigate the transcribed interviews rather systemically already at the beginning of coding; I knew what I was approximately looking for and could prescribe first meanings to passages with the help of the pre-defined interpretative system. On the other side, I was also able to stay receptive to and explore perspectives, information, and meanings beyond the initial category system and by doing so keep modifying it until a point of saturation would be achieved, i.e., no new categories, codes, modifications of categories, or relevant information would keep emerging.

The analysis was generally modeled after the six steps of focused analysis outlined by Rädiker and Kuckartz (2020). However, I took the liberty of adapting it to the needs of the present study. The respective steps of analysis, which I will continue to explain below, should be considered as strongly inspired by Rädiker and Kuckartz's approach rather than a strict replication of it:

(1) *Preparation, organization, and preliminary exploration of the data* – First, the conducted interviews were manually transcribed and pseudonymized. I opted for a type of transcription that included some selected linguistic 'verbatim' items like repetitions, interruptions, backchannels, and a few non-verbal cues such as laughter or crying (for transcription key, see Appendix 2). As I was primarily interested in the contents of the interviews and not the specifics of the language used, I converted features of oral language to the written norms of standardized German and English. Then, before proceeding to the next step, all transcribed interviews were read through and brief notes about first impressions and already distinctive passages were made.

(2) *Development of a preliminary category system* – Next, I developed a first version of the category system based on the questions in the interview guideline and the thematic blocks the questions created when broadly classified in terms of their focus and contents. Also, each category was given a short description to help coding during the next two steps.

(3) *Basic coding* – In the third step, I read through all transcripts again and coded them by assigning text passages to the categories (codes) I had created. Parts of transcripts that did not fit into any of the pre-determined categories were either dismissed as unimportant or coded under the category 'other' if deemed relevant for the study. I would then return to

the text passages classified as 'other' and create new categories and codes that would suit them. Meanwhile, definitions of the categories developed in the second step were altered, extended, and/or delimited.

(4) *Fine coding* – Now that an extensive category system had been developed, I started to work with individual categories and the text passages assigned to them. The aim was to identify and define subcategories within the initial categories or, in other words, to differentiate between the many text passages in their specific dimensions and meanings. Also, some categories were merged or split. For example, it was necessary to evaluate whether a code with only a few text passages would be expressive enough to stand on its own or if it would function better as an addition to another category. The step was finished when no new categories or subcategories kept emerging, and no further changes to the definitions of the categories had to be made. During fine coding, I also started to note my thoughts on the importance of each category for the final analysis.

(5) *Analyzing the codes* – I then proceeded to do a topic-oriented analysis by writing down an interpretative, thematic summary of each category. I tried creating an overview of each category and subcategory, examined individual positions and opinions, and figured out first theory-based explanations for them. Additionally, I selected illustrative quotations from the interviews that I could eventually include in the written-down version of the analysis. Even though my approach was less focused on each 'case' (couple or person) at a time, some interviewees or couples were selected to 'present' a specific category more than others either because particularly many text passages from their interview were assigned to that category or the definition of the category crystallized in their statements especially well.

(6) *Writing the analysis and documenting the analysis process* – Finally, based on the thematic summaries and by further extending the interpretation of the categories and subcategories, I wrote down the final analysis presented in Chapter 5. I tried refraining from merely describing the categories and, instead, concentrated on exploring patterns, rules, special cases/irregularities, and contradictions within them, as well as comparing and contrasting the drawn information against the background of the theoretical framework and research questions.

## 4.3 Data and Participants

For my research, I talked with four couples, hence, with eight individuals, between October and December 2022. The search for participants took place through a written call for interview partners, which was distributed in two mailing lists as well as through personal contacts. The

call resulted in four couples contacting me, one of whom I already knew personally beforehand. All interviews took place face-to-face in the interviewees' homes and in a setting where three people were present: both individuals from the respective couple and I. The choice of location (also regarding the possibility of conducting the interview online) was left to the interviewees so that they could be interviewed at a place where they thought they would feel the most comfortable. The interviews lasted from a minimum of one hour and 14 minutes to a maximum of one hour and 42 minutes, resulting in altogether six hours and eight minutes of recorded material.

The participants were based in Vienna and lived together in a coupled form except for one long-distance relationship where the couple lived apart from each other, one person in Vienna and another person in a big city in Germany. All interviewees were white, native speakers of either German or English, between 27 and 37 years old, and either in working life and/or about to finish their studies. None of the individuals were parents or had otherwise significant responsibilities for children, nor did anyone mention caring for the elderly or sick in their familiar circles. The highest and most common level of education within the group was a master's degree, with only a few exceptions with a degree lower than that. The interviewees worked in different industries such as social professions, assistance in science and research, legal services, corporate consulting in the tech and IT industry, online/print media, and pedagogical and creative professions. At the time of the interview, some interviewees had reduced working hours due to personal reasons or work arrangements such as being on educational part-time employment. In the following, I will introduce each couple in a bit more detail. As already mentioned, all personal information has been pseudonymized.

**Nora and Ian**

I met Nora (she/her) and Ian (he/him) in their bright and spacious apartment in Vienna. Ian is a cisgender man who identifies as heteroflexible, and Nora is a cisgender woman who identifies as pansexual (in the interview, Nora also uses the term *bisexual* or *bicurious* of herself when talking about herself in the past, presumably referring to a former sexual identification of hers).

Nora and Ian tell me that they first met at a party in the late 2000s. They became friends first, which then developed into a long-lasting romantic and sexual relationship that at the time of the interview had endured for over ten years. Meanwhile, their relationship had underwent a few changes: from a long-distance relationship to living together and from a monogamous relationship to a non-monogamous one. While still monogamous, Ian and Nora got engaged. A

few years later, at a time when the relationship had already been opened, they married each other. In the years between the engagement and wedding and alongside their preoccupation with non-monogamies, the couple had started to question the idea of marriage altogether, leading them to the conclusion that they wanted to celebrate the love they had for each other and everyone else in a rather non-conventional way: there was no legal marriage contract closed between the two, neither were promises of staying together forever made in their vows. As we meet, Nora and Ian have been consensually non-monogamous for around two years. Nora and Ian are polyamorous and could be characterized as each other's long-term domestic/nesting partners. Alongside their coupled relationship, both of them also have further relationships that can be sexual, romantic, and/or platonic. At the time of the interview, Nora is in a polyamorous relationship with a third person. Ian shares with me that he had recently broken up with his almost one-year-long second romantic partner.

**Lea and Maja**

Much like the other interviewees, I get to visit Lea (she/her) and Maja (she/her) in their home in Vienna, a snuggly furnished old apartment also with a lot of light and space. Lea identifies as lesbian and finds herself questioning her gender identity. Maja does not label herself in terms of her sexual orientation or gender identity.

In Lea and Maja's case, we can talk about two more or less separate relationships they have had with each other so far. In the summer of 2018, Lea and Maja matched on Tinder, wrote back and forth with each other for a while, and finally met up in person. Lea describes this encounter as "love at first sight," and, indeed, it was not long before the two started officially dating. In the autumn of the following year, Maja met Luis, whom she eventually fell in love with. This created difficulties in the relationship between Lea and Maja, which was not ready to be opened yet. Instead, the couple decided to end their relationship. Five months after the breakup, Maja and Lea got in touch again, discovered that they were still attracted to each other, and slowly got back together. After some time, the two transitioned into a polyamorous relationship where both can have other sexual, romantic, and/or platonic partners. As the interview takes place, Lea and Maja's relationship has been consensually non-monogamous for approximately two years. Luis, too, is still in the picture, as Maja continues to have an emotionally significant, loving relationship with him. Lea and Maja consider their relationship a primary relationship.

**Paul and Sophie**

Sophie (she/her) is a friend of mine who invited me over to interview her and her boyfriend Paul (he/him). Sophie and Paul have lived apart from each other since the very beginning of their relationship, so we decided to meet up one weekend when Paul is in Vienna to visit Sophie in her cozy apartment that she shares with her two roommates and a dog. Paul is a cisgender man who identifies as heteroflexible, and Sophie is a cisgender woman who identifies as heterosexual.

Paul and Sophie met for the first time at an internship in 2020 and noticed that there was a special spark between them. Despite this, there was some contemporary confusion in the beginning regarding who was interested in whom, in what way exactly, and who was supposed to make the so-called 'first move' in the budding relationship. After a while, Sophie and Paul became romantically and sexually coupled, and about two years later, the relationship was opened. Of all the couples I interviewed, Paul and Sophie are equipped with the most precise rules when it comes to their relationship, which is best described as an open relationship. Hence, they practice emotional exclusivity and exclusivity in terms of specific sexual acts. Extradyadic relationships, then, are more or less limited to sex. However, this rule (emotional exclusivity) turned out to be more of a flexible guideline than an absolute rule in the couple's case.

**Jo and Oliver**

Jo (they/them) and Oliver (he/him) are settled in their own apartment in a relatively quiet and calm area of Vienna. Jo is non-binary and identifies as pansexual. Oliver is a heterosexual, cisgender man, but when asked about the respective self-identifications at the end of the interview, he reflects that he is not quite sure about the definition of *heterosexual* in his case, his partner being non-binary.

Jo and Oliver met through work in the summer of 2015, where Oliver caught Jo's eye quite early on. They found him attractive, a feeling that only grew stronger as the two got into good conversations with each other. After Jo's persistent efforts to organize a date with Oliver, they finally met one-on-one. No longer than a week after their first date, Jo and Oliver already found themselves very much coupled. From here on, everything started to evolve quickly: getting to know each other's families, spending Christmas together, buying and moving into a new apartment, and eventually getting married. At the time of the interview, Jo and Oliver had been together for about seven years, and for about two to three of those years, they had been non-

monogamous. The couple mentions practicing so-called *kitchen table polyamory* where they place great importance on everyone within their polyamorous relationship network knowing of and getting along with each other. For example, Oliver also spends time with Jo and Jo's girlfriend Johanna, while Jo has gotten to know Oliver's former long-term partner and now friend, Dana.

# 5 ANALYSIS

I have split my analysis of the data into two main sections. The first, *Negotiating Non-Monogamies* (Chapter 5.1), aims to provide a basis for answering my two first research questions: 'How do couples negotiate the opening of their relationship, and what kind of motivations lie behind the process?' and 'What kind of developments or changes in terms of sexuality, intimacy, sexual practices, and understandings of one's self and relationships in general take place in it?' It draws on the questions set out in the interview guideline and thus on the personal experiences of the interviewees shared with me in response to them. My exploration begins by describing the interviewees' initial perceptions of monogamies and non-monogamies before encountering CNM. I then delve into their main reasons and motivations to engage in CNM. The analysis continues to cover the personal resources required for maintaining CNM relationships, the social reception of CNM, strategies to 'protect' coupled unions in a multi-partner lifestyle, and the above-mentioned changes and developments observed during the transition from monogamy to CNM.

The second section of the analysis, *Consensual Non-Monogamies Shaping Sexual Capital?* (Chapter 5.2), is more speculative in nature and relies less directly on the questions of the interview guideline. By utilizing the theory of sexual capital by Illouz and Kaplan (2021), it seeks to answer the third and last question of my research, which reads: 'Do non-monogamies also receive meanings other than simply being an alternative to monogamy, and can they contribute to enhancing an individual's sense of social worthiness and serve as means of constituting self-empowered and self-sustaining unique neoliberal subjects?' I examine whether CNM can influence an individual's desirability or self-worth in and outside the sexual market and how non-monogamy, as a potential sign of sexual un/availability, is communicated and perceived within patriarchy. I also try extending the concept of sexual capital to assess (perceptions of) desirability within the context of the primary/nesting couple.

## 5.1 NEGOTIATING NON-MONOGAMIES

In the first section of this chapter (5.1.1), I study the interviewees' once-held perceptions of relationships in a mononormative society to outline the key events and internalized beliefs that had shaped their initial approach to relationships and coupledom. Next, in Chapter 5.1.2, I present the most common impulses for engaging in CNM, ranging from reasons touching on sex, sexuality, and intimacy, to critical personal stances on the prevailing societal norms guiding our intimate lives, and to aspirations for personal growth and self-actualization. The

third subsection (Chapter 5.1.3) deals with the specific resources - communicative labor, time, and mental health - that the participants reported were demanded of them for sustaining CNM successfully. After that, I discuss the social reception of CNM among friends and family, highlighting the ambivalence in experiences with 'coming out' as non-monogamous in a mononormative environment (Chapter 5.1.4). The last two subsections focus on the different strategies the interviewees deployed to 'protect' their coupled unions (Chapter 5.1.5) and the changes and developments, with a specific emphasis on the areas of sexuality, intimacy, sexual practices, and understandings of one's self and relationships, that the interviewees perceived to have occurred during their transition from monogamy to CNM (Chapter 5.1.6).

### 5.1.1 PRE-CNM VIEWS ON RELATIONSHIPS: CAN ONE CHOOSE MONOGAMY IN A MONONORMATIVE SOCIETY?

One of the main feelings that had originally accompanied most of the interviewees' perception of monogamy was that of its unquestioned and unspoken 'naturalness.' The couple form had been adopted "without any doubt"[11] (Lea, H02, para. 8) as the 'golden' model for relationships and, consistent with Foucault's ([1976] 2020) analysis of heterosexual monogamy as an unpronounced 'internal standard' (see Chapter 3.2.2), the interviewees had embraced the notion of its seemingly unassailable normalcy without anyone explicitly having to convince them to do so; To be or not to be monogamous had remained a question unnecessary to be voiced, "because everyone assumes monogamy" (Ian, H03, para. 125) and "you just are socialized like that, or you only know [relationships] that way" (Oliver, H04, para. 32). Monogamy had become the prevailing relationship practice without a sense of active decision-making involved. Hence, Paul questions whether being monogamous was ever a free choice to begin with:

> Somehow the decision to be together and be exclusive was not a decision, right? But it was just so that all my relationships were like that. We were just together and monogamous, but we did not say, 'Okay, we are like together but are we then now open or closed?' (Paul, H01, para. 82)

In contrast to witnessing monogamy everywhere on a day-to-day basis, most of the interviewees had never heard of or, let alone, met anyone practicing CNM. Few interviewees mentioned not having had the language to address the topic in the first place, and given the social taboo surrounding it, finding people willing to talk about non-monogamies had never

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[11] All excerpts from transcribed interviews originally conducted in German have been translated into English by myself. This does not apply to one participant, who spoke in English throughout the whole interview, or their partner's speech, where occasional switches from German to English were made.

really seemed like an option for most. The very few representations that the interviewees had encountered either stemmed from stories narrated by parents, family, and religious and/or even sex-hostile communities or were mediated through pornography and the few available documentaries on marginalized sexual subcultures, most of which were anyhow presented in an unfavorable light; Mostly lumped together with non-consensual or unethical forms of non-monogamy (cheating), some had learned CNM to be sinful, shameful, or inherently against the Christian moral doctrine, while others had internalized CNMers to be otherwise weird, bad, disgusting, perverted, unhealthy, or just people desperate to save their miserable long-term relationships. Nora argues that the ridiculing misrepresentation of non-normative intimate and sexual practices is precisely what had contributed to the obscurity and assumed undesirability of CNM for her:

> The only things you might have seen were documentaries or reports about people who swing. And those were always older people who were presented in a light that made them seem almost ridiculous. It is such a shame. And that is probably the reason why [CNM] remained invisible to us for such a long time, precisely because everything that goes against the norm is somehow presented in a ridiculous light, right? (Nora, H03, para. 175)

Ian had likewise been aware of swingers whom he had (owing in part to pornographic portrayals) also envisioned as "these kinds of old people that go to swinger clubs and have sex and stuff like that" (Ian, H03, para. 172). It is not surprising that out of all the different ways to do CNM, both Nora and Ian reported having known about swinging only, a practice which, given its 'mere' focus on sexual pleasure, has attracted stigma both from outside (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Matsick et al., 2014) and within CNM subcultures (Klesse, 2006). In fact, one of the most prevalent presumptions that the majority of the interviewees had once held about CNM was its sex-centricity. In accordance with the hypersexualizing stereotypes documented in earlier research (Balzarini et al., 2018; Mahar et al., 2022), most interviewees had believed people engaging in CNM to be excessively sexual, meaning having a lot of sex, having sex all the time, having sex with multiple other people, and basically grounding their decision to be non-monogamous solely on sex.

The link between the (even if marginal and inadequate) visibility of swinging, the invisibility of other CNM models, and the sex-induced imaginary once shared by the interviewees reflects the one-dimensional and essentially devaluing presentation of non-monogamies in our society. The magnified emphasis on sex within the realm of non-monogamies enforces the morally inferior status of CNM by sustaining the common belief that CNM relationships are 'just' about

sex and thus shallow and void of emotional depth[12]. Consistent with this notion, some interviewees disclosed their initial skepticism regarding the possibility of achieving deep intimacy, trust, closeness, seriousness, or connectedness through CNM. The theme of denying CNM these qualities also pertained to the widely propagated concept of intimacy as a precious and necessarily limited personal resource. In view of this, distributing one's intimate energies toward more than one person would mean that the intimacy offered per partner would suffer in quality. For some, like Ian, the imagined risk of having a weakened ('diluted') love or lower quality intimacy spoke against CNM and for remaining monogamous with Nora:

> I think I thought [CNM] was only about sex. That was for sure. I think I thought it meant that [people engaging in CNM] cannot have the kind of intimacy that you get with monogamy, which I felt for [Nora], for example. I was like, 'But it would just dilute it, it is just watering down what'- because I loved what we had in our monogamous relationship. I really enjoyed it. And why would I risk that? Why would I water it down with other people? And that is what I thought beforehand. (Ian, H03, para. 172)

When it comes to 'intimate energies' and monogamies, most interviewees had predicted that the commitment to coupled exclusivity would be very much exhaustive and extend past the scope of intimacy or sex, for in monogamy, "that other person [...] has to be everything for you" (Jo, H04, para. 305). As asserted in Chapter 2.1, monogamy encloses a whole repertoire of different social and economic (also gendered) obligations, behaviors, rituals, and reproductive roles that are set to be carried out – a point equally acknowledged by some interviewees. Monogamy was understood as a whole life design that only begins with finding the 'right' partner and fulfilling their needs intimately, sexually, and romantically. Namely, soon after that, other 'investments' are expected to be made, such as sharing personal space by cohabitation, entering financially and legally binding contracts like marriage, or deploying all bodily resources one possibly has for bearing and rearing children. It is not only that such 'progression' where gradually more and more of an individual's resources are to be directed toward coupled life is generally expected of us, but it is, as Noten by Nora, "assumed that everyone also wants it" (Nora, H03, para. 130).

Unsurprisingly, considering the above, some interviewees had previously felt like being in an exclusive relationship and dealing with all the labor going into maintaining one were somehow at odds with personal freedom or being able to fully take care of yourself[13]. On the one hand,

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[12] As suggested by the literature on the topic, such stigma is often more severe toward more sex- or 'pleasure-based' types of CNM (open relationships or swinging, for instance) than those that center around emotional intimacy, love, and/or romance (see Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Klesse, 2006; Matsick et al., 2014).

[13] In contrast to associating monogamy with declined freedom and an increased need for personal 'investments,' for a minority of interviewees, CNM had symbolized increased freedom both positively and negatively. On the one hand, few had felt

the desire to be 'free,' have an independent lifestyle, or concentrate on oneself had been experienced as barriers for entering a committed monogamous relationship. On the other hand, few had found themselves under increased pressure to compromise major personal plans or life events in order to 'keep' that *one* special person in their life. Sophie's mother, for example, was keen on convincing Sophie to drop her planned travels so that she could physically be there for the emerging relationship between her and Paul. As we will learn later in Chapter 5.1.4.2, Sophie's trip to pursue her long-term crush, Johannes, in person while remaining in a relationship with Paul was not received with similar acceptance or enthusiasm. The justification to channel resources (money, time, 'intimate energies,' etc.) toward a person you desire, love, or deeply care for is not extended to all relationships equally, especially those relationships which, in terms of their intensity or requirements, could compromise the special status of monogamy.

Although all interviewees agreed on once having learned monogamy to be the only or at least the most viable way of doing relationships, many of them also recalled already having critical thoughts about the exclusive couple before coming into contact with CNM. One of the main reasons for such doubts was the often troubling experience of having witnessed 'failed' or dysfunctional monogamous relationships within one's own family. The real-life representations of monogamy in the interviewees' familiar circles could rarely live up to the promise of its moral superiority; Longevity, honesty, and fidelity appeared more like distant ideals rather than actual lived-out realities. Some interviewees had watched unethical forms of non-monogamy unfold, while others saw their parents part ways due to other reasons. Lea, for instance, believes that her earlier skepticism toward marriage and her resulting interest in CNM arose partly from experiencing her parents separate when she was a child:

> It [interest in CNM] could also have something to do with the fact that my parents separated when I was ten years old. And that was somehow really shitty. And then I thought, 'Relationships do not work anyway, and marriages do not work anyway, and fidelity does not work anyway, and all that does not even exist, and that is all bullshit, and why is anyone even doing this!?' and 'I will never fall in love like that or be in any relationship as if it these things would even work, like that is such bullshit anyway!' That is why I was not so much into monogamy until I was in my first relationship, and then I was basically monogamous. (Lea, H02, para. 331)

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fascinated by or even jealous of the presumed liberty of designing your intimate life in an autonomous and unique way while remaining 'relaxed' or 'casual' about it. On the other hand, CNM was also believed to be essentially ruleless or 'free' in the spirit of hypersexualizing stereotypes attached to it: "Freedom- like you think that you can fuck like never before and that that is the great thing about it, and somehow everyone is free." (Paul, H01, para. 350).

Lea's partner, Maja, mentions sharing a similar family background regarding her parents splitting up, alluding to their relationship (or perhaps that of Lea's parents or the parents of both) having ended due to a third person entering the picture. Maja now considers this a cautionary example of an event that she and Lea themselves would like to avoid reliving in their relationship:

> [S]o we both have witnessed the separation story of our parents, and I also believe that we both do not really want to have to end our relationship, for example, when another person comes into play. Or we have both like also had the painful experience of what it is like when that happens. And yeah, I do not think we want that. Especially not again. (Maja, H02, para. 118)

Maja thus questions the common idea that the involvement of an intimate, romantic, or sexual 'third' must automatically lead to the rupture of the primary relationship, as if tragically ending the initial relationship (also, in some cases, the 'other' relationship) would be the only feasible way of responding to extradyadic desire or infidelity. Such an idea is rooted in the consensus about monogamy's uncompromising nature, teaching us that monogamy equates to fidelity, that monogamy and 'promiscuity' are to be perceived as antithetical concepts, and that there is absolutely nothing between the two things. Some people do think, as Oliver points out, that "when you are not monogamous, you cheat" (H04, para. 302). And yet, as he continues to explain, when this cannot be proven to be correct in practice – as monogamists, too, cheat – people tend to get franticly surprised and horrified about it. Both Maja and Oliver's accounts illustrate the peculiar ways many of us are brought up to go about non-monogamous behaviors. Irrespective of the inconsistent evidence, they are not expected to occur in monogamy, and when they do, they are treated like startling anomalies. And in a society that valorizes monogamy, such separation further undermines the status of non-monogamies by presenting 'promiscuity' per se as bad or undesirable and thus inherently incompatible with 'good' or 'healthy' (read: monogamous) relationships.

Unlike Lea, for whom the example of her parents resulted in her opposing monogamy (at least temporarily or in theory), Ian remembers his younger self 'gravitating' toward monogamy partly due to having witnessed his parents' relationship turn unethically non-monogamous. He recalls yearning for a 'healthy' form of monogamy, and upon observing his parents' at times 'unhealthy' relationship, he believed to have conceived an image of what such a relationship could look like for him:

> And, of course, I also looked at my parents' relationship. They had an- I would say they were monogamous and, from a certain point onwards, unethically non-monogamous. [...] and it was actually only in the romantic sense that they were non-monogamous. They were

not sexually involved in anybody else, but they were romantically non-monogamous and that did not go well at all. It was very unhealthy. And that is why I think I gravitated particularly as a younger person [toward monogamy]- [...] So back then I was like 'I would love to have a healthy monogamous relationship (and) I have (an) idea how that looks like.' (Ian, H03, para. 24)

Fascinating is that notwithstanding the extent to which monogamous unions around us fail to live up to the very parameters that are supposed to prove their superiority, and regardless of the suspicions we might develop about monogamy's real-life functionality, we nevertheless end up adhering to the couple-norm when it is time to date or form intimate, romantic, and/or sexual relationships. As already mentioned, Lea was not particularly into monogamy until she entered her first relationship. Similarly, Jo recalls having "not too great of an image" (H04, para. 303) of the couple-norm until getting together with their first partner (who happens to be Oliver). Jo had anticipated that monogamy would bring along increased pressure that would be superimposed on the couple and the two individuals in it. Thus, the idea of having to fulfill so much of another person's needs alone and constantly 'working' on the relationship by repeatedly "fighting and reconciling again and working things out and compromising" (Jo, H04, para. 307) had not seemed appealing to them. Instead, Jo initially dreamed of a, in their own worlds, 'solo poly'[14] future where their life and living arrangement would center primarily around close friendships and an independent lifestyle as opposed to monogamous love and fixed, coupled cohabitation. Marriage also did not necessarily belong to their ideal life vision at first, but as Oliver stepped into the picture, imagining married life started suddenly making more sense again:

[A]t the time we met, I was like, 'Getting married? Ugh!' [with a tone of disgust] [...] I have simply way too often witnessed what kind of suffering that is, and I did not want that. It was too stupid for me. And then it was somehow like that with Oliver- that I could picture myself [getting married] again. (Jo, H04, para. 70)

The ineffectiveness of feeble displays of monogamy to evoke countering action in practice is telling of the enduring prevalence of mononormativity. The dissatisfaction and even emotional pain articulated by many interviewees demonstrate that monogamy had not always been presented to them in a favorable light, and it certainly had not been adopted by them entirely without hesitation or further contemplation. And still, neither the distrust toward coupled love, witnessing the many shortcomings of monogamous unions, nor dreaming about collective futures beyond coupled living could prevent most interviewees from eventually coupling up

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[14] *Solo poly* or *solo polyamory* describes the practice of engaging in multiple intimate, romantic, and/or sexual relationships while maintaining an independent, hence, 'solo' way of life. Such might include, for example, not cohabitating or sharing finances with anyone else or striving not to prioritize any partners within a relationship network. (WebMD, 2023, July 2)

and remaining monogamous for an extended period of time in their lives. It seems like monogamy has created such a strong illusion of itself as the most normal and 'natural' mode of life that the fabricated ideal of it manages to overpower its highly obvious, real-life manifestations, which pronounce a striking opposition to the widely accepted sense of its virtuous nature. Perhaps, then, those of us who witness the troubles of monogamy often fall short of genuinely challenging the institutionalized couple in practice, instead lulling ourselves into the optimism of 'doing it (monogamy) differently' ourselves – that, unlike so many others, *our* experience will be different and unique, and that with the right person by our side, *we* will make it work this time around.

Of course, such 'coercive' power that I allude to above is not a force inherent to monogamy in front of which people just magically fall powerless. Monogamy alone does not compel people to follow its doctrine mindlessly. Instead, it derives its power from an entire web of social structures, legal institutions, and culturally deeply ingrained ideologies that make it easy and rewarding to choose monogamy and difficult and less rewarding to choose (consensual) non-monogamy. The insistent tendency toward monogamy, even in the face of its suspect real-life representations, appears less surprising when we think back to the legal frameworks and social policies privileging coupled unions, the mono- and heteronormative value systems and subsequent moral pressures cultivated among the communities we are part of, and the either non-existing or blatantly stigmatizing portrayals of 'alternative' relationship models mediated through those very communities and the media. It is thus understandably difficult to 'choose' otherwise when there are no other options to choose from or when the other options made available are construed as essentially inferior, sinful, unhealthy, or perverted.

### 5.1.2 Reasons and Motivations

In this section, I present the most common reasons and motivations for engaging in CNM. These could be divided roughly into five categories that I named: 1) *extradyadic desire*, 2) *exploring sexuality*, 3) *bonds beyond sex*, 4) *questioning mononormativity*, and 5) *personal growth*. Almost all of these are linked in one way or another to the overarching idea or hope that CNM would offer greater individual freedom and personal autonomy to its practitioners, whether it be in the sexual or intimate sphere, within the core relationship, in social life in general, or the realm of self-discovery and -actualization.

### 5.1.2.1 EXTRADYADIC DESIRE: "I'VE FALLEN IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE ELSE, WHAT DO WE DO NOW?"

For some, like Paul and Sophie, Maja and Lea, or Jo and Oliver, feeling sexually, intimately, or romantically attracted toward a person (or people) outside of their monogamous relationship or, alternatively, experimenting sexually with a third person were among the initial factors that led them to consider the possibility of transitioning into CNM. Sophie opens up that while being with Paul, she had time to time had more or less fleeting 'crushes' on other people. One such crush had been Johannes, a guy from her past with whom she had not fully broken contact after becoming exclusive with Paul. Sophie and Johannes had since been exchanging "very romantic or somehow emotional" (Sophie, H01, para. 67) messages, and while Sophie had not explicitly tried hiding them from Paul, she felt that her actions were wrong. After an eye-opening conversation with a friend, she started to consider that her emotions toward Johannes might be neither passing nor inherently wrong and that they could potentially coexist with her love for Paul. For the first time, she gave serious thought to the idea of embracing non-monogamy. "Could it actually be something that I could apply to myself, too?" (ibid., para. 69) she asked herself, while feeling a strong urge to confide in Paul about her feelings for Johannes: "I realized a process had started in me and that was also why I travelled [to meet Paul] in his city" (ibid., para. 69).

Paul remembers Sophie then coming to visit him and saying that she had to get something off of her chest, namely that there was more than 'just' friendship between Johannes and her and that she was not able to do anything about it. Although opening their relationship was not the output she had been hoping for by revealing this information to Paul, it eventually led the couple to entertain the idea of Sophie traveling to pursue Johannes abroad. Additionally, it prompted them to consider the concept of Sophie generally acting upon her crush feelings toward other men in the future. Encouraged by this intimate conversation, Paul, too, eventually admitted that he "could also imagine having something with other people" (ibid., para. 66), albeit with slightly different objectives compared to Sophie (while Sophie was primarily invested in exploring connections and flirting with others with the prospect of potential sex, Paul's interest was solely in engaging in sexual relationships with other individuals). Consequently, what began as a seemingly one-sided extra-dyadic desire and a vulnerable confession thereof resulted in the founding moment of Paul and Sophie's open relationship.

For Jo and Oliver, on their part, a sexual/intimate experience they 'accidentally' shared with a friend of theirs became one of the turning points in their journey toward CNM and polyamory. Even before that, open and honest communication about non-exclusive attractions had been a

constant feature of the couple's dynamics (see Chapter 5.1.3.1). Hence, the fact that both had occasionally been eyeing someone else did not come as a surprise, nor had it ever been considered wrong or forbidden in their relationship. The two had also had conversations about experiencing "a little bit of [...] a sparkle" or "erotic chemistry" (Jo, H04, para. 88) in certain friendships. Indeed, sometime later, Oliver, Jo, and their friend, Hanna, ended up "accidentally smooching" (Oliver, H04, para. 85), which sparked the couple's interest in exploring CNM more intentionally. "I think from there we started to deal with it consciously, [...] I think then our expectations started to become more concrete," Jo (H04, para. 88) recalls.

A little over a year after entering an exclusive relationship with Lea, Maja had met and become dear friends with someone named Luis. From the very start, Lea had felt threatened by this newly established closeness, even though in their numerous conversations about it, Maja had repeatedly insisted that her connection with him was purely platonic. At first, Maja truly did not consider the new relationship as 'threatening' to that of her and Lea's, for no sexual attraction was part of it: "I just felt mentally and emotionally so connected," (H02, para. 24) she explains, "and that is why I did not regard [it] as threatening, because I thought to myself like 'I want to talk to him, and I might like to cuddle with him, but I do not necessarily want anything more'"(ibid., para. 25). In her perspective at the time, a relationship seen as seriously 'threatening' would have had to include the components of romance, emotional intimacy, *and* sexual attraction.

As time passed, Maja however realized that she had fallen in love with Luis, and that the emerging romantic feelings toward him might have serious consequences for her relationship with Lea. Thus, she had to come clean about them: "And then it actually happened that Maja said to me 'Okay, I have fallen in love with him, what do we do now?'" Lea (H02, para. 26) recollects the moment. After her confession, Maja communicated that she did not want to end her relationship with Lea and that she wished to maintain contact with Luis and explore her feelings for him. Essentially, by being in love with two people simultaneously, she had come to the conclusion that non-monogamy was what she wanted. Lea, feeling deeply hurt by the situation, was unable to consider CNM as an option. Her emotions were overwhelmed by the situation, making it difficult for her to accept the possibility of Maja being with someone else while remaining in a relationship with her. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 4.3, this conflict of interests led to the couple parting ways for a while before reuniting again and taking up CNM in mutual understanding.

Contrary to the widespread belief about romantic love and intimacy as precious and essentially finite resources, implying that loving or desiring someone new detracts from the love one has for their initial partner, both Sophie and Maja emphasized the disconnectedness or separateness of the feelings they, on the one hand, felt toward their new crushes or love interests (in Sophie's case Johannes, and in Maja's situation, Luis) and, on the other hand, continued having for their original partners (respectively, Paul and Lea). "And somehow it made like sense that the feelings I had [for Johannes] had nothing at all to do with my feelings for Paul. They were somehow like two separate things," Sophie (H01, para. 80) describes. Likewise, for Maja, developing a close bond with Luis and nurturing a meaningful connection with him did not diminish the significance of her relationship with Lea: "I realized that he was important to me. And the fact that Lea was also important to me was never up for debate. It was never questionable," she (H02, para. 27) states.

Though Maja felt no internal contradiction in her simultaneous love for Lea and Luis, she remembers Lea resisting this idea and viewing it as somehow conflicting: "I just felt that there was this resistance, as if these two things could not somehow be reconciled," Maja (ibid., para. 27) says. Giving in to this resistance, which would have meant denying or suppressing her feelings toward either of her now significant partners, did not seem like an option for her anymore. Her unwillingness to compromise and desire to be free in terms of 'feeling what she wants' had already grown too strong:

> And I had a very strong need of like 'I want to be allowed to feel what I want,' and I could not imagine not being in a relationship with someone at the request of another person. So, for me, it was like, 'Unfortunately, I cannot break off contact with someone else, who has just become important to me, for the sake of another person.' I personally just could not somehow settle on with that. (Maja, H02, para. 27)

The very real prospect of experiencing intimacy or love with more than one person, without automatically reducing the quality or 'amount' of love an individual has for their partners, was precisely what had made it unthinkable for Maja to choose between Luis and Lea and eventually impossible for her to compromise on anything other than a form of non-monogamy.

### 5.1.2.2 EXPLORING SEXUALITY: "I ALSO WANTED TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP OR SEX WITH A WOMAN"

Most interviewees expressed their initial attraction to CNM as a means of delving into their sexuality beyond the confines of the traditional relationship dyad. For some, this manifested as a desire to add excitement to their sex lives through threesomes involving their primary/domestic partner and a third person. Others sought to explore individual sexual relationships as a way to deal with personal sexual frustration or rekindle experiences

reminiscent of their previously short-lived single life. Additionally, CNM presented an important opportunity for bi- or pansexual individuals to step outside of heterosexual relationship structures and organize their intimate lives in a manner that felt personally more fulfilling and resonated better with their sexual orientation.

Perhaps influenced by the sex-centered imaginings that many of us associate with CNM relationships or the sense of sexual liberation these relationships are often promised to offer, some like Paul, Lea, Maja, Ian, or Nora expressed a primary desire to explore sexual encounters with multiple different partners when initially considering CNM. For instance, although his motivations have since changed considerably, Ian looks back on the enthusiasm he originally felt at the prospect of experiencing something that a years-long monogamous relationship could never have delivered: "For me, the first reason was basically to have other sexual experiences. It was more on the sexual level because after being monogamous for such a long time, it is quite exciting then to be like [with other people]" (Ian, H03, para. 39). Paul and Sophie also contemplate how Paul's history of predominantly exclusive relationships had limited his opportunities to explore the sexual freedoms related to the status of being single. Sophie suggests that apart from simply wanting to have sex with others, Paul also wished to compensate for the experiences he had missed out on while engaging in long-term serial monogamy:

> **Sophie**: [...] But I also had the feeling with you that it is not just about curiosity to have sex with others, but also about the fact that you want to make up for the single time, which I had but you did not.
>
> **Paul**: Mm, well, that is true.
>
> **Sophie**: Because you were always in relationships, and I had a time in my life when I was single for a relatively long time. So, in your case, regardless of the open relationship, it does play a role that I have had sex with more people than you have so far.
>
> **Paul**: Yes.
>
> **Sophie**: And like that is something that you have missed. And now you want to catch up on it. Yeah.
>
> **Paul**: Yes.
>
> (H01, para. 91-96)

For some of us who do not identify as heterosexual but, for one reason or another, end up engaging in heterosexual or 'hetero-passing' relationships for the majority of our time, monogamy might appear as an impediment to fully engaging with and expressing your sexual identity. This had been the case for both Jo and Nora. During the same summer Oliver and Jo had begun dating, Jo had also come out as pansexual (and non-binary) to their family. Since

Oliver was both Jo's first partner as well as the first person they had had any sexual experiences with (apart from perhaps themselves), they had not had the opportunity to explore relationships with women or other genders at the time. The budding monogamous relationship with Oliver would not bring about any change in this regard. Jo remembers feeling a little bit bummed about this, thinking to themselves: "I have now come out to my parents, too, in order to have the freedom to also have relationships with women [...], and it is just now that I have met a man! ((laughter))" (H04, para. 33). Consequently, from the very beginning of their and Oliver's relationship, Jo knew that they would have to take action one day and satisfy this unmet longing of theirs: "I will have to catch up on it someday," they had decided (ibid., para. 33). Years later, CNM came to provide the perfect moment to do so:

> For me, it was just that I also wanted to have a relationship with a woman or have sex with a woman. [...] it was a long way to get there, first to discover [the desire] and then to establish the freedom to act upon it. It was like 'Is this really going to happen now?!' [excitedly, with disbelief] ((laughter)) (Jo, H04, para. 271)

Nora also mentioned that one of the driving factors behind her initiating CNM was her wish to delve into the long-held curiosity she had for non-heterosexual sex and intimacy: "So I had known that I had been bicurious for a long time since my twenties, but I really had not known how to explore or indulge in it" (Nora, H03, para. 21). Throughout the years, Nora had communicated this curiosity to Ian, and as the two finally had an unexpected sexual experience with a friend of theirs, a woman, Nora was able to discover in practice that she was not merely bicurious but in fact bisexual[15]: "I was able to identify like, 'Okay I am actually bisexual,' and what the experience showed to the both of us was like, 'Okay there is much more to discover sexually out there'" (Nora, H03, para. 23). From this point onward, the couple started taking their first steps toward non-monogamy by experimenting with threesomes in various arrangements.

These threesomes proved significant for Nora, not only due to the newfound opportunity to explore relationships with genders beyond men, but also because they helped alleviate the considerable, general sexual frustration she had been experiencing beforehand. Having less to do with Ian per se than the deep sense of familiarity established through years-long monogamy, things had gotten, in Nora's own words, sexually "very much routinized" and "well-trained" (ibid., para. 185) between the two, offering her little to no fresh or thrilling experiences sex-wise. She mentions having attempted different methods, such as role-playing

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[15] At the time of the interview, Nora identifies as pansexual. Here, she is talking about her past self and thus herself as bisexual.

with Ian, to spice up their sex life and to introduce the much-desired third person into the relationship. These had not yet managed to relieve the sexual frustration she had been facing:

> [L]ike I was actually sexually frustrated. Just because there was nothing new for me there. [...] Even like the fantasies that we sometimes shared with each other or the things that we did that were supposed to make our sex life somehow more interesting again, like, I do not know, games or role-play- bringing the third person, who actually did not exist, into our sex life through role-play- that was not enough for me. (Nora, H03, para. 185)

What had resulted from the enduring dissatisfaction had been "very sexual dreams" (ibid., para. 185) that Nora had started having, and what had deepened her frustration even more was the fact that she had not been able to disclose her sexual dreams to Ian, for she had believed them to be wrong or somehow violate against their relationship: "I [...] tried to bury them, because I somehow thought that they were bad and that they were against our relationship," she (ibid., para. 185) shares. Despite the threesomes being "advantageous" (ibid., para. 23) in improving the situation for Nora and fostering a stronger mutual attraction between her and Ian, a part of her still yearned to discover sexual and intimate connections all by herself: "I felt a little bit restricted, and I thought to myself, 'Yeah, I would also like to explore things by myself and not always only together'" (ibid., para. 23). The couple then met the decision to open their relationship 'fully' by allowing both to engage in sexual and intimate relationships without the presence of each other.

### 5.1.2.3 BONDS BEYOND SEX: "I AM ABLE TO HAVE ANY KIND OF RELATIONSHIP WITH ANYBODY I WANT"

With only one exception in the data, it was uncommon for the reasons for embracing non-monogamy to remain unchanged as the process unfolded (not to mention that they rarely were singular to begin with). While many had been primarily interested in exploring sexual freedom, over time, other reasons such as emotional intimacy, love, or deep friendship started to overshadow the initial focus on sex. "In the beginning, it was indeed just about having sexual experiences," Nora, for example, tells me, "but that has changed now" (H03, para. 41). She elaborates on the significance of having a non-monogamous community by her side during her exploration of CNM, which has led her to recognize her deep desire to "meet new people in various constellations, not only sexually but also in an intimate way" (ibid., para. 41). At the time of the interview, the nurturing of meaningful connections with friends, chosen family, partners, and herself plays an integral part in her willingness to pursue a polyamorous path.

Ian reveals that he has undergone a parallel transformation in his personal motivations. Much like Nora, his first impulse to explore CNM had also focused on seeking sexual experiences.

However, he soon came to understand that having sex alone was not enough to sustain him in a non-monogamous relationship:"[A]t the end of the day, it is just sexual interaction, right?" he (H03, para. 39) contemplates. By then (co-)establishing the CNM community that Nora mentions above as well as discovering the concept of relationship anarchy[16] for himself, he came to the realization that it was human relationships that he had been interested all along, not only sexual ones but all of them in general. During this pivotal moment, Ian had a profound realization that he could attain a sense of true personal freedom through CNM – not only in the realm of sexuality but also in his ability to establish and nurture any kind of relationships with individuals of his choosing, unbound by societal restrictions:

> And my anchor, I guess, became the concept that I am able to have any kind of relationship with anybody I want, and why would I limit that? And why would I try and control anybody else? I personally believe that I can freely choose what kind of relationship I have with anybody essentially. And that became my kind of anchor. That I truly believe that it is beautiful to kind of create whatever relationship you want without being limited by society essentially. [...] And I was surprised because I thought my anchor might be sex and it just was not in any way. And yeah, that was a real big turning point for me, I would say. (Ian, H03, para. 39)

A few interviewees mentioned that for them, sex had not even been the most exciting part about CNM to begin with. Sophie, for instance, was not so much concentrated on pursuing sexual relationships as she was on allowing herself to delve into her 'crush feelings' and enjoying flirting or getting to know other men. Jo also did not feel like they necessarily longed for 'sexual adventures,' emphasizing that their and Oliver's decision to open their relationship had been ultimately based on love and long(er)-term commitment to more than one person at a time:

> **Jo**: I do not need sexual adventures like that at all. I can absolutely enjoy them, but the original reason why we [...] opened our relationship was that we said that we would like to be able to love other people and have relationships with them.
>
> **Oliver**: And both of us think that we have enough love inside of us for several people.
>
> (H04, para. 261-262)

### 5.1.2.4 QUESTIONING MONONORMATIVITY: "YOU CAN LIKE MORE THAN ONE CHILD. YOU CAN LIKE MORE THAN ONE KIND OF ICE CREAM. SO WHY NOT HAVE MORE SEXUAL PARTNERS?"

Approaching the initiation of CNM, most interviewees had started to critically reflect upon their deep-seated beliefs about relationships, thus asking themselves, "Why do I constantly

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[16] A relationship philosophy or philosophy of love that "questions the idea of love as a limited resource that only becomes authentic if it is confined to one person" and "rejects categories such as 'couple', 'lover', or 'just friends', in which the hegemonic relationships model compartmentalizes emotional bonds" (De las Heras Gómez, 2019, p. 646).

engage in monogamous relationships?" and, "Could I imagine entertaining other relationship models as well?" (Sophie, H01, para. 82). In fact, many had started to develop a more or less skeptical stance on monogamy, questioning its naturalized status, the overall soundness of long-lasting, exclusive coupledom, as well as the so-called merger of identities (Friedman, 1998; see Chapter 3.1.1) inherent to monogamy. All in all, having the opportunity to critically re-examine the level of commitment required in monogamous relationships and to potentially redistribute the responsibilities typically associated with one partner only served as a significant motivation to get into CNM.

Some participants had slowly come to the realization that while they had always been able to choose their partners freely, they had never had the chance to actively decide whether or not they wanted to be exclusive with them. That is also why Sophie had become intrigued by the idea of challenging monogamy and exploring emotions within a relationship model that she had previously deemed unthinkable. Being non-monogamous, she says, is "just about this curiosity to challenge the framework which I somehow did not choose freely and seeing how I would actually do by doing it" (Sophie, H01, para. 112). For others, the widely propagated impossibility of loving or desiring more than one person simultaneously did not seem like a plausible reason to remain monogamous anymore: "You can like more than one child. You can like more than one kind of ice cream. So why not have more sexual partners?" Oliver asks (H04, para. 265). Moreover, the mononormative ideal about "this one person that I have to find and who will be perfect for me forever and ever" (Lea, H02, para. 117) was found highly inconsistent with the reality and thus, as Lea expresses it, quite simply "just bullshit and an invention of humankind" (ibid., para. 117).

Two particular subjects in the participants' endeavors to deconstruct mononormative belief systems were notably prominent: reexamining jealousy and distributing relationship responsibilities. Starting with the former, the interviewees recognized CNM as a worthwhile opportunity to purposefully come into contact with jealousy, analyze its roots and its role in relationships, and potentially change how we respond to or take action upon it. Sophie, who describes herself as a "very jealous person" (H01, para. 80), saw CNM as a means of confronting her possessiveness over Paul and seeing if jealousy and the fear of loss are "something that [she] could unlearn" (Sophie, H01, para. 80). In a way, the choice to open her relationship with Paul allowed her to test the waters and experience first-hand what would occur if her partner engaged in sexual activities with someone else. Maja, too, firmly proclaims that a significant factor influencing her decision to engage in polyamory was to "get a little bit better grip on"

(H02, para. 266) her jealousy, which, she has learned, is often driven by an underlying fear of abandonment. Additionally, in light of witnessing relationships crumble due to both infidelity and, inevitably, jealousy, Maja and Lea were keen on embracing a form of togetherness where extradyadic desire and even jealousy could exist without having to automatically result in the drastic end of anybody's relationship.

Regarding relationship responsibilities, few interviewees had grown skeptical about the substantial level of personal dedication (i.e., covering your partner's needs on multiple, if not most, levels) expected in monogamous relationships. Lea argues that just as in friendships, where we have multiple friends with whom we share different aspects of our lives, romantic, intimate, or sexual relationships should also involve surrounding ourselves with different people to meet various needs rather than relying solely on one person for everything. For her, assuming one individual to be able to fulfill all of the various relationship duties alone is both 'absurd' and 'illogical':

> I think that [...] you have many needs in life, and it is absurd to expect one person to cover all of them. It is just illogical, and it does not make sense to me. And I think that if you compare [romantic partnership] to friendship, you do not have just one friend who has to cover all of your needs and whose needs you must cover, too, but there are many different people in your life that you surround yourself with, and why should you suddenly do things differently when a relationship is romantic or sexual in nature? (Lea, H02, para. 115)

Maja agrees with Lea and says that she feels uncomfortable with the idea of someone else aligning their whole life to her wants, because that other person might have – and very likely has – their very own wants: "I do not really want another person to like structure their whole life according to my needs, because they themselves might have different needs, or perhaps they also want to meet other people" (Maja, H02, para. 116). Her perspective is coupled with a firm conviction against assessing diverse relationships through the lens of a mononormative relationship hierarchy. She perceives the tiered distinction between partnership and friendship (as well as their respective functions) as unsuitable since it fails to capture the uniqueness of each relationship while privileging romantic partnership over others:

> I feel like every relationship is individual and covers different areas of attraction, needs, exchange, or I do not know. Somehow- so, every relationship has individual reasons for its existence, and I do not generally like when people say like, 'Partnership stands higher in the hierarchy than friendships or any other relationship.' (Maja, H02, para. 27)

### 5.1.2.5 Personal Growth: "Like somehow I did not want to stagnate"

Personal growth or individual development served as an additional, perhaps less prominent but equally intriguing motivation to engage in and sustain CNM. Notably, in connection with the

concept of neoliberal sexual capital (Illouz & Kaplan, 2021; see Chapter 3.3.2), it was interesting to discover that being non-monogamous presented an avenue for some interviewees to enhance their personal and relational development, spanning beyond 'just' sexual or intimate dimensions. The central notion within this category was that our present selves are very much shaped by the people we have let into our intimate lives. In Maja's words, "you learn something from every relationship," and the people who we are today are "not only [the result of] our own personal achievements […], but also the contribution of other people whom we have allowed to approach us intimately" (Maja, H02, para. 280).

Getting to know various relationship models and engaging intimately, romantically, and/or sexually with many different people was thus considered an invaluable learning experience and an important pathway to self-knowledge and improved interpersonal skills. Amidst the fact that CNM relationships are (or can be) communicationally laborious and also force people to face and manage deep-seated personal insecurities and negatively stained feelings such as jealousy or fear of loss (see Chapters 3.3, 5.1.3.1, and 5.1.6.2), it was believed that participating in one would set an individual on an ongoing path of learning, thus furthering their journey in self-discovery and -awareness. Maja, for example, reported that one of the things she had initially been interested in CNM was "getting to know different forms of relationships and experiencing [herself] in them," pointing out that by doing CNM, "you can learn many things that you can use for yourself and take a lot with you from it" (ibid., para. 115). Nora had also been intrigued by the thought that through CNM, she could embark on a mission of revealing "how much [she] can learn about [herself] and relationships, about how many doctrines there are from childhood, about the many difficulties in communication" (Nora, H03, para. 41).

Sometimes when a person goes through profound changes in their identity, a monogamous lifestyle may no longer align with or validate their altered (or altering) sense of self. Nora reports that in the time that followed Ian's proposal to her (while the two were still monogamous), she was internally going through "quite a phase" (ibid., para. 21). Having just turned thirty, she found herself at a crossroads in her life in terms of both her sexuality and how she generally desired to shape her life in the future. Despite her keen desire to stay together with Ian, the idea of monogamy, let alone legal marriage, had begun feeling constricting to her, as if it would hold her back or, in her own words, 'trap' or 'stagnate' her development:

> Because, on the one hand, I wanted the relationship so badly, but I also did not want to stay
> stuck at the same stage in life, like somehow I did not want to stagnate. And above all, the

wedding also represented quite the finality for me. Finality, in the sense that I am almost like trapped or something. (Nora, H03, para. 35)

Furthermore, another 'huge factor' for Nora to do CNM was to be able to realize more of her creative self and to find 'inspiration' and 'motivation' for creating art (singing, painting, and writing) through her relationships:

[T]hose relationships that have a creative side to them- [...] if I have that kind of connection there, like a connection with a person, then the relationship actually becomes relatively quickly even more intimate and beautiful for me, because I then either find inspiration or motivation again or can just create something. [...] and that is a huge factor why I do [polyamory]. (Nora, H03, para. 41)

Notwithstanding its minor representation in the data, the presence of personal growth as a motivation to engage in CNM does show that CNM is sought after for purposes beyond dating, having sex, or establishing relationships with multiple partners. It highlights the multifaceted nature of CNM and its (hoped-for) potential to facilitate personal and relational development that ought to bring profits to both the individual and their relationship(s): knowledge and skills pertaining to sex and interpersonal communication, self-discovery, or perhaps even innovation for enhancing one's creative potential. In contrast, monogamy might portray the very opposite of such advancements: a trap that brings you to stagnate, or a roadblock on the path to becoming a newer, perhaps truer, better, or more unique version of yourself.

### 5.1.3 RESOURCES

Although my interview questions did not explicitly cover *what* it takes to transition to and sustain a CNM relationship, the interviewees clearly suggested that CNM is not something that can be easily practiced 'just like that.' Instead, it was perceived as requiring a great deal of personal resources, among which 1) *communication*, 2) *time*, and 3) *mental health* (or health in general) were particularly salient. I will next discuss each of them in detail while also reflecting on their contribution to the ultimate accessibility of CNM on the side. Moreover, the presented categories raise further questions as to whether the required resources, which are held to a high value and considered a crucial prerequisite for success with CNM, can also create normative pressures that are increasingly placed on the individual and their capacity to manage issues (jealousy, possessiveness, etc.) that are regularly framed as deriving from, where else but, the individual themselves.

### 5.1.3.1 COMMUNICATION: "AND MAN, DID WE TALK ABOUT IT!"

Communication stood out as the most widely referenced and discussed resource for beginning and nurturing a CNM relationship. Not different from the observations of previous studies on the topic (see Chapter 3.3.1), it was found that engaging in CNM necessitated substantial and active communication, discussion, negotiation, and rulemaking (including breaking, revisiting, and modifying rules), often referred to as *relationship work*. The interviewees repeatedly emphasized that their relationships were not characterized by ease and stressed the immense emotional labor involved, which ought to demonstrate the serious commitment and ongoing personal investments required. Such work on the couple included things like emotional openness and the ability to verbalize personal fears and insecurities, thereby calling for consistent readiness to make oneself vulnerable in the presence of one's partner(s): "[Y]ou kind of make yourself so vulnerable, because you [...] just have to communicate all the time," Sophie (H01, para. 349) states. At times, the communication was detailed to become so excessive that it would border on overcommunication, resulting in all-consuming and draining experiences:

> **Nora**: And man, did we talk about it!
>
> **Ian**: Oh, did we talk about it! Ah, we talked a lot! Whoa! Overcommunicating. Classic. Like it was exhausting.
>
> **Nora**: I can remember those conversations where we sat on the sofa and just talked for like three or four hours straight, whereby those were the most honest conversations that I think we ever had with each other. And they were extremely important. And then there were times when we were just so tired and somehow exhausted because all we had been talking about were those things, right? When we had like forgotten to just hang out ((laughter)) for once.
>
> (H03, para. 29-31)

Although exhausting, demanding, and time-consuming, the emotional labor going into navigating CNM was considered highly necessary, valuable, and productive in terms of the well-being of both the coupled relationship and the individuals in it. Some mentioned believing that the vast relationship work and conflicts that come with it can strengthen the relationship and contribute to greater trust and emotional closeness between partners. Especially those conversations and discussions carried out at the beginning of transitioning into CNM – a time often characterized by new or unexpected, emotionally overwhelming, uncomfortable, or even crisis-like situations – were cherished as particularly meaningful. Similarly to Nora, who describes the intensive talks between her and Ian about their newly opened relationship as "the most honest conversations" they had ever shared with each other (see citation above), Paul reminisces back to the moment when Sophie directly verbalized having feelings for someone

else (Johannes) for the first time. For Paul, the conversation that followed Sophie's confession was the most intimate one the couple had ever had:

> Sophie then said, 'I have to- or I need to get something off my chest. [...] There is more than friendship there [between me and Johannes],' like, 'There are feelings there and I cannot do anything about them.' Yeah, that is exactly what she said. And I found that conversation unbelievably intimate and appreciative and somehow also like open because she also- like she was not like, 'I have this one guy and I just want to travel to him and spend time with him now [...]' or something like that, but more just like, 'I have these feelings,' and it was a really open conversation we had. And I regard it the most intimate conversation we have ever experienced in our relationship. (Paul, H01, para. 66)

As we know, communication skills (or communication skills that are deemed 'good' or desirable in a particular context) are not just there but must be acquired (see Chapter 3.3.1). Some couples, like Sophie and Paul, or Jo and Oliver, saw it as a great advantage to have learned and practiced effective communication prior to opening their relationships. Oliver mentions that open conversations and careful discussions had always been an integral part of Jo and his relationship, contributing to a functioning polyamorous relationship later on in their lives: "And I think that is also a big reason why poly works for us because we had already talked so much before," he (H04, para. 501) says. Likewise, Sophie mentions having profited from the relationship work she and Paul had done while still monogamous: "I did not expect [the open relationship] to be so much relationship work. And I think one advantage we have is that our relationship was extremely much work from the very beginning" (H01, para. 357). The rather turbulent start to her and Paul's relationship had called for intensified, conflict-ridden interaction, which had helped the couple develop a solid basis for managing the communicative-heavy demands of CNM life:

> But since we had so extremely many and such profound conflicts which we somehow had to work through, and because already in the beginning of the relationship we talked, talked, talked- [...] And it was not like 'we are together for five years and now we have a crisis,' but rather like, 'we are together for four months and now we have a crisis,' like that. And that is what I think- or like it is so crazy- we have established such a strong foundation and somehow acquired the knowledge to do relationship work that it makes it easier to communicate now. At least for me. (Sophie, H01, para. 361)

Open dialogues about sex had also been part of such 'pre-CNM groundwork.' Both Sophie and Paul as well as Jo and Oliver reported having had a lot of honest discussions about sex, desire, and intimate needs before opening their relationships. According to Paul, there had never really been any secrets between Sophie and him in terms of their sexual "wishes and fantasies" (H01, para. 61). The couple had also, so Paul, already incorporated other people into their intimate life by watching porn together while having sex. It further appeared that there had not

been major problems with acknowledging the possibility of one's partner fantasizing about having sexual or intimate encounters with other people. Watching porn, having 'opposite-gender' friends (which can indeed be perceived as threatening by some, especially in conventional heterosexual relationships), or articulating sexual fantasies had not been a problem for Jo and Oliver either. Throughout their partnership, the two had developed a practice of freely disclosing their attractions toward other individuals, even to the extent where 'checking out' others and sharing feelings of desire toward them had become a mutually shared, positive, and enjoyable event:

> **Oliver**: […] actually, if we found another person cute, we would be like, 'Hey look!' Truly like, 'Did you just see that!?' And more like-
>
> **Jo**: ((laughter)) 'That person has such a beautiful ass! But do not stare!' [playing a situation between them and Oliver]
>
> **Oliver**: Exactly. It had always been like that.
>
> **Emma**: So you were always able to like share those things with each other?
>
> **Jo**: Yes.
>
> **Oliver**: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
>
> **Jo**: And it was totally okay for me for you [Oliver] to watch porn or, I do not know, have any fantasies or so. Like it was-
>
> **Oliver**: Or that I have women as friends [*Freundinnen*].
>
> (H04, para. 72-78)

What we also know is that partners can be very differently equipped when it comes to the resources they bring into a relationship (see Chapter 3.1.1). Communicative competencies are no exception, which was also affirmed by a few interviewees. Oliver, for example, not only counts good communication as a prerequisite for his functioning polyamorous relationship but also stresses that Jo, in particular, is to be thanked for the fact that the communication between the couple has worked so well. In contrast to Jo, whom he describes as 'extremely communicative,' he perceives himself as less skilled in 'emotional' matters such as expressing or talking about personal needs and feelings. The lack of communicative or emotional abilities is ascribed to his socialization process and internalized family dynamics:

> **Oliver**: […] poly works for us because we had already talked so much before, and Jo is extremely communicative. I have learned a lot from them, for in my family, we keep things under wraps, and then we yell at each other for one minute, and then it is all over. But I have never learned emotional things like, 'What do you actually want?' or, 'What do you feel at the moment?' Time and again, Jo and I are amazed at how polyamory nevertheless works for me.
>
> **Jo**: ((laughter)) Yeah.

> **Oliver**: This is actually the base on top of which the whole thing is built and without which the relationship would not work, I think.
>
> (H04, para. 501-503)

Such disparities can potentially heighten the possibility for unequal distribution of emotional labor in a relationship. As brought to attention by Maja, especially in CNM relationships where there is a higher demand for emotional management, effective communication, and reflective introspection, those who have traditionally shouldered the majority of emotional labor may find themselves burdened to an even greater extent than before:

> A downside is that there is a lot of relationship work that has to be done. Especially if you are the person who tends to take on the relationship work and emotional labor, then you will have quite a lot to do. Like if you are the one who finds themselves in that role over and over again. (Maja, H02, para. 303)

So what if the expectation of 'good' communication in CNM cannot be met? Or, what if being vulnerable in front of your partner is not always possible for one reason or another? Paul and Sophie illustrate a situation where the expectation of engaging in open, honest, and transparent communication and disclosing personal matters in the context of CNM becomes evident. The ability to meet this expectation, however, remains unattainable. As Sophie was meeting her long-term crush, Johannes, abroad, she and Paul had a conversation over the phone. On this occasion, Sophie chose not to reveal a troubling event that had happened to her in the intimate/sexual sphere, stating that she was not emotionally prepared to talk about it. Paul, desiring complete knowledge and presuming the right to access his partner's personal affairs, perceived Sophie's decision to withhold information as concerning or, in his words, 'shitty' and potentially indicative of her establishing threatening intimacy with Johannes:

> **Paul**: Yeah, I want to know everything. I have already said that. And I know that one time you [Sophie] had- you were abroad, and I am not sure what it was all about, but you said like, 'I do not want to talk about it,' or something like that. It was about something intimate, and, to be completely honest, that was really shitty for me. Because I then felt like, 'Okay she is establishing new intimacy with someone else.'
>
> **Sophie**: But I did not want to talk about it because I had had a bad experience that was not consensual, and I was not ready to talk about it.
>
> **Paul**: Okay, okay.
>
> **Emma**: Mhm.
>
> **Sophie**: Not because I did not want to tell you about it, but because my boundaries had been crossed multiple times.
>
> (H01, para. 267-271)

As can be read from Paul's initial reaction to Sophie concealing information, lack of communication or the inability to communicate can be misconstrued as dishonesty or a threat to the primary relationship, which implies a potential occurrence of unwanted or forbidden actions outside of it. Scenarios like this should prompt us to ask whether communicative norms produced in the context of CNM can also pressure individuals to perform 'correctly' or as desired in situations where revealing, expressing, and discussing personal experiences and feelings are viewed as highly essential. Can the much-vaunted 'hard work' on maintaining openness, honesty, and vulnerability also enforce an obligation for disclosure that is irrespective of the individual's consent, internal resources, or state of mental health? Especially in light of the findings presented in Chapter 5.1.5.3, which indicate that transparency and honesty are indeed recognized as crucial requisites for CNM and serve the vital purpose of protecting coupled intimacy and, thus, the permanence of the primary/nesting relationship, engaging with such questions is necessary.

### 5.1.3.2 TIME: "BEING POLY MEANS THAT YOU MUST HAVE A SCHEDULING KINK"

Another resource that partly goes hand in hand with excessive communication is time. Some interviewees expressed that finding time for not only the relationship work but also for simply meeting up or going on dates with multiple people can be demanding. Jo and Oliver counted finding time and splitting it between all of their partners as one of the biggest challenges in maneuvering an actively non-monogamous lifestyle. Both voiced dissatisfaction with the amount of time they had available to spend with their other partners. Due to scheduling problems, Jo reports seeing their girlfriend Johanna much less often than they would like to. For the same reason, Oliver describes feeling frustrated about the fact that meeting with his new love interest, Anna, had been nearly impossible during the whole month before our interview. Anna, too, is polyamorous, which means that both her and Oliver's time is spread among several people, making the available time gap that the two can dedicate to each other even smaller:

> That is indeed ( ) frustrating because, in our case, things have not been working out for one month now. I think first she was sick, and then I was sick, and things like that. It gets annoying after a while when the relationship does not work because of such things. Also, sometimes it is really difficult not only because you have multiple partners in your life, but the other person, too, has two or three other relationships. It does not make things simple. There is like this- this- this- saying like, 'Being poly means that you must have a scheduling kink.' (Oliver, H04, para. 376)

Nora also mentions that especially in the beginning, balancing commitments in a polyamorous relationship was a significant challenge to her. Having a full-time job and thus a busy schedule

had made it difficult for her to manage her time and emotional energy in the relationship. The demands of maintaining CNM while having limited time had caused her significant stress for an extended period of time:

> For a long time, it was a huge problem for me to have the capacities in a way that I myself was doing good, too. Because I had my calendar fully packed for such a long time and I was working full time, it was relatively difficult for me and demanded a great deal from me. Like a lot. I was really stressed for a long period of time. (Nora, H03, para. 98)

Consequently, scaling down her work hours played a crucial role in navigating CNM easier. As she states, "It has definitely gotten better now when I work part-time" (ibid., para. 98). She continues by explaining that it is not only the time she has for all the meaningful relationships in her life (all of them, not just romantic or sexual ones) that has been put under strain through CNM, but also the time she has for herself alone: "I am definitely still working on planning evenings or moments during the day where I am just all by myself" (ibid., para. 98).

The interviewees' narratives provide evidence supporting the notion that time is a critical personal 'investment' that CNM relationships thrive on (see Patterson, 2018; Chapter 3.3.1). They underscore the unrealistic expectation that everyone can incorporate yet another relationship into their lives, that is, search, find, negotiate, establish, and maintain one successfully, not to mention the time spent on self-reflecting or researching and learning about CNM. Jo's comparison of CNM to an "extra hobby" (H04, para. 384) is quite telling of this, bringing attention to the fact that most relationships indeed are pursued during leisure time. And as we know, time outside of paid *and* unpaid work is not equally accessible across different socioeconomic classes, genders, and racialized groups, and there is a big difference between taking up hobby-like activities for one's pure enjoyment and using free time for mere recovery from exhaustive laboring, only to return back to (paid or unpaid) work again.

While it is true that anyone, rich or impoverished, can be busy and therefore experience significant difficulties in entertaining multiple relationships, there are many of us who, due to socioeconomic pressures under capitalism, cannot possibly reduce their working hours, go on educational leave, give up one of their part-time jobs, leave their children unsupervised at home, or neglect the elderly and sick while going on dates, philosophizing about relationship ethics in polyamorous peer groups, flying out to different countries to pursue long-term love interests, or enjoying yet another holiday trip with just a different partner. CNM, also time-wise, is clearly a matter of class privilege and wealth.

### 5.1.3.3 Mental Health: "The worst thing that could happen is that he dates a person who fulfills all my beauty ideals"

A majority of the interviewees reported that mental well-being and the availability (or unavailability) of related, internal resources affected their interest in- and the ability to actively maintain more than one romantic, intimate, or sexual relationship. Lea, to give an instance, recalls a phase in her life when she was "slightly depressed," causing her to shift toward monogamy and reject CNM, which had previously held appeal for her: "[D]uring that phase I kind of noticed like, 'Actually, I am not interested in this topic at all. I want to be monogamous.'" (Lea, H02, para. 16). In most situations where an interviewee's life was impacted by mental health issues such as depression, struggles with self-esteem, severe fear of loss, and negative body image, or drastic events like severe, even life-threatening sickness or the death of a loved one, CNM, or at least the active part of it (dating multiple people), was put on a pause.

For Maja and Lea, who at the time of the interview were still in the aftermath of Maja's illness and losing someone in their close family, CNM had become secondary throughout the crisis-ridden times. Active dating had taken a back seat for months, apart from Maja and Luis seeing each other time to time. Maja explains that she did not have any capacities left for all the relationship work – including confrontations – that CNM necessitates, for all the energies she and Lea had had to be directed toward themselves: preserving their own mental stability, taking care of each other, and just coping with the difficult circumstances:

> [A]s I was doing poorly due to, as I told you earlier, someone close to me dying and being personally affected by an illness, I really did not have any capacities left. Because [CNM] requires so much confrontation and relationship work, and it was truly a crisis that was going on at the time. It was as if we already had enough to contend with just by trying to maintain stability among the two of us, supporting each other, and handling everything. And that is also where [CNM] faded into the background a bit. (Maja, H02, Para. 85)

Maja carries on by noting that once her and Lea's personal life has stabilized a bit and when one of the two starts feeling like it, they will have a conversation about returning to actively practicing CNM again.

In their account, Jo and Oliver also highlight how life-altering crises, with their immense demands on both the body and mind, may impede the process of transitioning into CNM. Jo believes that they and Oliver would have been 'ready' to open their relationship even earlier had Jo not been diagnosed with cancer, which resulted in long-standing, intensive treatment for them and generally burdening times for the couple as a whole:

During the time we moved in together, we went through a lot of challenging situations. What I am saying is that I believe we would have probably opened our relationship even earlier, or we would have been ready for it earlier if I had not been operated on every few months because of cancer. (Jo, H04, para. 86)

Moreover, Sophie reveals the presence of specific 'struggles with the self' that had become more pronounced as a result of engaging in CNM. She explains that she often finds herself asking, "Am I enough to make [the open relationship] last?" or "[C]ould it happen that someone else comes along who can offer something better than I can?" (H01, para. 385). The struggles she had faced revolved primarily around issues of self-worth and body image. She reports that these concerns had been carried over into the open relationship, as CNM presented the potential (albeit imagined) that Paul could find someone else 'prettier,' 'sexier,' or, especially, thinner than her:

My greatest fear was- so I have a lot of body issues and feel like I am never beautiful or sexy enough. And I thought to myself, 'Okay, the worst thing that could happen is that he [Paul] dates a person who happens to fulfill all my beauty ideals.' (Sophie, H01, para. 137)

The internal fear of 'not being enough' for her primary partner in terms of her looks made it challenging for Sophie to cope with Paul having sex with other people. One of the main consequences of this fear was that Sophie had started to compare herself with Paul's dates, requesting to see photos of them, which then could either have a calming effect on her sense of self-worth or, alternatively, shatter it within seconds. To illustrate this: The night before the interview, the couple had once again had a conversation about one of Paul's recent sexual partners who, according to Sophie's parameters, was particularly 'thin.' The conversation, which may have turned more into a discussion or fight later on, activated ('triggered') a negative reaction in Sophie (she 'went off'), for she perceived the other partner of Paul's as slimmer and therefore also more desirable or better fitting for Paul than herself:

**Sophie**: I said that the one woman with whom he [Paul] had slept with had zero grams of fat, and that is exactly what triggers me.

**Emma**: She had what?

**Sophie**: Zero grams of fat. Like she was so thin.

**Emma**: Ah, okay. Mhm.

**Sophie**: And then I said that [Paul and her] would be a totally good fit. ((laughter))

**Paul**: ((laughter))

**Sophie**: And that is when I went off.

(H01, para. 220-227)

Sophie is more than aware of her insecurities, which she verbally reflects upon multiple times during the interview. She also acknowledges that her feelings and reactions might make her sound 'superficial' or 'bad.' Yet, she outlines that their roots are deeply embedded in her relationship with her body, going far beyond mere vanity or self-obsession and, in part, beyond her own influence. Despite Paul assuring Sophie that he does not have an ideal body type, that he loves her immensely, and that she is everything he could ever wish for on all possible levels, Sophie cannot help but be consumed by feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being lesser than Paul's other partner(s). Moreover, she describes having faced increased difficulty in communicating her insecurities and CNM-related negative feelings now that she is an open relationship, for she feels under pressure to present herself as having overcome her jealousy, comparing this experience to a 'test' she must 'pass': "I somehow thought that I have to pass a test or something so as to prove that I am able to open my relationship and not be possessive or something" (Sophie, H01, para. 349). She ends up eventually disclosing her wish to take a break from CNM. This wish, she implies, is related to her present mental state and the following distress provoked by Paul's involvement in sexual activities with other people, individual women in particular (I will resume discussing this topic once more in Chapter 5.1.5).

Maja also mentions self-worth as an issue that has posed a challenge for her CNM life. As I asked her and Lea about the greatest challenges that the couple had experienced while being non-monogamous, Maja (H02, para. 284) answered: "Self-worth. Being completely and so strongly shaken in your sense of self-worth. And all the old and new problems that I have with it," one of those being a notably strong fear of loss/abandonment. She continues to emphasize once more that her ability to endure the resurgence of uncomfortable feelings or insecurities as part of the emotional work required in CNM is dependent on the level of strain she experiences in facets beyond her intimate relationships: "And depending on how burdened I am in other areas of my life, I do not have as much capacity to deal with such feelings. Like I cannot let as much of them surface as I otherwise would" (H02, para. 284). Overall, the ebb and flow of one's internal resources and state of mental well-being were described as impacting the nature of one's CNM relationship. Rather than remaining constant or fixed, the relationships and the ways they were lived out were subject to constant adaptation, thereby existing in a state of ongoing potential change and dependence on the different 'phases' an individual goes through in life.

Sophie and Maja's openness about their personal struggles vividly portrays the difficulty of maintaining a sense of security and self-confidence in a CNM relationship. This challenge can

be magnified when challenges with psychological well-being that already take a toll on one's self-perception and self-esteem come into play, maybe even to an extent where an individual's ability to enter or sustain a CNM relationship is impeded. Both interviewees' perspectives further highlight the urgent need to re-examine modern-day non-monogamies' accessibility for disabled and/or neurodivergent individuals, individuals with mental health issues, and those of us who, due to trauma, internalized heteropatriarchal beauty standards, troubling upbringing and family dynamics, or other formative events in their biographies, cannot merely read, self-reflect, or communicate their insecurities, jealousness, possessive tendencies, difficulties with confrontation, or deep-seated fears away.

Additionally, it may be worth mentioning that at least half of the participants had employed or were currently employing couples therapy as a means to navigate CNM and address critical situations associated with it in their relationship(s). This, from my point of view, also highlights the emotional toll associated with CNM or at least the fact that people may not be able to handle it on their own without support from external sources. Many strategies used for CNM-specific scheduling, communicating personal needs and feelings, or dealing with jealousy had indeed been learned through professional help. Alternatively, many couples and individuals had accessed self-help sources such as books and blogs specialized in CNM, polyamory, and/or relationship anarchy, or had joined CNM-specific peer groups or communities where they could find support and acquire new relationship skills.

### 5.1.4 'COMING OUT'

Coming out of the closet can be challenging, scary, and even dangerous for many queer people in a heteronormative and anti-queer society where the default human experience is viewed as cisgender and straight. In a perhaps similar fashion, non-monogamists must also weigh the price they might have to pay for being openly non-monogamous in a mononormative society where coupled exclusivity is considered the norm. This section introduces the most significant responses from the social environment (friends, family, work colleagues, etc.) to the interviewees 'coming out' with their CNM relationship. I have divided them under the following categories: 1) *acceptance*, 2) *tolerated yet not celebrated*, 3) *denial*, 4) *stigmatized*, and 5) *losing family*. While reports on positive or neutral reactions were not completely absent in the data, it becomes overwhelmingly clear that CNM relationships are far from being welcomed, understood, or celebrated in an equal fashion to monogamous unions, continuing to bear the stigma of immorality, unhealthiness, and hypersexuality.

## 5.1.4.1 ACCEPTANCE: "WE DO NOT HAVE TO HIDE OURSELVES IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN"

The interviewees' experiences with 'coming out' as non-monogamous were generally marked by ambiguity. Most had told about their opened relationships to close friends, roommates, colleagues at work, and family; however, often selectively. Some members of the family, for instance, may have been left uninformed about CNM, and a few colleagues whom one had no significant connection with were not considered relevant to engage in conversations regarding the topic. Above everything else, it was deemed crucial to disclose CNM to potential new partners. All participants who addressed this during the interview shared the view that it is a matter of respect toward new partners to inform them about their possible involvement with a non-monogamous person early on, preferably on the first date or even prior to it.

Some interviewees confirmed that their CNM relationship was positively received within their close circles. Jo and Paul both report having attracted curiosity, fascination, and even excitement toward their non-conventional relationship models, especially among good friends or people like roommates. Paul mentions that while people cannot fully understand what his open relationship with Sophie is all about (likely due to the lack of information about CNM reaching the general population), they simultaneously find it alluring or even 'exotic:'

> So with- among my roommates, there was somehow like fascination for it, like, 'How does it work?' Like curiosity. I think fascination is a better word for it. Almost like exotic somehow. People cannot really grasp it but at the same time they are also curios about it, so they ask questions and so on. (Paul, H01, para. 324)

Jo remembers having received similar responses, namely people showing interest in their polyamorous relationship and thus asking questions about it. Jo personally embraces the inquiries, saying, "I find it totally beautiful" (H04, para. 498). Oliver further expresses that he believes the possibility for a person to be open and accepting toward others' non-monogamous relationships increases if the person themselves, in one way or another, does not necessarily conform to the prevailing social norms. Both Jo and him are convinced this to be particularly true within queer contexts, where the readiness and willingness to welcome non-normative life designs and identities is regarded as particularly tangible:

> Yes, that is always the case- it is easy to get together or find common ground with people who themselves do not conform to the norms. And then it is perhaps easier to talk about polyamory with them because they do not comply with the standard and are therefore also more open. (Oliver, H04, para. 487)

In broad terms, the interviews point out that CNM was best accepted by close friends. Maja, for example, states that the feedback she had received from her best friends had always been

supportive and affirming of her and Lea's choice to open their relationship: "[T]hey have always supported me, or they have just always tried to mindfully listen to what I have to share about my reality," she (H02, para., 223) says. Indeed, she reports friends to be the only group of people from which she had never received any form of negative backlash: "[W]ith everyone else, there has been mostly headwind," she (ibid., para. 223) adds. Nora, too, perceived that her and Ian's polyamorous lifestyle had been met with considerable acceptance in their friend groups. Their friends had not only embraced the idea of the two having multiple partners but had also grown accustomed to the couple bringing their other partners to social gatherings, not routinely expecting Nora and Ian to exclusively be each other's 'plus-one' and assuming their other partners to remain unseen and thereby, in a way, secondary.

When it comes to unveiling CNM in the realm of family, things get more complicated. As will be discussed more comprehensively in the final section of this chapter (5.1.4.5, *Losing family*), not all participants had been able to or had wanted to 'come out' as non-monogamous to their families or parts of their families. It was evident that only a minority of the interviewees who nevertheless confided in their family members about having multiple partners (or the potential thereof) had received somewhat positive or at least neutral responses. Additionally, the bar for considering a response 'positive' or 'neutral' appeared to be set relatively low, primarily signifying the mere absence of outright rejection or overtly disapproving attitudes. To illustrate this, Lea, for example, had encountered no significant opposition to her being non-monogamous from her family. However, this did not mean that her family members had been particularly thrilled or curious about the couple's relationship model either. Instead, the acknowledgment of CNM had been met with widespread disinterest and general reluctance to further engage with the topic. Lea suggests having observed a parallel to how her sexual orientation had been received within the family: similarly to being lesbian, CNM, too, may have been accepted yet not deemed worthy of understanding:

> I have actually told everyone in my life who is somehow important to me. For my mom it was not a big issue. For my dad's side of the family also not really. Well, yeah, my dad is not like- he is generally not very much interested in what I do. [...] Yeah, I think he takes it more like, 'Aha.' [with an indifferent tone]. My grandparents did not- I think to them I- I mean they are already struggling with the fact that I am a lesbian. So they do accept it without really understanding any of it. [...] And otherwise the family- well there is barely any headwind there. They are all like so that they do not understand what I do anyhow, because I have never done things like everyone else in my family does. I think that is why I already fit into the category of 'We do not understand Lea anyway.' (Lea, H02, para. 237-239)

Jo and Oliver describe a similar situation with their parents. Jo, who opens up about growing up in a very conservative, religious (Christian) family environment, says that their parents "do not find it comprehensible" (H04, para. 435) why they have decided to live a polyamorous life with Oliver. Like Lea's relatives, Jo's parents "manage to accept it," (ibid., para. 437) albeit their incapacity or unwillingness to genuinely understand it. Oliver further counts that although his mother does not necessarily oppose the idea of him being polyamorous, her underlying discomfort with the concept becomes apparent in her struggle to verbally demonstrate interest in Oliver's romantic partners beyond than Jo. Instead of asking questions about the people he dates, she goes silent: "[W]ith my mom, I know or notice that for her it is like, 'I would rather not ask anything.' That is her go-to thing. When it is unpleasant for her, she is like, 'No.' She just does not say anything" (Oliver, H04, para. 431).

In an exceptional departure from the unenthusiastic or disengaged acceptance of CNM that seemed prevalent among many family members, or the negative, and at times even damaging, repercussions that disclosing one's CNM identity was reported to have on family dynamics (as detailed later), Jo and Oliver had also come across instances where their CNM was ascribed an explicitly positive value; Where they were genuinely embraced to remain integral parts of the lives of their friends and family members regardless of – or perhaps even precisely due to – their polyamorous way of life. To illustrate this, Jo shares the story of them and Oliver being invited to assume the role of godparents. This invitation, they underline, was extended partly because of the couple's alternative lifestyle, which the parents viewed as an important example for their children to witness:

> And I find it all the more beautiful that it was the parents of our godchildren who knew-
> we had just opened our relationship and had told them that we are polyamorous. And quite
> shortly afterwards, they asked us if we wanted to be the godparents. And that was so
> healing and affirming and appreciative. And because they also said like, 'Yeah, you [Jo and
> Oliver] see many things differently and you have a different way of life and we would
> really like for our children to witness that too.' That was really beautiful. (Jo, H04, para.
> 554)

Jo explains that they are particularly thrilled about being included in the lives of family and friends who have children, all while not having to hide their and Oliver's polyamory from them. In their experience, adults may coexist with non-normative identities or relationship practices through a sense of mutual acceptance ('to live and let live'), whereby children are often 'protected' from being exposed to such realities. This suggests that CNM relationships can be perceived as a negative influence or somehow inappropriate for children to witness.

Therefore, Jo experiences even greater joy when they can openly embrace their true self in the presence of certain friends and family members, including children:

> How adults go about it is like, 'to live and let live,' but when it comes to children, it is like a whole another thing. And I find it beautiful that I have people among my family and friends who are so open [...] or who take us as we are. For whom [CNM] is totally okay. So that we do not have to somehow hide ourselves in front of the children. (Jo, H04, para. 558)

### 5.1.4.2 Tolerated Yet Not Celebrated: "Like I just want to share my joy!"

As briefly touched upon above, the acceptance of CNM by one's social environment did not necessarily equate to an explicitly positive or openly joyous reception. Some interviewees sensed that their multiple relationships were perhaps acknowledged or tolerated but not celebrated – at least not to the degree that is typically associated with monogamous unions. Jo vividly remembers sharing the news about their new partner Johanna with great enthusiasm, only to realize that the genuine joy and excitement they anticipated from others were missing, likely due to their pre-existing relationship with Oliver. People acted, Jo describes, "as if they had suddenly forgotten how to react adequately to such news" (H04, para. 428). "Had I been single," they continue, "the very same people would have been like, 'Wow that is so cool! How does she look like? And how is she? And what does she do? And how did you get to know each other?' and so on" (ibid., para. 428). Jo laughs at the irony that, for certain individuals, consensual non-monogamy or polyamory seems to hinder their ability to wholeheartedly experience or express happiness on behalf of others and the meaningful, loving relationships they establish: "Like I just want to share my joy!" they (ibid., para. 430) laugh.

Oliver complies with his partner by recalling that on the pretext that his multiple relationships are based on sex 'only' (which is incorrect), it has been construed as unfitting for him to share information about his other partners, for instance, with his parents: "So I know with my sister, like she used to be like, 'Do you really have to talk to mom about the people you have sex with and what it is like?' [...] when it is actually not about me just fucking around" (Oliver, H04, para. 431). He implies that now that he has more than one significant other, "this openness or the possibility to share" (ibid., para. 431) details about his intimate life is not granted to him as it would be had he been leading a monogamous lifestyle:

> It is about the fact that when I get to know someone I like a lot, who then becomes a big part of my life, I want to tell [my family] about them, just as I would if I were single. I would then also tell my family that I have met someone new, and that the person is really amazing. And now that I have a second partner, it is as if things would be different. (Oliver, H04, para. 431)

Also Sophie's mother, once encouraging her daughter to go to great lengths to further her and Paul's freshly blooming relationship, was not particularly delighted to experience that Sophie was planning to go meet her long-term crush, Johannes, abroad. "Oh, do you really have to fly there now?" (Sophie, H01, para. 300) she had asked her daughter hesitantly. When Sophie then contacted her mother from abroad with a photo of Johannes and herself looking "a bit like a couple," her mother could not help but comment, "Yeah, very unusual" (ibid., para. 300) on it. As things later on started to go downhill for Sophie and Johannes, and it looked like their relationship had come to an end, her mother was not necessarily able to hide her relief or some sort of contentment with the situation: "[S]he was totally like, 'Yes, hm, well soon you will by Paul's side again.' And I think she was like really happy as I told her that I missed [Paul]" (Sophie, H01, para. 301). While there may be a variety of underlying reasons for Sophie's mother's reaction that we cannot know of, it is worth pondering if the closure of a significant intimate relationship would have been more deserving of mourning had it not been deemed 'very unusual' (read: non-monogamous or extradyadic) and thus secondary or less-worthy right from the start.

### 5.1.4.3 DENIAL: "THEY DID NOT REALLY GET IT, OR THEY DID NOT WANT TO GET IT"

Another noteworthy response to CNM experienced by the participants was one that I coded *denial*, although the exact reasons or motivations behind the scenarios I am about to recount remain uncertain. Anyhow, a common denominator among the few instances falling under the category was the refusal to acknowledge the existence or validity of one's CNM relationship. To illustrate this, I will refer to two personal accounts by Lea and Maja, both of which deal with the reactions of their grandparents. In Maja's case, her grandparents had major trouble grasping that both Lea and Luis are significant partners of hers, mistakenly identifying one of them as her girlfriend or boyfriend and regarding the other as 'just' a friend:

> I really noticed that [my grandparents] just think that I am this crazy person who is always together with either her [Lea] or him [Luis] or something. They do not understand it at all, and now that we live together [referring to Lea and herself], they just think that she is my partner and that I am just friends with Luis. And they find this really nice, even though I have told them, 'No, I am not friends with him, I am in a relationship with him and actually have relationships with several people.' (Maja, H02, para. 231)

Maja is uncertain whether her grandparents genuinely fail to comprehend her lifestyle or simply refuse to do so: "They did not really get it, or they did not want to get it," she (ibid., para. 231) laughs. In a related manner, Lea suggests that while her grandparents may have a generally positive opinion of Maja, they do not view her and Lea's relationship as entirely

legitimate, perhaps still holding on to the hope that their granddaughter's queer and polyamorous relationship will remain just a temporary phase before she 'finally' grows out of it and settles into traditional heterosexual monogamy:

> So they do accept it without really understanding any of it. They know Maja and also like her, but at the same time, they do not quite understand why I am yet to finally find myself a man who will build me a house or so. (Lea, H02, para. 239)

What might lie behind such a stance is the underlying notion that non-monogamy cannot possibly represent the final and therefore most legitimate 'station' of a person's intimate journey or sexual development (perhaps similarly to what we know from the myth of non-heterosexual or -cisgender identities as 'just a phase'), for it contradicts the normative ideal of everyone eventually arriving – and wanting to arrive – at a 'respectable' stage of adulthood (Roseneil at al., 2020, p. 27; see Chapter 3.2.3) that revolves around the reproductive monogamous couple.

In a broader context, Maja and Lea's experiences with their grandparents appear to share similarities with Schadler's (2021) observations of polyamorous people finding themselves 'situationally pushed' into mimicking monogamous and heteronormative relationship structures irrespective of their own will, intentions, or identities (see Chapter 3.2.3). Especially, Maja's portrayal of her grandparents' inability to perceive both Lea *and* Luis as her partners aligns with Schadler's notion that simultaneously occurring polyamorous relationships are often misconstrued as temporally separate instances of serial monogamy. In Maja's example, one of her partners is consequently compelled to assume the role of either an ex-partner or a friend, which does not correspond to her lived reality or the image of her relationships that she seeks to convey to her family or friends. Furthermore, it appears that Maja and Lea's choice to move in together and become each other's domestic partners – a 'step' in life with great performative importance for sealing the couple within a mononormative life design (see Chapter 2.1) – in a way solidified the grandparents' false idea of Lea and Maja as a monogamous couple and Luis as 'just' a friend.

#### 5.1.4.4 Stigmatized: "You become a nymphomaniac in the eyes of society"

Many of the stereotypical and stigmatizing beliefs that the interviewees had once held about CNM themselves (see Chapter 5.1.1) were now frequently held against their own relationships by other people. CNM relationships would be often viewed as generally 'weird' or 'bad,' and were regarded as "less valuable, less affectionate, less serious, [and] less long-lasting" (Maja, H02, para. 254) than monogamous ones. They were often considered more of a symptom of an

unhealthy partnership rather than an explicitly desired, voluntarily upheld form of life, suggesting that "there must be something wrong with your relationship if you fall in love with someone else" (Jo, H04, para. 492). Among the many stereotypes and prejudices used to undermine the legitimacy of the interviewees' relationships, two were particularly prominent: CNM as an unethical and therefore automatically dangerous or hurtful practice and CNMers as hypersexual beings.

Beginning with the former, some participants reported that they felt like CNM was often perceived with skepticism evoked by people's negative experiences with unethical forms of non-monogamy. Central to the idea of CNM as inherently immoral was the imagined chain of events where extradyadic desire (mostly by one partner only) and following sexual, intimate, and/or romantic interactions outside of the relationship automatically lead to someone in the relationship web getting hurt (often the other partner who initially wanted no extradyadic affairs). In other words, many people found it hard to believe that non-monogamy could have any other outcome than heartbreak, hurt, and, eventually, separation. "What you are doing is just hurting each other through this relationship!" (H03, para. 160) is a reaction that Nora, for example, had received from an acquaintance of hers.

Maja and Lea speculate whether such an unfavorable outlook toward *all* kinds of non-monogamous relationships originates from the fact that the only context in which most of us have learned to approach non-monogamy is monogamy and, consequently, cheating. "I think that this idea of the third person, the poor victim, is strongly grounded in monogamy. Like one person cheats and the other person then becomes the victim, right? Like, as if it cannot work any other way," Lea (H02, para. 349) contemplates. Equally, Sophie believes that her mother's opposing reaction to her and Paul's open relationship – which went along the lines of, "You two are nuts! […] You are ruining your relationship!" (Sophie, H01, para. 298) – was in fact evoked by the mother's own history of being cheated on by multiple partners, including Sophie's father. "So I think she was totally reminded of that, which is also why she is so strongly against [the open relationship]," Sophie (ibid., para. 300) explains.

What might serve as further evidence for the damning image of CNM is the perhaps not entirely fabricated association between non-monogamies and certain highly problematic communities. Lea, for instance, remembers confining to a friend about opening her relationship with Maja, to which the friend then responded, "Oh, you mean like in the Otto Mühl commune?" (H02, para. 339), a former commune in Austria known for its sect-like,

authoritarian organization, abuse of power, and sexual abuse of children. Understandably, Lea felt shocked and hurt by the comment. Maja echoes her experience by stating, "That is another reaction you often get, is it not? That people confuse CNM with abuse" (H02, para. 344).

Many interviewees had also been confronted with hypersexualizing stereotypes about CNMers. "[P]eople think like, 'Oh it is just about sex or because you are scared of commitment,'" Ian (H03, para. 157) says. Maja reports feeling that now that she is polyamorous, she has "become this person who behaves like a nymphomaniac in the eyes of society," (H02, para. 235) referring to an excessively sexual, typically feminine person who, as she puts it, "takes what she wants and gets everything that others do not allow themselves to have" (ibid., para. 235) sexually. She senses that her relationships are not received with the seriousness that they deserve and are instead reduced to one dimension (sexual pleasure) only, omitting the fact that they can be equally complex and deep as any monogamous union:

> [People] do not even realize that it means a lot of relationship work and are just like, 'Well, you must be living in a land of milk and honey,' as if I somehow have five people at every corner who just straight out satisfy me permanently, and then I lie down in the next room and then the other ten come or something. You really notice how consumed people are by such fantasy. (Maja, H02, para. 235)

Maja appears to be insinuating that her non-monogamous relationship is transformed into a projection surface for other people's sexual fantasies. She finds it 'insanely hurtful' when her intimate life serves as a 'showpiece' for the benefit or perception of others, rather than being acknowledged for what it is from her own perspective: "And talking about it with others is actually also insanely hurtful because you are talking about the most intimate relationships really, and you then become used as a showpiece" (ibid., para. 235).

### 5.1.4.5 LOSING FAMILY: "I AM NOT SURE WHETHER IT WAS MY POLYAMORY, ME BEING NON-BINARY, MY PANSEXUALITY, OR JUST THE FACT THAT I QUESTION ALL NORMS AND EVERYTHING"

At the beginning of this chapter (5.1.4.1, *Acceptance*), I portrayed Jo and Oliver's affirming experience of being embraced by family and friends not merely regardless of their true, queer, and non-monogamous selves but also explicitly because of them. Unfortunately, the opposite outcome to the one I described can also manifest when a person confesses to their loved ones about being non-monogamous. Toward the conclusion of our interview, as I inquire if Jo and Oliver have anything else they would like to add to our conversation, Jo finds it important to mention that their sister had explicitly prohibited them from having any contact with their nieces and nephews. Although Jo does not attribute the breakdown of these relationships solely

to CNM, they believe it acted as an additional element that compounded the already existing reasons for their sister's decision to cut off contact between Jo and her children. These reasons, Jo believes, are more or less connected to either their sexuality, gender identity, or relationship practices, all of which happen to push the boundaries of hetero- and mononormativity: "I am not sure whether it was my polyamory, me being non-binary, my pansexuality, or just the fact that I question all norms and everything" (Jo, H04, para. 548).

Losing contact with family members or seeing family relations deteriorate was an issue that had overshadowed Nora's experience of being openly non-monogamous, too. In fear of her family and, in particular, her father rejecting her, Nora had not been able to tell all of her relatives about her polyamorous relationship with Ian. "I think some people from my family who do not understand [CNM] might turn away from me," she (H03, para. 148) says. While Nora had found it safe to open up about CNM and her pansexuality to her mother and brother, she deemed it too risky to reveal these aspects to her father. She believed that the repercussions would be harmful and impact not only her relationship with him but also the dynamics of the entire family, which would also include her mother and brother:

> [S]o my father who supports and loves me a lot, but who also has very conservative views and with whom we had to have a long discussion about why we did not want a civil marriage[17]- and when it comes to my sexual orientation or alternative way of living, he- I do not know how he would be able to cope with all of that. And I am just scared that he would completely turn away from me and that it would then change the whole family dynamics. I actually have a good relationship with my father, mother, and my brother- that that would change. Yeah. The fear of it happening is just there. (Nora, H03, para. 148)

Hiding CNM seemed to serve the purpose of preserving family unity and protecting the feelings or emotional well-being of family members who might not be able or willing to approve of Nora's sexual orientation or polyamorous relationship. Nora approaches the topic with great sensitivity, recognizing that her family, explicitly her father and mother, may not be able to, in her own words, 'cope' with her choice to have multiple partners, some of whom are not (cisgender) men. She worries about her father finding out about everything the wrong way, that is, from someone other than herself, not knowing his way around CNM, or not being able to handle situations where he would have to explain his daughter's relationship(s) to other relatives. Nora also believes that her mother, although aware and accepting of her daughter's identities and intimate decisions, feels 'burdened' by them, finding it challenging to fully connect with Nora's experiences while being unable to discuss the matter with anyone else:

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[17] As previously mentioned, Ian and Nora are married without having had a civil wedding or marriage contract.

> And especially for my mother- it is kind of difficult for her to put herself in [my position]. [...] She is actually interested in everything, but of course [CNM] is nothing she is acquainted with, and I do not think she is able to talk to anyone about it. I think it is burdening her. (Nora, H03, para. 124)

Nora is confronted with a challenging dilemma. On one side, openly embracing her multiple relationships could potentially result in parts of her family disassociating from her. On the other side, concealing significant aspects of her identity and life in general in order to maintain family cohesion and comfort may, to some degree, mean compromising her personal values or sense of authenticity. Due to her unease about "the prejudices and vulnerability to which you expose yourself" (ibid., para. 164) by openly leading a life that defies hetero- and mononormative standards, Nora admits that she is not fully able to live up to her otherwise firm belief that "such life forms should be just as valid, openly lived out, and communicated" (ibid., para. 164) as are heterosexual monogamies. What follows, she says, is a sense of personal dissatisfaction: "[A]t the end of the day, not being fully out with how I live or desire to live is just not satisfying" (ibid., para. 120).

At the same time, Nora finds herself troubled by the idea that the subjects she is meant to either keep secret or reveal involve her very personal matters. "What really annoys me about all of this is that it is my own business," she asserts, "Like it is my private sphere and my own right to live my life the way I want" (ibid., para. 148). Indeed, people in heterosexual and/or monogamous relationships rarely must explicitly pronounce their relationships by uncovering their most intimate affairs to others, for one is monogamous in the eyes of society until proven otherwise. Such right to discretion that comes with the privilege of 'functioning as a norm' (see Foucault, [1976] 2020, p. 38) does not extend to non-monogamies. The necessity or expectation to 'come out' as non-monogamous (much like coming out as anything other than straight or cisgender) thus arises from a fundamentally unequal starting position between 'normal' or 'natural' relationships and those that cannot but 'deviate' from the norm (no matter if in a positive, negative, or neutral sense).

### 5.1.5 PROTECTING THE COUPLE

How were consensually non-monogamous core relationships maintained, or as I framed it, 'protected' in the face of the theoretical possibility of either you or your primary/nesting partner finding or opting for another, potentially 'better' partner? Depending on the relationship and the boundaries set concerning its openness or exclusivity, the interviewed couples relied on different strategies to maintain a sense of control within the core relationship,

to prevent the development of intimacy or emotional connections outside of it (which can potentially lead to jealousy), or to just feel safe, committed, or wanted by your primary/nesting partner, who is actively dating other people. I grouped the identified strategies into these categories: 1) *rules*, 2) *group sex and sex with couples*, and 3) *obligatory disclosure*. In the last category, 4) *undoing rules*, I address instances where the existence or applicability of rules and relationship agreements were called into question by interviewees.

### 5.1.5.1 Rules: "We do not do it in our own bed"

Of all the interviewed couples, Sophie and Paul had the most specified rules for their open relationship. The primary purpose of these rules was to prevent intimacy and emotional bonds from developing with other partners and, accordingly, to secure the exclusivity of the primary relationship. The primary relationship would thus stay constant and unaffected no matter what, while other relationships would work merely as supplementary 'add-ons' to it: "[T]he rule number one is […] that the other relationship is more like an add-on to our relationship. […] it can be added onto it and then be taken away again," Paul (H01, para. 293) explains. By establishing strictly separated spatial domains for the unfolding of different relationships, the couple could draw a line between love and, in Paul's phrasing, interactions based on the 'principle of lust' (*Lustprinzip*). Not only were dates to be limited to sex only, but they were also supposed to take place outside of the couple's own intimate spaces (home, bed), their friend groups, or otherwise 'unsuitable' locations where something other than sex would have to come to the fore (public places, museums, etc.).

> **Paul**: What we definitely do not do to this day is that we do not do it [have sex] in our own bed.
>
> **Sophie**: Yeah, totally. […] I am also like truly extremely grateful for this rule because I think if you had had your first sexual experience with someone else in your own bed, I think ((laughter)) you would have had to move into a new apartment. ((laughter))
>
> (H01, para. 244-245)

Also, certain acts such as staying the night at a date's place or specific sexual practices like anal sex carried so much intimate value for Paul and Sophie that they were forbidden: "And with anal sex, we kind of decided that it was so intimate for both of us that we do not have anal sex with anyone else," Sophie (H01, para. 260) describes.

For Paul and Sophie, clearly defined rules and an unquestioned right to 'veto' were the lifeblood of their open relationship. For the rest of the couples, all of which practiced polyamory and were more or less interested in dismantling relationship hierarchies, rules

carried only reduced importance or were even consciously avoided because, unlike in Paul and Sophie's case, the compelling need to prevent the formation of emotionally meaningful and long-lasting parallel relationships was not that evident in them. However, to speak of the three polyamorous relationships as ruleless or altogether void of any primary-secondary structures would be incorrect. In my view, also those interviewees who strived for veto-free, egalitarian polyamory realized some kind of prioritization within their multiple relationships, perhaps just through means other than outspoken, strict rules.

Nora and Ian, for instance, considered to be each other's primary partners only in terms of the time and energy they *willingly* commit to each other. "I want to spend the most time with Nora and my best friends. That is what I want to do," Ian says, "But that does not mean that Nora has a right always to be like, say, 'No, you have to come or do this or do that!' We mutually want to have a primary relationship in terms of time and energy" (H03, para. 113). As a further instance, Maja and Lea had learned strategies to keep each other feeling safe, important, and committed while actively dating other people. They would arrange a date night immediately after one of them had just been on a date with someone else, deploy couple's therapy (I doubt the same was done with other partners), stay available to each other while being on a date with someone else, or make sure to convey their affection toward their primary partner remotely in such situations:

> We learned in therapy that if one of us is on a date, for instance, then we make up a thing like, 'Can you write me a message until 10 p.m.?' and then the other person writes, for example, 'Yes, I will still come home today,' or, 'I will not be home today anymore,' or, 'Do not forget that I love you very very much and I will get back to you in an hour,' or something like that. (Lea, H02, para. 99)

There is "an unwritten rule" (something I would consider a veto that is just not being labeled as such) behind such strategies, Maja reveals, namely that "other relationships are allowed to be there, but they must not make us feel that we are not important to each other [...] [our relationship] must not be shaken in its foundations" (ibid., para. 130). After all, Lea and Maja agree that their relationship is, in contrast to their other (or most other) relationships, 'uncompromisable' and more 'future-oriented,' serving as the 'center of life' for both of them. Lea believes that in addition to the exceptional 'depth' of the couple's physical and emotional connection, its primacy can also be attributed to the 'investments' both partners have had time to make throughout their years spent together. Hence, alone through its longevity and 'invested' value, their relationship does have a favorable head-start in comparison to others:

> I do believe that there is something to it that you have already invested so much, and you do not give something like that away so quickly. And if another person were to come along

now, I would not just give our relationship away. Even if I were to fall in love with someone else now […]. (Lea, H02, para. 326)

### 5.1.5.2 Group Sex and Sex With Couples: "When it is a threesome with a man and two women, like the man is in an easy position there, right? Like there is no threat."

Controlling your partner's intimate decisions, particularly in terms of their choice of sexual partners or the specific types of constellations in which they might engage in sexual activities, showed to be another important means of safeguarding the primary status of the core couple. Ian, who started his non-monogamous journey by having group sex together with his domestic partner Nora, mentions that he had initially made a conscious effort to integrate men into their threesomes, so as to challenge his discomfort with Nora having sex with men, which at the time had felt more 'threatening' to him as opposed her being intimate with women:

> [A]nd as Nora said, we experimented always together in the beginning. It was important to me that it was not just with women because in that constellation you know when it is a threesome with a man and two women like the man is in an easy position there, right? Like there is no threat. There are no potential issues for jealousy probably. And that is not really so cool for the woman, I guess. And it is not really fair to say like, 'Just because of my insecurities, you can only have sex with women.' ((laughter)) (Ian, H02, para. 28)

Of course, Ian's reasoning reveals an internalized heteronormative double standard derogative of non-heterosexual intimacy and sex (their seriousness and validity); Witnessing his girlfriend with another woman had made him feel more secure and less jealous than having a second man come into the picture. At the same time, Ian's effort could also be interpreted as a way to defy his own (potential) unwillingness to- or some sort of unease about engaging sexually with another man, a fear most likely rooted in internalized homophobia. For a cisgender, at the time hetero-identifying man with no previous sexual experiences with other men, welcoming same-gender sexual contacts for the first time may very well have been challenging. What proved to be an even bigger challenge or 'threat' to Ian's sense of safety in his core relationship was the couple's decision to leave the threesomes behind and explore sex and intimacy individually outside of the relationship dyad. This, he explains, was a scary moment of having to let go of the control he had previously had over his relationship with Nora:

> […] and then, as Nora said, the discussion came like, 'Okay how about doing things separately and exploring separately?' and of course that feels a bit scarier because it is like letting go of the control that you have in monogamy. It is like, 'Okay I am letting my partner experience things with other people, and I am not there to be a part of it and therefore I do not know what is gonna happen. I do not know how you are gonna feel and I do not know how I will feel.' Like that was the scariest point I would say from my perspective to say like, 'Let us give it a try.' (Ian, H03, para. 28)

Paul and Sophie provided another interesting example of how couples may protect their intimacy by regulating the choice of sexual partners. While Sophie had found Paul having sex with individual women emotionally very distressing, she was more or less okay with him going out and having threesomes with couples. Her ease with group sex with couples derived from the assumption that the couples would be less interested in establishing anything 'deeper' than a sexual relationship with Paul, for "they already have each other and do not necessarily offer [Paul] anything" (Sophie, H01, para. 311) – *anything* in terms of anything that would jeopardize Sophie's special status as Paul's only intimate and emotionally meaningful connection. Paul confirms Sophie's account by stating that, in his experience, dating couples for the sole purpose of sex indeed is easier than singles, who might be more likely to strive for a relationship: "[D]ating singles is annoying. I therefore find it extremely easy with couples because they already are in a relationship. They just have the lust [...] to do it quickly [...] And yeah, that is quite easy for everyone, including [Sophie]" (Paul, H01, para. 311-313).

### 5.1.5.3 Obligatory Disclosure: "The most important thing is that I know everything. Like every single thing."

All interviewees emphasized that honesty was one of the core pillars of their CNM relationship, strengthening trust and a sense of commitment between partners. Honesty was believed to be achieved first and foremost through open communication and specifically through disclosing information about one's whereabouts, other partners, potential new dates, and even intimate and/or sexual interactions with other people. Knowing details about your partner's intimate life did not only serve the purpose of ensuring their safety while meeting up with sometimes complete strangers, but also of keeping track of and controlling their extradyadic intimate, sexual, and/or romantic connections, which contributed to an increased feeling of comfort within the core relationship. "I actually wanted to know quite a lot at the beginning because it made me feel safer," Ian (H03, para. 102) recollects. As for Paul, he prioritizes having complete awareness of 'every single thing' Sophie undertakes in order to feel content within their CNM arrangement. "In this open relationship, the most important thing for me is that I know everything. Like every single thing. What Sophie is up to and what Sophie wants to do. Then it is also okay for me," he (H01, para. 190) says.

All couples felt it was essential to keep each other informed about new (potential) partners and upcoming dates. However, their practices differed in whether they considered it important or mandatory to explicitly seek permission from the primary/nesting partner to go out or pursue a relationship with someone else. Jo and Oliver, for example, tried consciously avoiding such

arrangement whereby Maja and Lea tended to switch between "always asking beforehand if it is okay to have a date" and "doing something spontaneously without asking for permission in advance" (Lea, H02, para. 108), always adjusted according to the circumstances and the emotional well-being of both individuals. How much then would be revealed about dates and other partners afterward also varied. As detailed above, some participants wanted to know 'quite a lot' or even 'everything' about their partner's intimate affairs, whereas others had established communicational strategies by which they could control or limit the amount of information shared. As an instance of the latter, Maja and Lea had decided that the person who would be in a more 'vulnerable' position (the one without a date or an active second partner) would be able to set the tone for how much and what kind of details could be uncovered about their partner's extradyadic activities:

> But the person who could potentially be hurt is the one who is allowed to control [the discussion] a little bit. They are the one who can ask questions and decide how much they want to know, and they can also say, 'Stop.' It is not the other person who can just tell anything they want. It should be based on the initiative of the person who wants to know. (Maja, H02, para. 99)

Ian and Nora, on their part, had come to a solution where "it is always okay to ask" (Ian, H03, para. 102) about other partners without the obligation for the person being asked to deliver any answers. "It is always okay for the other person to say, 'I prefer not to answer that question,' or answer it in a way that they feel comfortable," Ian (H03, para. 102) clarifies. This way the couple could enable each other more room for deliberate concealment and also voluntary (as opposed to merely mandatory) disclosure. Ian points out that the vigorously emphasized honesty in CNM, when equated with a compulsory exposure of intimate details and an unquestioned right to knowing, can even border on violating your partner's privacy, not to mention the privacy of the other individuals they date:

> [Y]ou want to be honest with your partner and open. But at the same time, privacy is a thing. And also not only your own privacy but also the privacy of anyone else that you are intimate with. Particularly sexually, because it is not really okay that you share intimate, sexual details with someone else about somebody else to someone without their consent, right? So, it is about finding this balance between respecting privacy and being open and honest. (Ian, H03, para. 102)

### 5.1.5.4 Undoing Rules: "We try to work on the insecurities rather than working on the rules"

At times, rules the couples had initially set for their relationship ended up either not working in practice or failing to provide the safety they were thought to bring to the core relationship. Ian and Nora had first had one concrete rule that had forbidden staying the night at another

partner's place, which however got ruled out fast as the couple noticed that it just was not practical for them. Not any different from the overarching argument of the chapter, the purpose of this rule had been to prevent intimacy from forming between your partner and the individuals they date, thereby securing the position of the primary/nesting relationship: "[I]t felt safe to make that rule because like when you are staying over at someone's place, you create a sense of intimacy, of course," Ian (H03, para. 104) confirms and continues:

> But then it is like 4 a.m. and you are on the other side of Vienna, and it is just like, 'I wanna go to sleep.' I do not want to have to get a taxi back and then wake the other person up here just to go into bed just to wake up three hours later in my bed. Like that does not seem like a realistic- it does not really protect our relationship like we thought it would do. So that rule got thrown out of the other window. (Ian, H03, para. 104)

The impracticability of (some) rules also became evident in how Paul and Sophie executed them in their open relationship. The two had experienced difficulties implementing the general prohibition of extradyadic emotional intimacy. Especially for Paul, not establishing any kind of non-sexual connection with his other partners before having sex with them was nearly impossible. Not only because it might be a necessary step for some to feel ready for or comfortable with sexual engagement to begin with, but also because not knowing the person (in this case, a cisgender man) that one (respectively, a woman) is about to let into their home for sexual (or other) purposes may be potentially dangerous. The couple thus had concluded that "you do have to like go for a walk or something beforehand," (Sophie, H01, para. 252) because

> women may not just go home with someone whom they have met on Tinder and be like, 'Yes, we are having sex now.' Like you want to check out first if the person actually exists and is like generally okay. That is a part of a date. (Sophie, H01, para. 252)

More importantly, due to the differences in their desires, needs, and motivations regarding CNM, the rules that Paul and Sophie had set for their open relationship had never been equally applicable to *both*. Because the main function of the rules was to reduce extradyadic encounters to sex 'only,' they could not be directed at Sophie and most certainly not at her short-term intimate/romantic relationship with Johannes. Paul, on the other hand, was more affected by the rules, for he was primarily interested in sexual encounters while being 'supervised' more closely by Sophie regarding the matter. There was a clear imbalance in the implementation of the rules, which led Paul to feel like he was more restricted in the open relationship *and* by Sophie than Sophie was by him or the rules:

> So we did not have like a real fight, but rather a discussion where you at some point said, a bit out of defiance, I think, that you had the feeling that you were very much regimented by me. Or that there are so many things that I am not okay with, and that [...] I am allowed

to do. Like everything I want. Because I demand these dates where I can build emotional relationships and experience them and so on. And then I am to you like, 'Nope, that does not work for me, that does not work for me, and that does not work for me.' And I think that was the point where we realized that [an open relationship] is not so easy when you want different things. (Sophie, H02, para. 285)

Sophie and Paul had eventually settled for sticking with their rules and accepting the fact that as long as their intimate needs remain different, their open relationship "can never be rules-wise fair or balanced" (Sophie, H01, para. 287). Nora and Ian had taken quite the opposite road and eliminated all rules whatsoever. The couple had realized that they could not protect their coupledom through rules because, in their view, the underlying 'insecurities' from which such rules derive would remain untouched. "[R]ules and agreements tend to protect insecurities," Ian asserts, "and we try to work on the insecurities rather than working on the rules" (H03, para. 113). By undoing intimate regulations, Nora and Ian began dissolving the hierarchical relational frameworks built around them: "It was better for us to say, 'Let us just actually open the relationship.' ((laughter)) To see how we feel when we take away the constructs we have had. And that feels really good" (ibid., para. 113).

## 5.1.6 Changes and Developments

In this concluding section of the first part of my analysis, I lay out the primary changes and developments detailed by the interviewees regarding their journey from monogamy to CNM. Considering the limited available space and my principal focus on viewpoints pertaining to the sexual/intimate sphere (potential changes or developments in sexuality, intimacy, sexual practices, and understandings of one's self and relationships), I will introduce other emerged topics only briefly, providing less detail than they would otherwise deserve. Accordingly, I will begin the section with a concise overview of these alternate topics: 1) *personal freedom and autonomy*, 2) *unveiling insecurities*, 3) *increased trust and sense of safety*, 4) *communication*, and 5) *dismantling relational hierarchies*. Toward its end, I finally address the main subject categorized as 6) *new perspectives on sexuality*, which is more directly related to my main research questions.

### 5.1.6.1 Personal Freedom and Autonomy: "CNM gives me the feeling of *I can* rather than *I must*"

Since transitioning into CNM, most interviewees' intimate lives have been positively shaped by an increased sense of freedom and personal autonomy. Many reported that they no longer had to suffocate, hide, or keep quiet about their feelings and needs, the expression of which could

have formerly been potentially detrimental to their monogamous relationships. Paul, for example, was happy about the newly found freedom to communicate feelings, even uncomfortable or 'risky' ones such as extradyadic desire, to his primary partner. In Maja's view, CNM allows her more choice and agency in relationships instead of obligating or restricting her in her actions. "So [CNM] is really helpful to me in that it gives me the feeling of 'I can' rather than 'I must.' I think that's the most beautiful thing for me," she (H02, para. 278) explains. She goes on to describe it as "relaxing" – no longer having to "stop the feelings [she] has toward another person" (Maja, H02, para. 278). She can now observe these feelings and act upon them if she wants to.

Some participants shared that they had also developed greater self-sufficiency and personal autonomy within their couple dynamics through CNM. In addition to appreciating the expanded relational possibilities and open communication, Maja and Lea, to illustrate, had improved their ability to make more self-determined choices that were less dependent on the core partner and more in line with their individual desires, preferences, and goals. While still monogamous, Maja describes the two having been so "emotionally merged with each other" (H02, para. 148) that their personal spaces had grown unhealthy small. "[W]e were really almost in an interwoven symbiosis- which was not a hundred percent healthy," she (ibid., para. 148) stresses. With the introduction of non-monogamy, the couple had to establish a new approach to distance, closeness, and the right to individual self-determination. Being united at all times as a couple and striving for harmony "at all costs" (Lea, H02, para. 159) had had to make way for "telling each other things that the other person may not want to hear" (ibid., para. 177) and tolerating even unreconcilable disparities in individual needs.

### 5.1.6.2 UNVEILING INSECURITIES: "YOU KNOW YOU ARE NOT REPLACEABLE BUT SOMETIMES YOU JUST FEEL LIKE IT"

As brought up in Chapter 5.1.3.3, for some individuals, personal insecurities and issues with self-worth became more pronounced or noticeable through their involvement in CNM. "Like I knew of my insecurities before, but the open relationship is definitely something that can and sometimes also does reinforce them," Sophie (H01, para. 372) states. In her case, the redependence on acknowledgment by other men had made her hyperconscious about her appearances and performance of femininity: "What might they [men] think of me?" she had started to ask herself, "How much do I eat now?" or, "What do I say now?" or, "How should I dress now?" or, "What do I do now?" (H01, para. 372). Sophie's insecurities did not surface in the dating market alone but also in the context of Paul engaging sexually with other women

who may supposedly 'beat' her in attractiveness. "I can be completely shaken in my self-wroth only because someone [whom Paul dates] supposedly has what I do not have or what I think I do not have," she (ibid., para. 282) admits.

Like Sophie (but perhaps to a different degree), a few other interviewees had also experienced a recurring fear of not being enough for their primary/nesting partner. In line with the principles of classical monogamy, within a non-monogamous relationship, your partner's other relationships might be viewed as competitors, theoretically elevating the possibility of you being 'replaced' by one or more of them or having to take a back seat in the relationship. Lea, for instance, expresses that she sometimes feels vulnerable when it comes to her special status in Maja's life. She ascribes this feeling to problems with self-esteem provoked by CNM and the loss of sense of security, which had once existed in monogamy through the control exerted over one's partner and their whereabouts:

> You know that you are not replaceable but sometimes you just feel like it. [...] So that is mostly because of self-worth. Sometimes also this fear comes like, 'Oh dear, she could now get to know another person who might be more exciting than me and then she might only want to be with that person and not with me anymore.' And just this fear of change and of having control over what is going on when you are not there [with your partner]. (Lea, H02, para. 285)

### 5.1.6.3 Increased Trust and Sense of Safety: "The fact that we can theoretically be elsewhere, and we choose to be with each other makes the time that we have even more special"

While it could be demonstrated that the fear of 'losing' one's partner to another person, and thus an ensuing sense of uncertainty, can become accentuated in CNM life, a parallel and opposite change could also be observed: heightened perception of safety and trust between primary/nesting partners. On the one hand, such an elevated sense of security was attributed to the vast relationship work required in CNM: open and honest communication and working through insecurities and uncomfortable emotions. The ability to be vulnerable and openly share your deep, perhaps long-hidden, intimate desires or fears that arise in the context of CNM helped foster a stronger sense of being fully embraced and loved by your partner as your authentic self. To illustrate, for Paul, an open relationship means "trust" and "a safe space" where "[y]ou do not have to pretend to be something you are not. Instead, you can permit insecurities and you know that there is nothing weird about them" (H02, para. 374).

On the other hand, what made many interviewees feel safe and appreciated in their core relationship was the recognition that even in the face of the excitement of new partners, who

might very well be equally or even more desirable than themselves (whatever the meaning of 'desirable' might be), and the challenges or crises that would arise in the core relationship (with the possibility, in theory, of their partner then opting for another existing relationship), their primary/nesting partners deliberately chose to remain committed to them. "The fact that we can theoretically be elsewhere, and we choose to be with each other makes the time that we have even more special," Ian expresses. Sophie also voices that

> It is a beautiful realization to see that Paul stays here with me [...] to experience that our relationship is not that unstable that when someone from the outside comes, whom your partner shares intimacy or has good times with, our relationship is automatically called into question or endangered [...] And in those moments when things go south, I then see like, 'Well, he [Paul] is still sitting here.' ((laughter)) Or at least he has not gotten on the FlixBus yet and driven away. ((laughter)) [...] just because somebody else does not have love handles like me. (Sophie, H02, para. 383)

The primary relationship's strength to withstand the increase in partners evoked a feeling of being actively chosen and desired for who you genuinely are. Maja welcomed these feelings positively: "It was great to notice that it is truly me as a person that is wanted, and that I am not merely wanted because I fulfill some function for Lea" (Maja, H02, para. 156). She describes this as having been a decisive moment in her life in that it unraveled to her the difference between love and possession or love and mere entitlement to another person. By embracing polyamory and continuing to choose Lea as her partner, not just out of obligation, tradition, or the necessity to fulfill a predefined role or function in her life, Maja can now trust herself to have a more differentiated understanding of the reasons behind her commitment to Lea. "I know now much more precisely why I am in a relationship with [her]," she (ibid., para. 309) says.

### 5.1.6.4 COMMUNICATION: "I SAY MORE OF WHAT I TRULY THINK, AND ALSO WHAT I GENUINELY WANT OR DO NOT WANT"

It is not new information that all couples I interviewed expressed a marked rise in communicative relationship work owing to CNM. Polyamory and open relationships were perceived as requiring a lot of open discussion, negotiation, and a constant willingness to re-tailor the boundaries of the relationship to the changing needs of both partners. Maja suggests that it is the ordinariness of the required relationship work that refutes the romanticized idea of CNM as revolutionarily free, "hippie-like," "super-alternative," and almost "magical" relationship utopia for her, stating, "[I]t is actually quite normal work on relationships that requires a lot of negotiation," (H02, para. 355) and most certainly does not exclude disagreement or conflict.

Speaking of conflicts, the most evident shift in communication approaches noted by at least half of the couples was the intensified willingness to enter, allow, and deal with conflict and disagreement. This development, although not found easy or necessarily pleasant, was viewed in a positive light by the interviewees. Closely associated with the aspirations for more self-determination and personal autonomy (see Chapters 5.1.2 and 5.1.6.1), some couples, such as Maja and Lea or Nora and Ian, had become less peace-seeking or compromising in their communication, intending to find room for setting and respecting individual boundaries, for speaking one's mind and addressing problems (instead of sweeping them under the rug for the sake of maintaining unity), and for making personal needs and wishes known. Maja and Lea, for instance, were now keeping clear from their 'people pleasing' tendencies, which they admit both having displayed in the past. For Lea, this means that "I say more of what I truly think, and also what I genuinely want or do not want. Because I used to be much quicker in just swallowing stuff and going like, 'Okay, okay,' [in a conciliatory tone] just to avoid conflict" (Lea, H02, para. 179).

Otherwise, in a general sense, the interviewees' experiences seemed to favor the notion that their communication, although exhaustive and time-consuming, had gotten better and specifically more open and honest since transitioning into CNM. Some also reported that they had started to make time more deliberately for one-on-one relationship talk, as was exemplified by Nora and Ian and their regular relationship check-ins referred to as 'radars.'

### 5.1.6.5 Dismantling Relational Hierarchies: "Our relationship is essentially invincible because the only thing that can end it is us choosing to end it"

Most notably, among couples who were engaged in less emotionally exclusive, polyamorous dynamics, there was a considerable reworking of relationship hierarchies reported as a result of transitioning into CNM. Lines between partnership and friendship, romantic relationships and non-romantic relationships, or married life and non-married life had become more blurred, raising the question of what the definition of a 'real' relationship is after all and how (if at all) it differs from other meaningful relationships such as friendship.

For some, it had come as a surprise that through CNM, their friendships had deepened and taken on a more prominent role in their life. "Like it has been a totally unexpected side effect of non-monogamy that my friendships have deepened and become more intimate. And I think that is the best thing about it," Ian (H03, para. 42) remarks delightfully. For others, such as Maja or Jo, the differentiation between partnership and friendship had become more meaningless

altogether, for they could simultaneously exist within one single relationship. Jo knows that with their friend, Hanna, "there is always the option for more [sex and/or intimacy]," (H04, para. 267) continuing, "it always moves back and forth between platonic friendship and somehow like the feeling of, 'Is there something more between us?'" (ibid., para. 267). Equally, Lea found that in polyamory,

> the boundaries between friendships and relationships become a bit blurred. So there are a few people that I would basically call friends, but where I also think that I am in a relationship with them because these relationships are just as close, important, and intimate to me. (Lea, H02, para. 302)

The dismantling of normative relationship hierarchies was also reflected in the redistribution of tasks and responsibilities between the primary/nesting partner and the other partners, thus reducing the level of involvement expected from the primary/nesting partner. The satisfaction of sexual or intimate needs could be shared between more than one person, and alternative solutions to addressing temporary imbalances in those needs within the core relationship were more readily available, which some interviewees said they found personally relieving. Also, the entitlement to routinely access your partner's time, attention, and emotional and intimate resources was called into question in practice. In moments when the need for emotional support, close intimacy, or shared activities increased, instead of automatically obliging the primary/nesting partner to deliver any of them, the interviewees were reminded of the fact that they also had other people in their lives who are able and willing to step in and be there for them.

As already implied above, relationships were perceived as more flexible in CNM (polyamory in particular), allowing them to change in meaning and function. Of course, monogamous relationships change, too, but what was considered the crucial difference between CNM and monogamy regarding the matter was how individuals and their partners could go about such change. Namely, in some participants' view, a relationship in CNM does not necessarily have to end or be considered a failure if it changes in its nature. Ian finds that the common idea of relationships having to end because they no longer live up to the mononormative expectations – whether it be longevity, exclusivity, cohabitation, or suppressing extradyadic attractions – does not apply to CNM (or at least not the kind of polyamory he practices with Nora). A relationship can, for instance, stop being romantic (a quality very much valorized in monogamy; see Chapter 3.1.2) in nature and persist in another way without losing any of its value or significance. Consequently, Ian describes feeling like his relationship with Nora is 'invincible' in that no societal convention could determine its ending or mark any course it

might take as wrong or disappointing. If anyone or anything were to end it, it would be Nora and himself instead:

> But I feel like our relationship is essentially invincible, which is so cool because the only thing that can end it is us choosing to end it, and then that is the right decision. And then the relationship goes into the right direction. It can never be wrong, which is so cool. It feels invincible because even if it changed and we became non-romantic or non-sexual partners, or we decided to not to live together anymore, we would still have a relationship that was right for us and that is so cool. And that option you very often do not have in monogamy because when the relationship ends, that is it. (Ian, H03, para. 139)

### 5.1.6.6 NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUALITY: "I USED TO THINK I AM A SUB, AND NOW I HAVE REALIZED THAT I ACTUALLY HAVE A VERY DOMINANT SIDE TO ME AS WELL"

Discoveries in the field of sexuality were the most extensively elaborated-upon developments reported by the interviewees: new sexual experiences, practices, and roles in previously unknown constellations and with people of different gender identities were unlocked. Spectrums of sexual orientation were broadened, new forms of (sexual) attraction were detected, and individually vulnerable aspects within the sexual sphere were brought to light. For some, the confrontation with pluralized sexual roles explored through CNM has even helped them deconstruct patriarchal gender roles.

I will begin with reported experiences related to changes in sexual orientation. In Chapter 5.1.2.2, I mentioned that two interviewees, Jo and Nora, had both been motivated to explore CNM for various reasons, one of them being a deep desire to embrace their bi- and/or pansexuality after being in years-long monogamous relationships with cisgender men. Indeed, both had their aspirations fulfilled through CNM. During the interview, both reported currently being or having recently been in relationships with individuals who did not identify as cisgender men. Perhaps less expectedly (for not initially included in their motivations for CNM), two of the interviewed cisgender men, Paul and Ian, had also been able to engage with their heteroflexibility for the first time through non-monogamy. Prior to having his first ever group sex experiences in the wake of opening his relationship, Paul had not been aware of the fact that he could thoroughly enjoy engaging sexually with other men in specific settings. Similarly, Ian believes that had he not transitioned into CNM, he would never have had the chance to study and fulfill the 'urges' he felt toward some men. Now that he can explore his heteroflexibility at his own pace through non-monogamy, he feels liberated and (more) free:

> And I also allowed myself to follow particular urges that I had toward particular men. I did not- I would not classify myself as bisexual. I would classify myself as heteroflexible because I am not generally attracted to men physically. I am sometimes attracted to some men physically and sexually. And I would have never explored that in a monogamous

relationship because can you imagine having to come to you [Nora] and say, 'Hey I had sex.' And not only that I had sex, but I had sex with a man. Like that was or would have been a chaos for me and my identity whereas now I feel freer to explore that side of things whenever I feel the urge and that is so liberating [...]. (Ian, H03, para. 182)

One of the most notable changes in the perception of sexuality in the course of progressing to CNM involved what I named *pluralization of attraction* (or forms thereof). Many participants described that by dating or being in a relationship with multiple different people, they had come to recognize that the things they found attractive in other people were actually broader in scope than they had perceived before (when still monogamous) and that the nature of their attraction showed significant diversity based on the individuals they engaged with on a sexual, intimate, and/or romantic level. "I have noticed that there are different attractions relevant for me in different relationships. Every relationship does not have the same attraction," Maja (H02, para. 273) expresses. Prior to CNM, she says, "[I]t was not clear to me that a relationship does not automatically have to include the pillars of sexuality, emotionality, romance, sensual attraction and so on, like all of these different forms of attraction at the same time" (ibid., para. 25).

Lea agrees with Maja's view, voicing, "I find it very exciting to observe how different things attract me. With some people it might [...] be the body. It might equally be their mind. Or I can find attractive how a person deals with other people" (H02, para. 274). Unlike in monogamy, Lea can freely observe and study her attractions in CNM instead of having to concentrate on negating or fighting them: "I am not actually busy with thinking, 'I should not find this person attractive,' but am allowed to find the person attractive. I can reflect on why I actually find them attractive, which is quite an enrichment for me" (ibid., para. 274). Oliver also indicates having found out that he may not find conventional femininity automatically appealing after all, but only in people who perform it comfortably as a 'natural' or unforced part of their identity. In Jo, who neither identifies as a woman nor displays (or feels comfortable with displaying) conventional femininity, Oliver finds other things attractive:

> So what has changed for me is that I see Jo in a certain way, and that is not necessarily in this classical, to put it stupidly, feminine framework with lingerie and things like that. That did not work for me with Jo. But it did with Lisa, because that is her standard thing, so to speak, and it was not a costume for her. And that is when I came to the conclusion that [femininity] works for me but only with another person. (Oliver, H04, para. 516) [...] I do not want you [Jo] to pretend to be something else for me [...]. Because if you do not like it, then I like it much less, even if I had just found it great [with someone else]. (ibid., para. 522)

A majority of the interviewees had also found CNM a suitable and relatively safe framework for growing their interest in and/or trying out new sexual practices that they had either long fantasized about or previously regarded as scary, unthinkable, or wrong. Such practices and activities included, for example, the already mentioned group sex, fetishes, kink, BDSM, and attending sex-positive events. "I have become more open to the BDSM and fetish scene," Maja shares and adds, "I can allow myself to have more interests, approach them slowly, and face them, which is something that has been hard for me in the past" (H02, para. 270). Jo also reports becoming sexually more 'adventurous' now that they practice polyamory. By being more in touch with their sexual fantasies, they say, "I have realized that there is a lot more that I am actually comfortable with [...] That there are just more things that I want to try out. Things that have become thinkable for me" (Jo, H04, para. 531). Discovering sexual practices or activities as 'thinkable' meant to conceive them as "no longer wicked and evil" (ibid., para. 537). Having the ability to discover new facets of sexuality "in the most diverse constellations" and without "having a bad conscience" (ibid., para. 537) afterward was a vital element in Jo's personal journey on unraveling sexual stigma they had once absorbed from their conservative-Catholic, sex-negative upbringing.

Nora discloses that through experimenting with new forms of sexual enjoyment, touch, and kink (beyond penetrative sex, as she emphasizes) since transitioning into CNM, she has managed to identify a more dominant side of herself that she had not been aware of before:

> I used to think [...] that I am just more a sub, and now I have come to realized that I actually have a very dominant side to me as well. And to be able to experience that so slowly, somehow like step by step, is totally beautiful. (Nora, H03, para. 185)

Other participants, too, had found themselves taking up new, formerly undiscovered roles during sex and in relationships in general. "[Y]ou can slip into different roles with different people," Lea states, "I can somehow like have more of the role of a seductress in one relationship and then I adopt the opposite role in another relationship" (H02, para. 271). Experimenting with different positions within a relationship or during sex also served as a formative experience in acquiring new, less patriarchal understandings of femininity and masculinity. Having sexual encounters with other men alone had provided Ian with a "whole different perception of manliness," he (H03, para. 182) reports. Overall, having sex with multiple other individuals, each unique in their own way, had forced him to unlearn and eventually abandon many gendered constructs about sex that he had once held self-evident:

> [A]t the beginning, I was very much like, 'Okay, I have to prove my worth as a man. I have to make sure that everyone has an orgasm, and I have to perform, and that is what a man

does.' I am glad that that has developed too. So [...] like nowadays sensuality is much more in the foreground and not this like very animalistic act of penetration as the ultimate goal and- And why is even penetration always the goal? Like it was great to learn and incorporate these things into our sex life. (Ian, H03, para. 182)

For Nora, engaging with her dominant side offered a way to counteract patriarchal gender roles according to which "as a woman you have to somehow show this passive, sub [subdominant] side and, vice versa, men have to perform, also through penetration, like the more dominant side" (Nora, H03, para. 185). After transitioning into CNM, she describes having embarked on a transformational journey of rethinking gendered expectations within the sexual sphere and the power(lessness) associated with according roles: "[T]hose have just completely turned around for me, and I am deconstructing them for myself right now [...] It is very exciting. So yes, it is a great new horizon that has opened up" (ibid., para. 185).

In contrast to the above addressed, perhaps more empowering accounts, dating new men had made Sophie realize her continued vulnerability to patriarchal gender roles and sexual behaviors. In the dating market, she was further away from the erotically autonomous, equal sexual subject she had perceived herself to be when she had been solely with Paul. She was surprised by the fact that since opening her relationship, the men she had dated had all embodied an overtly accentuated form of patriarchal masculinity ('Machos'), and in those relationships, sex and pleasure were more in service of the man rather than Sophie herself. "[I]t is interesting to see that outside of our relationship, with other men, I fall back into this [...] man pleaser," she laughs and adds, "the two men or crushes that I dated were also quite machos [...], and I found it interesting that I chose that kind of men for myself again" (Sophie, H01, para. 372). Feeding off of her underlying issues with self-worth and body image (detailed in Chapter 5.1.3.3) and the recurring need to receive validation from other men in the dating market, Sophie noticed herself increasingly catering to patriarchy again: performing in bed according to the heteropatriarchal sex script and fussing over her eating, looks, and general behavior in the presence of (potential) dates. "I actually find it extremely exhausting to be so reliant on this feedback all the time and having to feel like I have to do so much to receive it," she (ibid., para. 372) concludes.

## 5.2 Consensual Non-Monogamies Shaping Sexual Capital?

We have now reached the second section of the analysis that is further divided into three parts. In the first part (Chapter 5.2.1), I inquire whether the interviews implied that CNM could be commodified to the individual's benefit, either in the sexual market (i.e., in dating, socializing,

and finding new partners) or outside of in other, not directly intimate or sexual areas of life. In other words, I consider the possibility that CNM might function as a desirability-enhancing (or -decreasing) asset and thus impact a person's embodied sexual capital (Chapter 5.2.1.1). I also explore the potential for turning CNM into neoliberal sexual capital (Chapter 5.2.1.2). In this scenario, the sexual, intimate, and/or sexual know-how and personal growth acquired through a multi-partner lifestyle become individual selling points - an integral part of a self-mastered neoliberal identity. The second part (Chapter 5.2.2) focuses on specifically one interviewee's gendered experiences with strategically controlling the visibility of their CNM relationship and thus their perceived sexual availability in public. In the third and final part (Chapter 5.2.3), I circle back to sexual capital and examine whether it is also negotiated within the dynamics of the non-monogamous couple, thus extending the scope of sexual capital to consider the couple as its own little sexual economy that, in relation to sexual/intimate encounters outside of it, assigns (a sense of) un/desirability to its individuals.

## 5.2.1 COMMODIFICATION OF CNM WITHIN AND BEYOND THE SEXUAL MARKET

### 5.2.1.1 EMBODIED SEXUAL CAPITAL: "A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE PUT OFF BY AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP"

With the exception of one instance, the interviewee's narratives did not exactly suggest that CNM had contributed to a higher embodied sexual capital in the dating realm. Quite the opposite, potential new partners seemed to view CNM rather as an obstacle than a desirability-enhancing aspect. Some interviewees had sensed from the outset that others might potentially consider them less attractive due to their pre-existing primary/nesting relationship in the background. "I was really afraid that no one would like to interact with me because I was a man in a long-term relationship. Like why would anyone be interested?" Ian (H03, para. 39) remembers thinking. In other's cases, having difficulties in finding people willing to engage with them had become a part of their dating reality as a CNMer. Paul reports that for him, "it really was not easy to get casual sex" through dating apps, etc., because "a lot of people are put off by an open relationship" (H01, para. 288). Sophie and he both explain feeling that other (potential) partners would find their relationship arrangement 'weird,' 'unsettling,' or as if they already were "a little bit out of the game" (Sophie, H01, para. 323) due to having a girl- or a boyfriend at home.

Paul believes that his sexual desirability as a CNMer had weakened, particularly among singles, suggesting that singles who might outwardly seek sexual encounters 'only' might ultimately be

more drawn toward individuals with whom the potential for an emotionally intimate, monogamous partnership still exists:

> At least in my experience, [...] many women are looking for someone with whom they can have sex quickly but who could potentially also become their boyfriend. And that is where I am out. This is the reason why I had like extreme difficulties in finding anyone. (Paul, H01, para. 288)

He further conveys his sympathy for singles who date within the urban area he lives in, expressing understanding for their skepticism toward the surge of non-monogamous partner alternatives. "I can totally understand it," he says, "I would not be into it either. Like being single somewhere and [CNMers] being the only people you meet up with. [...] Where I live, everyone is poly. How shitty is that!? That all people you can date are (poly)" (ibid., para. 324). Ultimately, because Paul was not rewarded with the opportunity to choose from an abundance of singles willing to date him (which would have indicated high sexual capital, i.e., not having to 'settle' for whatever is offered to you but being able to 'pick'), group sex or sex with couples had to come to his rescue. Among couples looking for a third person to have group sex with, Paul's non-monogamous relationship had no (negative) bearing on his popularity anymore.

In contrast to the otherwise somewhat negative reports on CNM's effects on individuals' embodied sexual capital in the dating market, Ian was the only one who explicitly recalled having experienced a rise in his desirability due to being non-monogamous, which took away his initial fear of nobody wanting to interact with him. He believes that his history ('track record') of having multiple relationships might actually be perceived as impressive and thus make him appeal experienced and more attractive to others:

> I was like, 'Okay, so apparently I am attractive to people, and apparently it is okay that I am in a non-monogamous relationship, and apparently it is even attractive that I am in a non-monogamous relationship because I have got proof or a track record of relationship(s).' (Ian, H03, para. 39)

He also adds that the enduring long-term relationship he has going on with Nora might also enhance his standing in some people's view, suggesting that the 'ability' to maintain long-lasting relationships is a prized attribute in the dating market, conveying an image of a 'good' and trustworthy (potential) partner as opposed to a 'strange' or morally questionable person: "It is like another person can see like, 'Well if you have managed a long-term relationship, you are probably not a total weirdo or a bad person.'"(ibid., para. 39).

### 5.2.1.2 NEOLIBERAL SEXUAL CAPITAL: "OVERCOMING THE AVERAGE" THROUGH CNM

Did the data indicate that CNM could also yield personal 'profits' in areas beyond the sexual market? In other words, were there any indicators that it may have contributed to an increase in neoliberal sexual capital in the lives of the interviewees? In my opinion, yes. Alone the fact that *personal growth* could be found under the driving forces for some individuals to explore CNM points to such phenomena. Chapter 5.1.2.5 highlighted how engaging in multiple relationships was considered an invaluable learning experience that could facilitate the acquisition of self-awareness and better interpersonal skills or even support a person's creative ventures in the artistic realm. To reference Maja once more, "you learn something from every relationship," and the people who we are today are "not only [the result of] our own personal achievements [...], but also the contribution of other people whom we have allowed to approach us intimately" (H02, para. 280). Precisely because CNM was acknowledged to demand substantial communication efforts and confrontations with deep-rooted personal insecurities and mononormative patterns of thinking and acting, it was hoped to propel individuals onto a long-lasting journey of self-discovery and personal growth.

Personal growth after transitioning into CNM had in fact been observed by many interviewees also in practice, especially in the aforementioned areas of self-knowledge and interpersonal/communicational skills. Many highlighted that they are now more in tune with themselves: their fears, traumas, insecurities, past experiences, negatively connoted feelings and behaviors such as jealousy or possessiveness, as well as their wants, desires, and personal boundaries. More importantly, it was not merely about becoming more aware of or reflecting upon these things (insecurities, jealousy, and possessiveness in particular), but also about getting on top of them, hence, controlling them or at least having more control over them. In other words, *managing* feelings and behaviors was, also in literal terms, considered a major 'added value,' 'reward,' or 'profit' attained through CNM. "Both of us have gotten to know ourselves better. [...] I really enjoy realizing that I can deconstruct these feelings of [jealousy and fear of abandonment], or at least change them. Maybe not always permanently but at least temporarily," Maja, for example, tells me and adds, "I find this very interesting and like an added value" (H02, para. 266). Paul also finds it personally "very rewarding" to "get away from these jealous thoughts and possessiveness" (H01, para. 166) through an open relationship, whereas Ian reports that overcoming personal insecurities by facing them has helped him and Nora 'grow' since taking up polyamory.

(Nonsexual) interpersonal or communicational skills gained through laborious relationship work, intensive self-reflection, and intimate encounters with various people were an often mentioned and much-appreciated element in CNM for many interviewees. However, it remained a bit unclear *what* exactly these skills were other than perhaps the things already mentioned in previous chapters: open communication, honesty, talking about difficult feelings and insecurities instead of sweeping them under the rug, and drawing and respecting personal boundaries. What I know is that these skills were reported to exist and somehow evolve through CNM: skills learned within the primary/nesting relationship could be transferred to all kinds of interactions outside of it, and things learned in other relationships would be brought back to 'benefit' the core relationship. For Ian, his special insights into relationships and non-monogamies (derived from personal experiences as a polyamorist/relationship anarchist, extensive individual research on the subject, and close involvement in a CNM community) had even earned him a distinctive, almost specialist-like status as a trustworthy confidant for others: "[P]eople often kind of confine in me or share their intimate experiences and things like that and I am very happy to listen and give them support or advice," he (H03, para. 95) explains.

There were also a few interviewees for whom CNM functioned as a supportive complement to certain areas in their lives or generally as a kind of addition to their already 'unique' and 'alternative' lifestyles or personalities. As previously mentioned, Nora considered her multiple relationships a productive source from which she drew inspiration, motivation, and creativity for her artistic ventures. For Jo and Oliver, on the other hand, being polyamorous and thus 'different' in the intimate sphere was just one among the many 'quirky' and norm-breaching things the two had embraced in their lives. What became apparent during the interview with the two was that 'standard' was not something they identified themselves with or strived for in any of their doings. Polyamory had thus seamlessly fit into the underlying motif threading across every aspect of the couple's life, namely shaping it autonomously and individually, unbound by societal norms:

> **Oliver**: And what pervades our life in general is the idea that we do things as we want to. I do not know- like with our wedding, we held it in a small circle. Things like that. We make our food the way we want to do it and not like, 'Yeah, you are supposed to do it that way and then you have to do this, but'-
>
> **Jo**: Yeah. We do not care-
>
> **Oliver**: It does not matter. It is our thing and our celebration and yeah, if you do not like it, then you do not have to come.
>
> **Emma**: Yeah.
>
> **Oliver**: And that is- that just runs through everything that we do actually.

**Jo**: Yeah.

**Emma**: Mm.

**Oliver**: It does not matter if it is lying on the floor in the office, taking a short break, or things like that that are not standard. That is just how (we like it).

(H04, para. 323-330)

There were also other signs in the data that suggested that CNM might serve the function of mediating a 'cool,' 'alternative,' or 'liberal' self-image of its practitioners: CNM was reported to attract positive fascination among other people who might view it as an 'exotic' feature of a person (as was noted by Paul in Chapter 5.1.4.1) or a lifestyle that can provide the 'normies' around valuable insights into 'unique' ways of viewing the world and existing in it (as Jo and Oliver's narrative about becoming godparents exemplifies in the very same chapter). Sophie acknowledges having once felt like she could separate herself from the monogamous masses through CNM and spice up her self-image as a norm-defying and exciting person who can prove to have 'overcome' the conventional. Slightly amused by herself, she admits that besides her genuine interest in unlearning mononormativity, she had been feeling a bit embarrassed about her and Paul's monogamous relationship, contrasting it to all the 'queer stuff'[18] she intensively engages with and looks up to in her life: "[W]hen you deal with so much queer stuff, and then you look at yourself and your heterosexual monogamy, it is like- ((laughter)) It kind of has the effect of like, 'Yeah.' [slowly, with dissatisfaction]" (Sophie, H01, para. 80). By having such an 'unexceptional' relationship lacking unique qualities or norm-breaching characteristics, Sophie had felt as if she had been incapable of "overcoming the average life model [*Nullachtfünfzehn-Modell*]" (ibid., para. 80). Hence, an open relationship had seemed like a way for her to rise above the ordinary crowd, to "add something unconventional to the whole thing" (ibid., para. 80).

The narrative of personal growth was evidently present in the interviewees' telling, including elements that resonate with the neoliberal ideal of self-reliant and -controlled, unique, and autonomous individuals for whom relationships bring not only their inherent value but also other 'side-effects' which can secure 'profits' in other areas of life other than the sexual market or intimate and romantic relationships. Many of these effects could be shown to revolve around the individual and the self: observing the self, analyzing the self, understanding the self, and eventually 'mastering' the self. 'Working' on the self by confronting its darker or

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18 Generally, both Paul and Sophie seemed to view CNM as more characteristic of queer life than of cis-heterosexual relationships.

uncomfortable sides (insecurities, trauma, fears, etc.) through CNM was believed to serve a higher purpose: self-knowledge. Knowing yourself, then, seemed to be the very key to understanding the personal 'root causes' behind the undesired feelings of jealousy and possessiveness, both of which were continuously construed as something that could in fact be dismantled or conquered by the individual. It seemed that from a similar place of 'continuous learning,' great everyday communicators and interpersonal 'experts' could even be born. Moreover, it is apparent that CNM serves purposes other than a mere alternative to monogamy. It is also formative of individuals' identities and their sense of uniqueness. For some, CNM might be a natural continuation of their already 'alternative' lifestyle or a sign of refusal to conform to social norms. Others might see in it a way to develop their professional or artistic selves or a promise of a 'cool' identity that might counteract their internal unease about being way too 'average.'

## 5.2.2 STRATEGIC DISCLOSURE OF CNM: SIGNALING AVAILABILITY AND SHIELDING AGAINST PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE

Before moving on to discuss the extent to which sexual capital might also be negotiated within couple-intern sexual economies, I want to return to Sophie's experiences alone one more time and center her narrative about communicating about her open relationship in the dating market, which I believe to exemplify how CNM identities can be deployed strategically depending on the situation and the specific social functions they are hoped to fulfill. In this subchapter, the social functions of interest are a) conveying sexual availability to others by disclosing non-monogamous identities and b) shielding against unwarranted sexual/intimate interest or harassment by doing the opposite. Rather than evaluating Sophie's self-perceived desirability or sexual capital across different contexts, I am primarily concerned with her experiences regarding the gendered implications of patriarchal understandings of un/availability. What becomes evident through her telling is that the level of personal, intimate, or sexual availability and the freedom to decide over it are not solely under the individual's own control – no matter how theoretically liberating their relationship model might be –, but also depend on the meanings that other people assign to the individual, their body, and the identities they carry. These may not always align with those that the individual themselves would like to convey to their surroundings.

Out of the interviewees, Sophie was most vocal about the forms of coercive power that had been imposed on her by men and the patriarchy: boundary crossing, non-consensual 'sexual'[19] experiences, sex centered around men's pleasure (as opposed to that of her own or both people involved), and being viewed as 'property' of men – also when being in an open relationship. In the course of transitioning from monogamy to CNM, a central realization for Sophie had been that of her rediscovered vulnerable position as a woman in the dating realm (see also Chapter 5.1.6.6). She reports that stepping outside of the comfort and safety of her long-term primary relationship with Paul (which she describes as remarkably gender-equal) had also meant that she would – faster than expected – fall back to her "sixteen- or seventeen-year-old self" again, who is very much dependent on being accepted by men ('man pleaser') and thus "not at all safe from abusive relationships" (Sophie, H01, para. 372). In light of these circumstances, Sophie mentions disclosing her non-monogamous identity rather selectively. That is to say, controlling the visibility of her open relationship is an important instrument in both attracting desired partners and shielding against unwanted attention:

> Yeah, at the club, for example, if I were interested in having something with a person, I would say to them that I am in an open relationship. But if I had no interest in them, I would deploy the classical excuse as a protective thing and say, 'Yes I am in a relationship.' (Sophie, H01, para. 308)

On the one hand, being able to say that she is in an open relationship, Sophie can unlock opportunities for wanted intimate and/or sexual encounters. This, of course, would be theoretically impossible if she was monogamous. On the other hand, and surely not different from what many single women, femmes, and feminine-presenting people are forced to do, Sophie is used to concealing her sexual availability when dealing with uninteresting people or (sexual) harassment and persuasion by men: "[I]f it is some annoying cab driver who pesters me stupidly, I will say 'Yes, I have a boyfriend!'" she (ibid., para. 306) illustrates. While it is not untrue that Sophie has a boyfriend, by leaving parts of her relationship status unarticulated, she believes she can prevent men from interpreting her non-monogamous identity as an additional invitation to pursue her: "I would not say, 'I am in an open relationship,' either, because, again, it like opens up a wrong idea for the other person" (ibid., para. 338). "[Y]ou know how it is anyway," she continues to speak to me, "It makes things a little bit easier sometimes" (ibid., para. 340).

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[19] Quotation marks are placed here as a sign of questioning whether non-consensual sexual experiences can be classified as *sexual* in the first place. This notion pertains to the larger conversation about the difference between sex and rape and the irreconcilability of non-consensual actions (in the sexual sphere) and sex.

Although being exposed to gender-based and/or sexual violence (under which I count verbal harassment and persuasion, too) has nothing to do with CNM itself (as previously stated, concealing one's potential sexual availability is a strategy applied irrespective of one's relationship status), the fear of inciting unwarranted sexual attention by disclosing a non-monogamous identity might have something to do with the already addressed stereotype about non-monogamists as overtly sexual people: "[O]nce I was talking to someone in the club, and maybe what [being in an open relationship] also brings along is that people think that I am like a very sexual person," Sophie (ibid., para. 323) contemplates. Perhaps, then, the 'idea' (see paragraph above) that Sophie would like to prevent from crossing the minds of those (men) that she seeks to get away from is that of her as sexually more 'loose,' 'willing,' or 'easy-to-get' than others.

By being able to act in conformity with one's desire, CNM can provide an increased sense of sexual/intimate autonomy and freedom (see Chapter 5.1.6.1). Sophie, for instance, does not necessarily have to suppress her sexual interest in other people and can "indulge in crush feelings" (ibid., para. 80) without Paul's permission or having to feel guilty about it. Yet, there is no guarantee that others, especially men she wishes to appeal to, also interpret her non-monogamous identity in a way that reciprocates her intentions when disclosing it. While Sophie exercises her willingness and freedom to pursue extradyadic relationships through CNM, some men dismiss her as 'out of the game' precisely because she is non-monogamous. One of Sophie's crushes, Evin, had difficulties in 'daring' to pursue her, not exactly knowing what he was 'allowed to do' with her while fearing a potential conflict with her primary partner, Paul. A woman deliberately and self-determinately asserting her sexual or intimate availability while embracing CNM may not be enough for some men like Evin to fully recognize her as self-governed, free, and accessible. Deep down, there is an underlying sense that Sophie is still 'owned' by Paul:

> So it was interesting how [Evin] dealt with me because [Paul] was still like a boyfriend and somehow the man to whom I belong, and that is why he did not dare to make a move on me and communicated that he was a little unsure in terms of what he is allowed to do with me. Because there is still someone in the background to whom I am linked. And I think that is a little bit like- like what I meant with the thing when you say, 'I have a boyfriend,' and then you are like a little bit out of the game for the other person, in my case men. It does play a role here. I am somehow available but then there is still kind of someone under whose protection I am. And what became like clear [with Evin] was that he did have interest in me but did not want any conflicts. (Sophie, H01, para. 323)

Paul also points out that he has encountered the challenge of dating while already being involved with someone else, for some potential partners may not find it optimal to date someone who is in a committed relationship. Sophie responds to him by saying that she still sees a fundamental gender-based difference in the ways both of them are treated in the dating market and with respect to their CNM identities. Where it might be slightly more challenging for the openly non-monogamous Paul to find partners who are also interested in having casual sex 'only,' Sophie is confronted with an ideology according to which she cannot possibly be free, self-driven, or equally involved in decision-making while in a relationship with a man. On several occasions, and especially regarding her crush, Johannes, Sophie mentions having felt like she was perceived to be 'borrowed' or 'lent out' to other men by her primary partner, suggesting that she would be passive and merely at the mercy of Paul's decisions in terms of what she is or is not allowed to do in the course of their open relationship:

> [S]o what I just meant was that by the reactions I have received, I could directly see that I was perceived to be owned by Paul. Like somehow as if I were passive and belonged to someone else, and you [Paul] kind of lend me out or so. And that mediates like a message of, 'Such a crazy thing that he [Paul] allows her to date others.' That was definitely the case with Johannes. (Sophie, H01, para. 325)

In summary, investigating Sophie's accounts of communicating about CNM offers us important insights into the prevalence of the idea of women as men's property. Women, femmes, and feminine-presenting people, despite their relationship status, are forced to resort to a (heterosexual) monogamous identity (as opposed to a single or non-monogamous one) in order to protect their personal, sexual, and intimate integrity from violations carried out by (cisgender) men, because the truth is (although perhaps not as blatantly apparent as, let us say, a hundred years ago) that in heteropatriarchal settings, men are assumed to have an unrestricted entitlement to women's bodies and personal space. They very notion of already 'belonging' to another man can thus be seen an objection to a woman's sexual availability or desirability – a notion that many of us have learned to instrumentalize as we navigate patriarchy. Of course, if we understand the strategic proclamation of oneself as 'taken' by another person as an effort to preserve sexual or intimate autonomy, thereby refusing someone's access to oneself and one's body, it is necessary to question whether it is even autonomy that we are talking about here. Can self-determination or personal freedom be achieved through the supposed possession of someone else over you? Is it truly autonomy when the independence from one man is achieved through the real *or* imagined power another one has over you?

### 5.2.3 Negotiating Sexual Capital Within Couple-Intern Sexual Economies?

The theory of sexual capital and its two manifestations – the direct sexual desirability of an individual (as in embodied sexual capital) and the perceived added value that specific sexual or intimate experiences otherwise bring to the subject (as in neoliberal sexual capital) – have mostly been applied, to the best of my knowledge, to either the dating market or specific sexual fields (subcultures, urban spaces, events, etc.) or, as is the case with neoliberal sexual capital, spheres beyond the intimate or sexual realm (work, interpersonal communication, self-determination, subject-constitution, etc.). In each sexual field, an internal sexual economy is established that governs what or whom we find attractive and determines how sexual capital is distributed among the individuals in it. Drawing from the insights that the interviewees shared with me regarding the shifts in their sense of self-worth and how they assessed their own attractiveness, as well as that of their primary/nesting partner, within a non-monogamous core relationship, I wanted to dedicate this last chapter to a speculative elaboration of the theory of sexual capital, for I am curious: Could the non-monogamous couple also have its own internal, small-scale sexual economy where individual sexual capital, in relation to both partners' desirability outside of it (in the 'dating market'), is negotiated?

Two types of phenomena identified in the interviews brought me to consider the existence of something like a 'couple-intern sexual economy' that influences the variation in sexual capital among its individuals. The first of them concerned the reported increase in (sexual) desire toward your primary/nesting partner upon witnessing their desirability to other people. Nora, for instance, talks about the resurgence of attraction she felt toward Ian as she came to observe that, "Okay, wow, [he] is totally attractive for other women, too!" (Nora, H03, para. 185). In a similar fashion, Maja implies having perceived Lea in a more intriguing light after "seeing what other people find attractive about [her]," continuing, "and it makes you go like 'Oh, but that is so true!'" (H02, para. 280). Maja equates this experience to the sensation of observing your partner with a renewed outlook: "Because you are kind of stuck in your ways before, and you have this image of your partner that they are still the same person that they were when you met them [...], it is nice viewing you [Lea] the way other people view you" (ibid., para. 282). As a result of observing your partner's popularity in the dating market, few couples even reported having undergone a temporary 'boost' in their sex life.

Whereas my first observation, outlined above, pertains to the logic of: the more enhanced your primary/nesting partner's sexual capital outside of the core relationship is, the more desirable *they* also appear to you within the core relationship, the second was about how individuals'

perception of their *own* sexual capital (or lack thereof) was shaped by the (assumed) 'value' of their primary/nesting partner in the sexual market, as well as the 'value' of the primary/nesting partner's other partners. This manifested itself, for example, in the fear of marked disparities in extradyadic popularity between partners: one having an easy time in finding and entertaining multiple relationships in CNM (indicating elevated sexual capital) while the other one struggles to find any connections whatsoever (indicating scarce sexual capital). Ian reports having felt such fear in the beginning after opening his relationship with Nora, driving him to temporarily seek validation for his threatened sense of personal desirability by trying to establish connections with as many people as possible:

> I had this worry that Nora would be able to go out and meet people and have much easier time connecting with men, women, all genders. And that I will be sat home watching Netflix by myself. And that was my worry. So I probably like went for the scatter kind of approach of like, 'Okay, I am just gonna try connecting with anybody just to show that I can.' To get some validation. (Ian, H03, para. 39)

As previously noted, an individual's assessment of their own sexual capital would also depend on the presumed sexual capital of their primary/nesting partner's other partners. This became particularly clear in those interviewees' narratives who more or less directly expressed feeling as if they had entered a 'competition' for their partner's attention and intimate energies through CNM. The fluctuating dynamics of desirability – whether in terms of 'beauty,' 'sexiness,' 'uniqueness,' 'skills,' or whatever it is that makes a person desirable in a given context – between you and your partner's new lovers or sexual companions had a decisive role in indicating perceived threats to the core relationship. As indicated by the findings introduced in Chapters 5.1.3.3 and 5.1.6.2, fears of inadequacy and abandonment were recurring topics in some interviewees' CNM lives, and the act of comparing oneself to a partner's new intimate connections demonstrated the potential to either soothe or shatter a person's sense of self-worth.

In Sophie's case, the sexual ranking between her and Paul's other partners was most notably determined by their (in)ability to conform to patriarchal beauty standards of femininity, especially those regarding weight and looks. Discovering that another partner of Paul's possessed a greater share of this precious 'currency' (particularly 'thinness,' which Sophie thought she herself was missing) caused Sophie to fear that Paul's perception of her might shift unfavorably; She worried that she might sink down the ladder of sexual desirability, not just in her own perspective but also in Paul's eyes. It is then no wonder that, on one occasion after receiving a photo of one of Paul's dates, who this time around appeared to be less 'attractive'

than she perceived herself to be, she could sustain her sense of self-confidence and security with Paul. The other woman's sexual capital (assessed merely by her appearances) seemed not high enough to jeopardize her own status and thus incite jealousy:

> **Sophie**: I know I was sitting like in this café with a friend and then you sent me the picture of her-
>
> **Paul**: ((laughter))
>
> **Sophie**: And we looked at it and were like, 'Oh, never mind!' [relieved tone of voice] ((laughter))
>
> **Paul**: ((laughter))
>
> **Emma**: Not a danger?
>
> **Sophie**: Yeah, it was like, 'Not a danger Sophie, you can sit back now.' And then there was not so much of this jealousy of her there anymore [...]
>
> (H01, para. 139-144)

Possessing sexual know-how and, like many of us are used to saying, 'being good in bed' (whatever it should mean) can equally heighten a person's status in the sexual realm and make them appear more desirable to others. Potentially alluding to such phenomena, Sophie further reveals that she felt nervous about the idea of Paul having exceptionally good sex with someone else. "[C]ould it happen that someone else comes along who can somehow offer something better than I can?" (Sophie, H01, para. 385) – also in terms of sexual satisfaction? Sophie remembers feeling terrible upon learning that Paul had not only had sex with another woman for the first time but also that it (sex) had happened more than once during a single date, indicating the experience having been particularly satisfactory for both parties: "[E]verything felt twice as horrible as [Paul] told me that they had had sex two times that evening. I thought to myself like, 'My God, it must have been really good then,' like, 'Two times in a row?!' ((laughter))" (ibid., H01, para. 201).

Paul also reflects upon having picked up on certain attributes in Sophie's other partners that made him feel undermined in his masculinity. He recalls a conversation between Sophie and him where Sophie opened up about having a bad sexual experience with another man (potentially Johannes, although unclear) whom she had temporarily connected with after the opening of the couple's relationship. Besides the point that Sophie's primary intention in the conversation had been to convey her underlying dissatisfaction with this experience, Paul got stuck in one detail only: Sophie's date had allegedly had a bigger penis than Paul himself. Although he knew that the act of comparing penises and letting such a thing affect his sense of

self-worth was 'stupid,' he could not help but feel, in his own words, 'emasculated' by this information:

> **Paul**: So Sophie also told me that [sex with this other man] was just not good. And I picked out a detail from her statement. Like I may just say it. The guy has a much bigger penis than I do. ((laughter))
>
> **Sophie**: ((laughter))
>
> **Paul**: Yeah, yeah. So Sophie explicitly said like, 'It [sex with him] really sucked,' right?
>
> **Sophie**: It was just hurtful and stuff.
>
> **Emma**: Mhm. Mhm.
>
> **Paul**: Yeah, and I feel like- yeah, like it is so stupid that you then feel like so emasculated. Like for many men, that is truly somehow like a thing. I find it just so interesting [...] that I project my own fears onto what Sophie says and ultimately change her message completely. [...]
>
> (H01, para. 214-219)

So what does it say about you when your partner's date has a bigger penis than you do? If we were to consider (the construction of) masculinity – in the most heteropatriarchal sense and therefore also in the nonsensical correlation with a person's penis size – as a desired asset within, let us say, cis-heteronormative, mainstream dating spaces, then it would mean that you, in that given moment, might possess or at least believe to possess weaker sexual capital than your partner's other date. What I find interesting about the example above is that although Sophie's disclosure about not having that great of a sexual experience with another man could have theoretically been interpreted by Paul as a reassurance of his own sexual prowess – potentially boosting his perceived sexual capital in Sophie's eyes for he, *despite of* allegedly having a smaller penis than his 'competitor,' could provide her with better sexual experiences – it was the brought up difference in penis size that got him shaken up in his self-confidence as a (cisgender) man and partner to his girlfriend.

It appears to me that the concerns outlined above go beyond your partner simply participating in sexual, intimate, and/or romantic connections with others. They also pertain to the particular individuals they are involved with and the qualities that set these individuals apart, especially in comparison to you yourself. Who and what these individuals *are* can hold the power to directly speak to what we are *not*; They speak to our personal 'deficiencies' and insecurities that we believe detract from our own desirability. Whether we deem ourselves desirable and what we believe our partners to find desirable in us and other people are not random or a matter of mere personal preferences, but an effect of our assigned position on a hierarchical system of (sexual) attractiveness that operates on patriarchal, heterosexist values,

not to mention the racism, ableism, and classism inherent to them. What is apparent from Sophie and Paul's accounts is: to be a desirable 'woman,' you must be 'fit' and 'thin' and to be a desirable 'man,' you must definitely not have a small penis – you better watch out because someone else might beat you in these areas and come and snap you partner away from you!

Of course, comparisons in desirability are nothing CNM-specific and certainly happen in all kinds of relationship arrangements, monogamy and unethical non-monogamy included. I nonetheless contemplate whether within coupled unions that have been consensually opened, the degrees of personal sexual capital undergo a more profound reevaluation as both partners reenter the sexual market marked by competition. In contrast to classical monogamy, where couples can insulate themselves from such competition by cocooning themselves in obligatory exclusivity and the (theoretical) impossibility of extradyadic desires translating into actual extradyadic actions, in the context of CNM, the possibility (or danger) of your partner actually, in a sense, 'having a taste of' what you yourself are lacking, becomes tangible: they might flirt with people more 'beautiful' than you, be generally more 'popular' than you in the dating game, fall in love with someone more 'adventurous' than you, have amazing sexual experiences with a person whose physique you can only dream of, enjoy heartier laughs with a new lover 'funnier' than you, or indulge in meaningful conversations with a partner 'smarter' than you.

# 6 Discussion

My analysis of the interviews resulted in a variety of categories, which I discussed in two separate sections. The first explored the participants' lived experiences with negotiating CNM: the kind of personal motivations and life events that had led them to open their relationships, their socialization about different relational structures before it, the kind of personal resources they have since needed to navigate CNM, the reactions that their 'coming out' as non-monogamous had incited in their social surroundings, the measures that they had taken to protect their core relationships amidst new potential partners, and, lastly, the most notable changes and developments within and beyond the sexual/intimate sphere they had observed during and after their transition from monogamy to CNM. In the second section, I examined the interviewees' narratives through the lens of the theory of sexual capital, trying to identify whether modern consensual non-monogamies practiced within neoliberalism have desirability- or status-enhancing properties. Accordingly, I inquired whether the data supported the speculative idea that CNM, too, could be translated into personal profits both as embodied sexual capital (elevated desirability, attractiveness, popularity, etc., in the sexual sphere) and as neoliberal sexual capital (the sense of being valuable when being weighed against the moral doctrine of neoliberalism). The preoccupation with sexual capital also guided me to consider the gendered challenges of disclosing sexual availability *together* with CNM in patriarchy, and to broaden the scope of the theory of sexual capital by proposing that the dynamics within the non-monogamous couple might also shape the volume of its individuals' sexual capital.

The identified motives for engaging in CNM proved to be manifold, not necessarily adding anything new or groundbreaking to the already existing body of research on the topic (see, for instance, Aguilar, 2013; Hnatkovičová & Bianchi, 2022; Moors et al., 2017; St.Vil & Giles, 2022; Wood et al., 2021). The primary reasons focused on sex, sexuality, love, and relationships: CNM was seen as a promising means for alleviating piled-up sexual frustration and the sense of overfamiliarity in a long-term coupledom, pursuing new and exciting sexual encounters, establishing and nurturing deep and loving connections with others, and generally reclaiming a sense of freedom in the sexual/intimate sphere. Most importantly, for those who were not straight (or cisgender) but had mainly participated in heterosexual or 'hetero-passing' relationships, the transition to CNM provided a promising opportunity to shape their intimate lives in a way that facilitated and felt affirming of their sexual identity. This result ties well with previous studies that have similarly highlighted CNM's perceived potential to support

fluid relational structures and the exploration and expression of queer and marginalized sexualities (Hnatkovičová & Bianchi, 2022; Wood et al., 2021).

Also, the journey into CNM was not always a carefully planned or reasoned choice but more of a spontaneous or even accidental occurrence. A few individuals had simply fallen in love with a third person, had an unexpected extradyadic sexual experience, or begun developing an urge to follow attractions without the wish to compromise their existing core relationship because of it. Contradicting the mononormative belief that (romantic) love or sexual desire is an inherently limited resource that can be distributed among more than one person only at the cost of its quality or quantity, loving or desiring a new person was not experienced as an impediment to the ability to continue loving and desiring your initial core partner. In fact, the attraction and affection felt for each partner were considered distinct and unrelated, much like their own separate and unique spheres.

The reasons for doing CNM encompassed more than sexual affairs and the pursuit of love and intimacy, illustrating how CNM signifies more than a mere multi-partner lifestyle. In line with Jessica Wood and colleagues' (2021) findings, the decision to engage in CNM was deeply rooted in individuals' values and moral beliefs about personal freedom and erotic autonomy. In my data, too, CNM was adapted to personal relational ethics with the intention of challenging mononormative notions of coupled togetherness, in/dependence, responsibility, and the right to (or lack of) personal freedom in practice. CNM was hoped to bring the individual closer to the ideal of an autonomously governed intimate life, as opposed to remaining 'stuck' in one that is silently imposed on them by society. Undoing relationship hierarchies, such as the subjugation of platonic love to romantic love, and redistributing relationship duties among multiple people were seen as attractive ways to move toward a personally less restricting and thus more free and ethical relationality. Additionally, the interviews revealed a recurring desire to foster a self-sustaining, self-reflective, and ever-developing subject, confirming the already established link between CNM and the pursuit of personal growth and development (Aguilar, 2013; Moors et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2021). Envisioned as an endless path of learning, self-knowledge, and nurturing creative potentials and interpersonal know-how, for some, CNM even held the promise of becoming an updated, more authentic version of yourself.

Motivation alone is not enough to initiate and sustain CNM. Consistent with prior analyses and personal testimonies (see Patterson, 2018; Roodsaz, 2022; Tastrom, 2018, July 23), the interviews demonstrated that CNM is a relationship structure that places an exceptionally high demand on

personal resources. Based on my data, these could be broken down into three interconnected categories: communication, mental health, and time. Communication was identified as the number one requisite for managing a non-monogamous relationship, confirming what scientific publications (Klesse, 2012; Petrella, 2007; Schadler, 2020) and self-help literature on the topic (Anapol, 2010; Easton & Hardy, [1997] 2009; McGarey, 2004) have long stressed: CNM necessitates (or is presented as necessitating) laborious, skilled, carefully-planned, and time-consuming relationship talk and negotiation. Indeed, a central remark that surfaced in every interview was that CNM is not about lighthearted dating or mere self-centered pleasure-seeking but about committed 'work' on the core relationship through intensive, open, and vulnerable communication, self-reflection, and active engagement with conflict and emotional discomfort.

While this kind of 'work' on the relationship was shown to be truly vital for the participants' relationships, with positive outcomes such as a heightened sense of trust, honesty, and emotional intimacy between core partners, it also appeared to fulfill the function of granting CNM its validity as a relational practice just as – if not more – complex, challenging, and devoted as its monogamous counterparts. Serena Petrella (2007) argues that CNM (to be precise, the author's focus lies on polyamory and not CNM in general) is commonly conceptualized as intricate, advanced, and emotionally demanding 'hard work' by its supporters, which helps elevate its status to a so-called 'superlative relationship' - one that is not for the emotionally 'immature' or those of us who avoid commitment and true, deep connection (p. 156).

Amidst all the discussions about relationship work, I could not help but notice a certain inconsistency between the assessment of 'work' in monogamy and 'work' required in CNM. One might remember that monogamy, too, had been recognized as an exhaustive and resource-draining relationship model that demands, to cite Jo once again, "fighting and reconciling again and working things out and compromising." While within CNM, 'work' served as a sign of a relationship's legitimacy and depth (distancing it from the devalued category of 'simple,' emotionally 'immature,' or 'just' sex-based relationships), in the context of monogamy, it was met with skepticism: the 'work' on sustaining monogamy was considered questionable, unjust, and restrictive of personal freedom and autonomy. While challenging the harmful cultural norms and forced expectations cultivated within monogamy is both justified and necessary, it is worth asking whether modern CNM practices equally facilitate their "own regimes of normativity" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 519), which may not be any less burdening or authoritative than those they claim to counter or replace. The data (most notably the

documented experiences of 'failing' at CNM-specific communication or feeling like one must prove their emotional maturity by managing to 'get a grip' of their jealousy) suggest that these regimes might revolve around the obligation for disclosure and open communication (often framed as honesty).

The reported challenges that struggles with depression, self-esteem, body image, fear of abandonment, and emotionally (and physically) taxing events in the personal sphere posed for individuals' ability to nurture multiple relationships unveiled mental health as another precious resource for maneuvering CNM. Crisis-ridden times and negative changes in mental health had left many participants temporarily incapable of engaging in the vast, CNM-specific communicative labor and (potential) conflicts in it. Some also found it challenging to deal with the resurfacing fears, insecurities, and trauma evoked by CNM. If anything, the stories shared with me about the painful efforts to manage jealousy and possessive tendencies proved that the difficulty of sustaining a sense of self-worth and security can become amplified in CNM, especially if your self-image already is on fragile soil due to underlying issues related to mental health and psychological well-being.

The chief concern that arises when I look at the interviewees' narratives about mental health pertains to the accentuated illusion of individual agency within CNM and the resulting construction of jealousy and possessiveness as mere issues of the individual's psyche. Scholars (see Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2012, 2014a; Petrella, 2007; Schadler, 2020) have voiced reservations about the fact that modern CNMs rest firmly upon individualized rationalization of emotions and self-reflectivity, individual capacity for change, and, in Petrella's (2007, p. 157) wording, a 'know thyself' and 'own your emotions' mentality. These endorse a reductionist and neoliberal version of sexual and social agency where the individual is cast as "an autonomous creature" that is "psychologically self-contained and emotionally independent from any other being" (Petrella, 2007, p. 157). Consequently, the individual is "made increasingly responsible for [their] attitudes on sex, [their] expectations and [their] economies" (ibid., p. 157). My analysis supports this notion. Jealousy and possessiveness were frequently traced back to the self, its deepest fears, insecurities, trauma, and flaws in character, whereby the primary solutions to jealousy and possessiveness were commonly attributed to individuals' apparently freely chosen efforts to 'work' on themselves. This 'work' translated to permanent emotional vulnerability and readiness to confront insecurities and deep-seated fears, striving to understand and explain where these come from, and eventually regulating or even mastering them.

The prevalent notion of introspection and self-government as *the* path to achieving sexual and social agency presents an issue for CNM's emancipatory potential. As we know, the critique of monogamy is, at best, a critique of society as a whole. Mononormativity, compulsory monogamy, and related concepts emerged from the need to uncover the bodies and moral ideals upon which the hegemonic couple is based, and to scrutinize who benefits from its preservation in the private, public, and beyond. Indeed, as insinuated by the data, the decision to do CNM is frequently accompanied by social criticism that denounces the exclusive couple as a product of repressions of the hetero-monogamous rule. CNM, by contrast, presents itself as a site of more ethical, equal, and liberating relationality that is supposed to exceed pure hedonistic pleasure-seeking. However, as long as the problems that arise within CNM are addressed as problems of the individual and their lack of self-analysis and capacity to change, the socially transformative power of CNM remains hidden. Jin Haritaworn, Chin-ju Lin, and Christian Klesse (2006) have argued that the primacy of self-knowledge in CNM overlooks the fact that "emotions and desires are socially constructed in specific historical sites and power relations" (p. 520). Insofar as the practice of CNM fails to tackle the power relations it theoretically claims to defy and continues endorsing "abstract individualism" (ibid., p. 519) and the "therapeutic culture of self-scrutiny" (Roodsaz, 2022, p. 884) instead, its political implications can reach no further than the intimate lives of the few lucky and 'enlightened.'

Considering the time interviewees spent nurturing multiple relationships and working on themselves and their communication skills (not to mention deployed therapies, counseling, research, peer groups, etc.), questions regarding the accessibility of modern non-monogamies arise. How is possessing all these precious resources related to individuals' material realities? Who exactly are the few 'enlightened' who can afford CNM? Is CNM, as we know it today, compatible with capitalism, especially with the lives of those who are most severely entangled in its exploitative and oppressive structures? What about those of us who, if I may directly cite myself, cannot merely read, self-reflect, or communicate their insecurities, jealousness, possessive tendencies, difficulties with confrontation, or deep-seated fears away? Or, what about those who, due to socioeconomic pressures, cannot possibly reduce their working hours, go on educational leave, give up one of their part-time jobs, leave their children unsupervised at home, or neglect the elderly and sick while going on dates, philosophizing about relationship ethics in polyamorous peer groups, flying out to different countries to pursue long-term love interests, or enjoying yet another holiday trip with just a different partner?

Since CNM is not socially assumed, 'coming out' or not 'coming out' as non-monogamous is a theme that, in one way or another, relates to the life of each person engaging in it. Unlike monogamists, who do not have to disclose their relationship type to be perceived as monogamous, non-monogamists are faced with the decision of to whom, if at all, they wish to reveal their identity. Although reports of positive or neutral receptions of CNM from the participants' social surroundings were not entirely lacking in the data, and while there were some signs that CNM is gradually gaining a progressive or 'cool' reputation, I came to the conclusion that CNM relationships are yet to be welcomed, understood, or celebrated in an equal fashion to monogamous unions, especially among non-monogamous individuals' relatives and birth families. 'Coming out' with CNM was shown to carry noticeable risks for individuals, ranging from stigma and devaluation to concrete social punishments such as isolation from loved ones. Consequently, and in line with the findings of other recent studies (Mahar et al., 2022; O'Byrne & Haines, 2021), some interviewees chose to disclose CNM only selectively.

The perpetual and pervasive positioning of CNM in the realm of 'peripheral' or 'less respectable' sexualities (Rubin, [1984] 2007) within the broader cultural consciousness was confirmed by the fact that most of the negative assumptions the participants themselves had once learned about non-monogamies (prior to CNM) overlapped with those held against their own CNM relationships years later. Commonly mixed with unethical forms of non-monogamy, CNM was found to endure the stigma of immorality, unhealthiness, vanity, and hypersexuality, resulting in experiences of social exclusion, rejection, and fear of abandonment as well as a sense of (imposed) dissonance between an individual's lived reality and its portrayal in the open. Consistent with what has been revealed by previous studies (see Conley et al., 2013; Mahar et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2021), the underlying devaluation of CNM was based on the presumption that CNM cannot match the level of depth, intimacy, and devotion found in monogamy. This presumption seemed to justify the disinterest and lack of seriousness with which some interviewees' multi-partner lifestyles were sometimes met: extradyadic relationships were not really seen as worthy of deeper understanding, celebration or, should they come to an end, mourning. Instead, non-monogamous relationships would frequently serve as a projection surface for other people's sex-centric and shallow stereotypes about CNMers. At times, reflecting Schadler's (2021) observations, the existence of concurrent partnerships would be outright denied by misconstruing them through a mononormative lens as either separate instances of serial monogamy or 'just' friendships and one 'real' partnership.

Navigating a multi-partner life also involved, as I framed it, *protecting* the core couple in the face of (potential) new partners. To do this, the interviewees turned to different rules, agreements, and other strategies to either prevent the formation of emotional bonds outside of the core relationship, preserve control over the core relationship by reducing unknown or unpredictable elements, or foster a sense of security, commitment, and desirability with their primary/nesting partners. As could be expected (see Finn, 2014; Labriola, 1999; Miccoli, 2021), strictly defined rules were most prevalent in the one open relationship in my data (apart from the early stages of one polyamorous relationship). Their key function was to minimize the competition for your core partner's emotional and intimate energies by establishing strictly separated and well-defined spheres of 'love' and 'lust.' The former would be inhabited by the core partner alone and thus be privileged with romance, emotional intimacy, love, and any (sexual/intimate) acts the couple deemed too intimate to share with others. The latter would then be reduced to sex 'only.'

However, according to my analysis, interviewees who strived for more egalitarian CNM (polyamory) also preserved some, perhaps less outright and tiered primary-secondary distinctions, just through means other than outspoken, rigid rules. These included abstract 'principles' like honesty or committing time and energy to each other, communication strategies intended to keep core partners feeling loved and desired amidst extradyadic dating, and vetoes (which may not just have been named as such) securing the core relationship's utmost importance and longevity. Moreover, although some polyamorous couples rejected the idea of primary-secondary hierarchization through their language, relational ethics, and intimate practices, tangible structures reminiscent of hierarchies found in tiered forms of CNM and even traditional monogamy frequently endured (think, for example, coupled co-habitation, shared finances, years-long shared history, investments in couples counseling, marriage, etc.). This shall remind us that the mere ethical-philosophical deconstruction of relationship hierarchies does not automatically translate to the absence of mononormative hierarchies in CNMers material realities, for "couple privilege also manifests in the body of social, legal, and financial advantages" (Gahran, 2012, December 3).

Two further intriguing techniques for ensuring the core couple's safety emerged in the data: regulating the choice of sexual/intimate partners and mandatory disclosure of intimate information. Regarding the former, I found out that the sense of security within the primary/nesting relationship could also be achieved by controlling your partner's choice of other partners or the constellations in which they would engage in sexual activities. This meant

that group sex and sex with couples, for example, were often considered more soothing for an individual's self-assurance than letting your partner explore extradyadic connections individually and/or in constellations of two. Also, preferences regarding your core partner's other partners could be shown to bear gendered implications and heterosexist double standards: one interviewee recalled having once considered their partner having same-gender sex and intimacy less 'threatening' than them engaging in heterosexual activities. Given that CNM (polyamory in particular) enjoys a gender-neutral and egalitarian reputation among many of its advocates and has even been classified as an explicitly (queer)feminist practice by some (for more detailed discussion, see Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2018b; Noël, 2006; Vasallo, 2019, 2018), such statements should incite us to launch more investigations into the ways patriarchal understandings of 'real' or 'valid' sex and intimacy, and their entanglements with compulsory heterosexuality, can also materialize within CNM dynamics.

The second technique, disclosing information about extradyadic activities, aligns with the overarching subject of communication and CNM. To some extent, knowing details about your partner's intimate life was considered to safeguard the core couple's endurance and well-being. Yet, this presented a challenging field for the interviewees to navigate. Mandatory disclosure, often conceived as a sign of honesty and part of the 'good' communication in CNM, was both expected and critically questioned by them. On the one hand, some interviewees saw it as their unquestioned right to know nearly every single detail about their primary/nesting partner's extradyadic relationships, presenting it as a prerequisite for their CNM relationship to work at all (for studies with similar observations, see Cook, 2005; McLean, 2004; Wosick-Correa, 2010). On the other hand, others saw the obligation to reveal their (and their other partners') intimate details as a potential invasion of privacy and a violation of the individual's right to draw personal boundaries. Once again, we find ourselves facing the ambivalence of what appears to be one of the most widely advocated normative guidelines for navigating contemporary non-monogamous relationships: 'open' communication.

In the end, the interviews raised some concerns about the overall effectiveness of rules and agreements in CNM. First, rules and agreements were perceived as impractical since they could not always be applied equally to both partners due to fundamental differences in their initial motivations for engaging in CNM or because they did not respond well to the varying individual needs and changing circumstances in the dating market. Second, in some cases, they could not bring forth the sense of security and ease they promised. As a result of the latter

instance, there was a tendency to completely discard rules, as it was believed that rules and agreements merely uphold insecurities and the hierarchical relationship structures that revolve around them. Rather than working on the rules, it was believed to yield better results to work on the personal insecurities from which these rules supposedly originate. The focus of the narrative would thus turn to self-reflectivity and -knowledge again, suggesting that putting rule-like restraints on relationships detracts the individual from attaining a profound understanding of themselves, preventing them from freeing themselves from the shackles of mononormativity and grasping the greater purpose of CNM.

Since transitioning to CNM, most interviewees reported having undergone changes and developments in their lives that substantially matched their initial motivations to explore CNM. Many had noticed their sense of personal freedom and autonomy increase by being able to uninhibitedly pursue any (or most) relationships of their choice, express formerly hidden and unwelcomed feelings (extradyadic desire, fears, insecurities, etc.), and allow more room for individual self-determination within the core relationship. Prior studies have similarly identified individual (also erotic and sexual) freedom and autonomy as unique benefits experienced by many CNMers (see Klesse, 2018b; Moors et al., 2017; Sheff, 2005). For a few of the participants in my research, the heightened self-determination also coincided with specific enhancements in communication (willingness to enter, allow, and deal with conflict, draw personal boundaries, etc.) that defied the merger of identities (Friedman, 1998) characteristic to modern monogamies. Other mononormative conventions also became under deconstruction: the strict and hierarchical distinction between different kinds of 'loves' started to dissolve, friendships grew in importance, responsibility over the individual's sexual and emotional fulfillment was redistributed, and relationships in general began to be grasped as more flexible and thus capable of adopting new functions and meanings in ways uncommon to traditional monogamies.

The data further suggest that CNM increased the individual's sense of trust, safety, and confidence in their primary/nesting relationship. Many were more optimistic about the strength of their core relationship after witnessing how 'resilient' it is despite the increase in 'competing' relationships from outside. As a consequence, many enjoyed the feeling of being actively chosen and desired as their authentic self. An opposite development could, however, also be noticed. As highlighted before, personal fears and insecurities often became amplified in CNM in various magnitudes, resulting in a sense of vulnerability and even significant mental

distress. Some interviewees were thus kept on their toes in light of the (imagined) potential of being replaced by someone 'better.'

Most importantly, CNM enabled individuals to arrive at new understandings of their sexual self, live a life that reflects their authentic sexual identity, broaden their spectrum of sexual attraction, live out their sexual fantasies, get to know new (perhaps formerly forbidden or unthinkable) sexual practices and subcultures, and even undo patriarchal understandings of femininity and masculinity by examining formerly undiscovered roles in sexual/intimate interaction. Affirming existing findings about CNM and bisexuality (see McLean, 2004; Robinson, 2013; Sheff, 2005), my data illustrates that, especially for non-straight individuals in heterosexual or 'hetero-passing' relationships, CNM can provide a vital opportunity to engage with their non-heterosexual desires and gain a more fulfilling experience of the 'whole' of their sexuality without having to choose between their core relationship and sexual self-discovery. Even those who were not initially interested in sex, intimacy, or romance beyond heterosexual settings could discover a safe(r) framework for doing so within CNM. This was illustrated in the data by the emergence of *heteroflexibility* as a category with which some formerly hetero-identifying cisgender men had started identifying themselves in the wake of experimenting with and eventually enjoying (some) same-gender sexual/intimate encounters in CNM.

The interviewees' descriptions of changes and developments in the sexual/intimate sphere were marked by other notable 'extensions' or, as I named them, *pluralizations* of attraction. Most individuals told me that dating multiple people, each with their unique qualities, had brought them to the observation that what they found attractive in others was broader in scope than they had realized before (prior to CNM) and that their attraction showed significant diversity based on the individuals they engaged with on a sexual, intimate, and/or romantic level. Each relationship was perceived to embody its unique range of attraction, affection, and desire. In contrast to monogamy, which is often expected to entail every single type of attraction that is assumed to exist (especially romantic and sexual attraction; see Rosa, 1994), many interviewees did not feel like a relationship would have to include all of them or a certain combination of them in order to be considered 'real' or meaningful to them or to result in specific social, intimate, or sexual practices. Theoretically, the identified pluralization of attraction could be perceived as echoing lesbian feminist articulations about the potential of non-monogamies to counter the patriarchal construction of different kinds of 'loves' and the primacy of straight, coupled romance over platonic love and non-heterosexual collective ties (see Rosa, 1994; McPheeters, 1999; Willey, 2016). What sets a 'real' relationship apart from, for

instance, a friendship when neither the sexual/intimate practices nor the forms of attraction present in it can serve as the foundation for determining its 'realness' or 'superiority'?

One more development in the sexual/intimate sphere that I consider particularly noteworthy is the renegotiation of heteropatriarchal gender roles through CNM. Nora, for instance, shared that she had discovered a previously hidden sense of sexual autonomy and dominance by experimenting with new forms of sex and intimacy in CNM. By embracing polyamory, she embarked on a journey of questioning societal norms related to gendered sexual expectations and the accompanying power dynamics, especially regarding the imposition of passivity onto women, femmes, and feminine-presenting people within heterosexual coupledom. For Nora's partner, Ian, extradyadic sexual encounters (especially those with other men) had led him to reevaluate his conception of masculinity and the social pressure to conform to patriarchal ideals of it during sexual/intimate interactions. Other interviewees had also found themselves 'slipping' into previously unknown roles during sex and beyond. Comparison of these findings with those of previous studies (Richards, 2010; Schippers, 2016; Sheff, 2005) confirms that involvement in CNM can indeed unlock ways for individuals to explore and expand their social roles beyond binary understandings of femininity and masculinity and thus disrupt heteronormative relational scripts and power dynamics.

In the second part of the analysis, I examined the interviewees' accounts of the specific functions and benefits of CNM with Eva Illouz and Dana Kaplan's (2021) theory of sexual capital. My interpretation of the data resonates with the authors' central argument that within modern neoliberalism, our sexualities, sexual identities, and intimate experiences become commodified in that they are transformed into embodied personal assets with which individuals can gain social recognition, self-assurance, and validation (Illouz & Kaplan, 2021, p. 190) both in and outside of the sexual/intimate sphere. The meanings ascribed to CNM indicated that non-monogamies could become integrated into the processes of making neoliberal subjectivities, which are expected to manifest qualities such as pronounced individuality, personal autonomy, self-responsibility, and committedness to ongoing personal growth and self-governance of emotions and behaviors (see Christiaens, 2020; Exner, 2020; Illouz & Kaplan, 2021; McGuigan, 2014).

Both the motivations for engaging in CNM and its reported benefits for the individual and their relationships supported the vision of CNM as a domain of never-ending learning that mandates and generates personal growth. This observation enhances the existing body of research with

similar findings (Hnatkovičová & Bianchi, 2022; Moors et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2021). In my data, personal growth translated best to enhanced self-knowledge and communication skills, which were to be acquired through nothing other than 'work' on the self and dynamics of the couple. By means of individual endeavors to confront, analyze, understand, and ultimately control the personal 'root causes' for harmful or unwanted patterns of thinking and acting, the individual could not only free themselves (and their partner) from jealousy, possessiveness, and other mononormative repressions, but also work toward embodying an actualized, more enlightened version of themselves. This would also include enhancements of the artistic/creative self (where CNM relationships serve as a valuable source of inspiration) or things like becoming the interpersonal expert of your life (and perhaps of others' lives, too). Because of the prioritization of the aforementioned endeavors (self-reflection, 'work' on the couple) and their anticipated outcomes (freedom, autonomy, self-mastery, creativity, etc.), the non-monogamous self aligns with the ideal subject evoked in neoliberalism: one who is an active producer of and thus accountable for their own reality.

For some, CNM allowed them to assert a unique, alternative, norm-breaching, and even 'cool' or 'exotic' sense of self or way of living, where being 'different,' 'non-standard,' or 'weird' did not signify an abject position but an essential part of their identity. Being 'different' was reclaimed with pride as a sign of authenticity, personal freedom, and erotic autonomy, speaking directly to neoliberalism's demand for highly individualized subjects who are the "carriers of personal, physical, emotional, and sexual attributes that are supposed to constitute and define their particularity and uniqueness" (Illouz, 2012, p. 52). The capacity of CNM to become integrated into an individual's lifestyle, shape or reinforce their profound understanding of themselves, and even raise them positively above the 'ordinary' crowd indicates that CNM does entail identity-forming qualities and that its marginalized position can even be transformed into the individual's advantage. This tells perhaps less about the 'degree' of marginalization of modern CNMs (although debatable) than it does about the neoliberal cultural climate where "[d]ifferences are no longer seen as essential or absolute 'otherness' but rather as particularity, hybridity and the products of individual practices in need of continuous refinement (Engel, 2011, p. 116).

While the data showed promising examples of CNM potentially increasing individuals' neoliberal sexual capital (see paragraphs above), evidence that it could also affect their embodied sexual capital remained scarce and ambivalent. Except for one instance, the interviewees' accounts did not necessarily insinuate that CNM functioned as a desirability-

enhancing asset for them in the sexual market. The (feared) experience of being 'out of the dating game' for others because of your CNM lifestyle was quite common: having a primary/nesting partner back home would often be equated with being already 'taken' by others, and some potential partners could be put off or weirded out by the idea of dating a non-monogamous person. As the only counterevidence, one interviewee reflected that multiple relationships might actually be deemed an impressive personal 'track record,' thus enhancing their attractiveness in the eyes of others. At the same time, they believed that the enduring long-term relationship with their nesting partner might equally add to their desirability as a legitimate, trustworthy, and morally upright partner option, knowing that the 'ability' to maintain a long-lasting relationship is a highly cherished 'green flag' by many.

Despite the somewhat conflicting accounts on CNM's desirability-enhancing potential, we may still assume that the modern sexual market persists in operating on mononormative expectations, favoring those of us who can, even if only in theory, offer the promise of a resultant exclusive relationship or prove to be capable of maintaining one. This can pose unique challenges for CNMers who can become excluded from the category of an ideal partner or sexual/intimate availability altogether. Furthermore, as shown by Sophie's testimony in the second last chapter of the analysis that I dedicated to her, the perpetuation of patriarchal ideology, which construes women, femmes, and feminine-presenting individuals as property of men and assumes men's entitlement to women, femmes, and feminine-presenting individuals' bodies and intimate space, may add additional complexity to the dynamics of navigating desirability and availability as a non-monogamous person.

Finally, the analysis of sexual capital inspired me to consider the reality of something that I provisionally called the *couple-intern sexual economy*, a speculative extension of Illouz and Kaplan's (2021) theory of sexual capital. This little sexual economy (insofar as it exists at all) influences the variation of sexual capital among its individuals and, despite its name, operates only in relation to the (imagined) desirability of each partner and their other partners outside of the dyad. The first piece of evidence supporting the couple-intern sexual economy was that many – if not most – interviewees had observed an increase in their (sexual) desire toward their primary/nesting partner upon witnessing their primary/nesting partner's desirability to other people. I proposed the following logic to explain this phenomenon: the more enhanced your primary/nesting partner's sexual capital is outside the core relationship, the more desirable they also appear to you within the core relationship.

The second supporting evidence that I found in the data was the fact that some individuals' perception of their own sexual capital (or lack thereof) was shaped by the desirability of their primary/nesting partner in the sexual market, as well as the desirability of the primary/nesting partner's *other* partners. This meant, first, that marked disparities in extradyadic popularity between core partners could also evoke a sense of disparity in their personal attractivity. Second, an individual's own embodied sexual capital, this time measured in their personal *qualities* rather than in the *quantity* of their extradyadic attention, would also depend on the presumed sexual capital of their primary/nesting partner's other partners. So, the higher your partner's new (potential) partner's embodied sexual capital is (be it in terms of physical appeal, allure, distinct qualities, talents, or any other factors that might add to a person's desirability in a specific context), the more yours might be in danger of declining, and vice versa. Central to this observation was the notion that through CNM, you might reenter the 'competition' for your core partner's attention and intimate resources. Consequently, the changing dynamics of attractiveness between you and your partner's other partners could highlight potential 'threats' to the core relationship by either soothing or shattering your sense of self-worth.

The proposed idea of a couple-intern sexual economy highlights that who and what our core partner's other partners *are* can hold the power to directly speak to who or what we ourselves are *not.* Hence, someone else's elevated sexual capital in a specific area can illuminate our 'flaws' that we believe detract from our own desirability in it. Within CNM, then, our partner's extradyadic intimate choices (with whom they end up engaging with) can potentially alter our assigned position within the social ranking system of attractivity that is presumed by the theory of sexual capital. This system and its conditions for desirability and attractiveness are by no means universal or objective (Illouz & Kaplan, 2021, p. 76) but, as confirmed by the data, inherently patriarchal: they privilege those of us with intimate/sexual attention, validation, and self-assurance who possess the right kind of 'currency' in it, notably, the ability to conform to hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity.

Where my draft of the couple-intern sexual economy fails to hold up is when we think of sexual capital and its hierarchical distribution among individuals as the effects of distinct sexual fields that govern them (for more, see Green, 2014; Illouz & Kaplan, 2021). The couple cannot really constitute its own sexual field with collective or unified internal parameters for what counts as desirable because its individuals might – and most likely do – differ in their sexual/intimate preferences, desires, attractions, and performances. Rather than originating from within the couple, the assignment of individual sexual value relies on unstable external

factors, namely, extradyadic partners and their sexual capital. Perhaps fluctuations in desirability between couples derive more from individuals comparing themselves to others against the backdrop of a much broader (perhaps imagined) sexual economy that operates independently of individual sexual fields and their small-scale sexual economies – one that has the power to set socially dominant standards for attractivity and outline general boundaries in terms of who is worthy of love, sexual attention, intimacy, and care, and who is not. I cannot think of what else such 'broader sexual economy' could be than the good old patriarchy and its many entanglements with white supremacy, ableism, and classism.

Although measuring desirability certainly is not limited exclusively to CNM relationships, I found myself wondering whether a more profound reevaluation of the distribution of embodied sexual capital might occur as a result of opening a relationship, as both partners theoretically return to the sexual market that is marked by competition. At least when compared to monogamy, where couples can shield themselves from such competition by assuming absolute exclusivity and the (theoretical or imagined) impossibility of desires outside the core relationship turning into actions, within the realm of CNM, the potential or, if you will, risk of your partner ultimately experiencing what you yourself are lacking (or believe to be lacking) becomes real.

# 7 CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, I aimed to explore the process of negotiating consensual non-monogamies (CNM) as experienced and narrated by formerly monogamous couples who now practice CNM. By conducting a qualitative investigation into the firsthand perspectives of four Vienna-based couples, I focused on identifying and understanding the meanings that transitioning to CNM carries for individuals and their relationships. Also, my intention was to discuss the emerging topics by situating them within the context of a hetero- and mononormative neoliberal capitalism and thereby evaluate whether modern CNM can be considered a socially and politically transformative practice. Thus, I found myself drawn to speculating whether CNM is resistant or instead vulnerable to self-commodification within and beyond the sexual market in neoliberalism. The central questions guiding my work were:

1) *How do couples negotiate the opening of their relationship, and what kind of motivations lie behind the process?*

2) *What kind of developments or changes in terms of sexuality, intimacy, sexual practices, and understandings of one's self and relationships in general take place in it?*

3) *Do non-monogamies also receive meanings other than simply being an alternative to monogamy, and can they contribute to enhancing an individual's sense of social worthiness and serve as means of constituting self-empowered and self-sustaining unique neoliberal subjects?*

While, in general, the reasons for engaging in CNM turned out to be sexually motivated or, in one way or another, linked to the desire to form new intimate and/or loving relationships, my research showed that the will to open a relationship often stems from needs that go beyond that. In my data, these were most notably linked to individuals' value systems and the underlying desire to pursue a sexually and intimately autonomous, free, and authentic life, uninhibited by hegemonic normative frameworks. Indeed, the involvement in CNM was often followed by strong criticism of mononormativity and the limitations it imposes on personal freedom, thereby presenting CNM as a more ethical, progressive, and emancipatory relational structure. In addition to being ascribed a transformative power in terms of partners being able to liberate themselves from the oppressive constraints of monogamy, CNM also represented a never-ending journey of self-discovery and personal growth. Personal growth, particularly in the fields of self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, turned out to be a recurring motif

throughout the whole analysis of the data, spanning from the initial reasons for doing CNM to its perceived effects in real life.

CNM relationships were navigated through various means, ranging from specific rules and relationship agreements to normative expectations such as 'open' communication, (mandatory) disclosure of intimate details, introspection into personal insecurities, and self-government of emotions, especially jealousy. Most notably, CNM was unveiled as a highly resource-draining and laborious relationship model, especially when it came to individuals' time, mental capacities, and interpersonal skills. This raised questions about the accessibility of modern consensual non-monogamies and the compatibility of CNM with capitalism. Who, after all, can afford to throw themselves into all the work that finding and nurturing multiple relationships requires, ranging from self-analysis to couples counseling, from voluntary self-study to communicative labor, from specialized time management to peer group meetings, and from exhausting emotional self-discipline to resolving resurfacing conflicts with potentially more than one partner.

Given that skillfully managed, consistent, and laborious communication was by far the most cited prerequisite for successful CNM and also the very aspect that seemed to grant CNM its legitimacy (distancing it from its superficial and hypersexualizing stigma), I suggested that 'good' communication might very well be one of the core elements – if not *the* core element – of the "regime of normativity" (Haritaworn et al., 2006, p. 519) established from *within* modern CNM practices and subcultures. And, having documented how difficult it can be for individuals to adhere to the requirement of 'good' communication due to various reasons beyond their control, the CNM regime of normativity may not be any less burdening or authoritative than the one we find in monogamy. Moreover, although there was no explicit recognition of gender or other social categories affecting the division of communicative or emotional labor among the interviewed couples, some participants' reports about its (potentially) unequal distribution may be nevertheless of interest for future (queer)feminist research, especially in the face of the somewhat ambiguous results of previous work dealing with the question whether CNM can facilitate the reworking of hegemonic gender roles and thus further egalitarian management of emotional labor in relationships (see Sánchez, 2019; Schippers, 2016; Sheff, 2005, 2006).

Navigating CNM was also shown to rely heavily on the normative expectation of introspection and self-knowledge. A highly individualized discourse around 'work' on the self and couple-intern dynamics prevailed in the interviewees' narratives: maneuvering CNM was often

depicted as a matter of individual efforts, emphasizing the importance of rationalization of emotions and self-reflectivity in making non-monogamies succeed. Jealousy and possessiveness, the two major 'problems' that often became amplified through CNM, were often perceived as issues of the individual's psyche: their traumas, insecurities, and deep-seated fears. The solutions to these 'problems,' and thus the route to personal liberation and relational awakening, were reduced to neoliberal, 'individualistic therapeutic discourses' (Roodsaz, 2022) and 'know thyself' (Petrella, 2007) methodologies. The illusion of individual agency and personal responsibility as *the* forces capable of setting the individual free from mononormative constraints dismisses how social, political, and economic conditions, power dynamics, and normative frameworks govern our desires, emotions, and available resources for intimacy. In light of this, the political and socially transformative implications of CNM cannot truly reach beyond the lives of the few privileged and 'enlightened.'

From my study, it is apparent that CNM carries great potential for changing individual relationship dynamics and facilitating positive developments in individuals' lives, such as sexual self-discovery, an enhanced sense of personal freedom and erotic autonomy, realizing queer and marginalized sexualities, and even undoing heteropatriarchal gender roles. It also demonstrates that CNM does carry meanings beyond just an alternative to monogamy, for its benefits can be felt beyond the intimate/sexual sphere. Indeed, the analysis shows that CNM can be transformed or, if you will, commodified into an integral part of a neoliberal subjectivity by adding to its unique, self-mastered, creative, ever-developing, progressive, and exceptionally skillful character. As I interpret it, CNM does have identity-forming qualities that harmonize well with the ideal of a self-actualized and -responsible subject called forth in the era of neoliberalism. CNM can positively distinguish its practitioners from the monogamous 'normies' around, if not universally or acknowledged by the 'mainstream,' then at least in the individuals' own self-perception. This observation, together with the notion that the non-monogamous practices I investigated are *not* accessible to everybody and fail to address the beyond ideological or ethical-philosophical structures upholding mononormativity (which is by no means the respective couples' own fault), shows us that modern consensual non-monogamies might be more at risk of being subsumed by neoliberal sexual politics than they are actively contributing to a collective revolution that comprehensively resists mononormativity and its powerful alliance with other repressive forces like capitalism, heteronormativity, racism, and ableism.

If we think about the documented positive developments and profits that CNM can generate for individuals and their relationships as well as the amount of precious resources (time, mental capacities, communication skills, all of which are also tied to material wealth) one probably needs to have to engage in it successfully *in parallel* with the analyzed upright devaluation, stigmatization, and social sanctioning it continues to face from the public, defining non-monogamies' status becomes confusing and complicated. The simultaneity of CNM's (semi-) marginalized position and the personal benefits individuals evidently still can reap from it makes CNM a contradictory and, hence, fascinating arena to explore, especially within the scope of neoliberalism and its remarkable ability to turn lived experiences and identities from subordinate positions into celebrations of individuality. Where do CNMers eventually stand socially and politically if some of them can inhabit extremely privileged positions in spite of it, or perhaps even thanks to it? Perhaps, as I alluded to at the beginning of the thesis, the marginalizing effects of CNM and their particular severity only arise from the interplay between CNM and further social categories, most of which remain overlooked in the present study. Certainly, my findings add to an already privileged and disproportionately visible and well-studied spectrum of white, middle-class(ish), (visibly) nondisabled, and urban experiences with consensual non-monogamies.

I firmly believe that going forward, we will have to start systematically incorporating and centering the invaluable perspectives of disabled CNMers, educators, activists, and thinkers (see, for instance, Iantaffi, 2010; Reay, 2022, December 19; Tastrom, 2018, July 23) into our analysis of modern-day non-monogamies. These have excelled at disclosing and re-examining the hegemonic, often taken-for-granted norms and expectations imposed on non-monogamous subjects and their bodies from *within* popular CNM discourses and subcultures (which, to my observation, remain predominantly oblivious to such). Alongside anti-racist, -classist, and -capitalist critiques, they demonstrate how CNM relationships cannot be viewed as inherently liberating, for their norms and expectations are – just like those (re)produced within the monogamous couple – tailored based on an ideal CNM subject, which is by no means universal but raced, classed, and nondisabled. Additionally, it would be essential to reevaluate the applicability of the theory (or theories, for there are more than one) of sexual capital in the context of CNM, as, to my knowledge, non-monogamies have not been looked into within this framework before, and my inquiry remains hypothetical and tentative at best.

# Appendices

## Appx. 1 Abstract

This thesis explores the processes of transitioning to and negotiating consensual non-monogamies (CNM). To identify and understand the significance of embracing CNM for individuals and their relationships, I conducted a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of four, both queer and cis-heterosexual, Vienna-based couples practicing CNM. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and evaluated using the method of focused analysis. Besides seeking to understand the key motivations, dynamics, and effects of opening a relationship, my research also investigates whether modern non-monogamies can be viewed as a socially transformative practice, resistant rather than susceptible to self-commodification in the neoliberal sexual market and beyond. The study highlights the various methods and incentives behind adopting and maintaining CNM, the resources and kinds of labor invested in the practice, and the diversity of meanings associated with it, extending beyond a mere multi-partner lifestyle. Despite holding great potential for profound and even emancipatory changes in the sexual/intimate sphere and beyond, which undoubtedly are of interest for queer and feminist aspirations, my research suggests that the transformative power of CNM cannot extend beyond the intimate lives of the few, as long as the practice itself remains at odds with capitalism and is governed by increasingly individualizing, neoliberal discourses. CNM is revealed as an ambivalent field of both privilege and disadvantage, as well as emancipation and social confinement – a field where, despite its anti-normative premises, new regimes of normativity are called into being.

*In German/auf Deutsch*:

Die vorliegende Arbeit erforscht die Prozesse des Übergangs zu (und der Verhandlung von) konsensuellen Nicht-Monogamien. Im Fokus stehen hierbei die Bedeutungskonstruktionen von Nicht-Monogamie im Kontext des Individuums und der Beziehung. Auf Grund des erfahrungsbasierten Zugangs wurde die qualitative Methode des semi-strukturierten Leitfadeninterviews gewählt. Es wurden Interviews mit vier in Wien lebenden, queeren bzw. cis-heterosexuellen nicht-monogamen Paaren durchgeführt und im Anschluss mit Hilfe der Methode der Fokussierten Interviewanalyse ausgewertet. Neben dem Versuch, die Motivation für die Öffnung einer Beziehung, sowie die damit verbundenen Dynamiken und Auswirkungen zu verstehen, geht die Studie der Frage nach, inwiefern konsensuelle Nicht-Monogamie im Kontext des Neoliberalismus als eine sozial transformative und widerständige Praxis verstanden werden kann. Beleuchtet wird hierbei die zugrundeliegende Motivation für die

Einführung einer konsensuellen nicht-monogamen Beziehungsform, sowie die persönlichen Ressourcen und Formen von Arbeit, die in die Aufrechterhaltung dieser miteinfließen. Zudem wird auf die vielfältigen individuellen und sozialen Bedeutungszuschreibungen eingegangen. Im Rahmen der Analyse wurde deutlich, dass konsensuelle Nicht-Monogamie auf der Ebene des Individuums emanzipatorisches und transformatorisches Potential (unter anderem) im Bereich der Sexualität beinhaltet. Eine Ausweitung auf gesellschaftlicher Ebene bzw. eine Erreichbarkeit dieses emanzipatorischen Potentials für eine Vielzahl an Personengruppen bleibt jedoch im Kontext neoliberaler und kapitalistischer Strukturen offen. Somit erweist sich Nicht-Monogamie als ein ambivalentes Feld, das sich durch eine Gleichzeitigkeit von Privilegien und Benachteiligungen, sowie Emanzipation und sozialem Zwang charakterisieren lässt - ein Feld, in dem trotz antinormativer Prämissen neue Regime der Normativität konstruiert werden.

## APPX. 2 TRANSCRIPTION KEY

| - | hyphen, followed by space bar | abrupt cut off speech; the speaker is cut off either by another speaker or themselves and therefore does not finish a sentence or word |
|---|---|---|
| (tomorrow) | word(s) in round brackets | transcriber uncertain of hearing or understanding a part of speech correctly |
| ( ) | empty round brackets | transcriber unable to hear or understand a part of speech |
| ((laughter)) | word(s) in double round brackets | sounds such as laughter or crying that are otherwise difficult to transcribe |
| 'Well that is nice.' | single quotation marks enclosing transcribed speech | speaker quoting someone else or themselves |
| [a question directed at Sophie] | square brackets enclosing notes | notes added by transcriber for better understanding of transcribed speech |

Transcription key inspired by/partially adopted from Jefferson (2004).

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