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## **Challenging Love**

An exploration of theories and practices of  
Consensual Affective Non-Monogamies in Italy

Doctoral dissertation by

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*To all the people who struggle against individualism  
in these times of social isolation<sup>1</sup>.*

*To all the people who accept contradictions and imperfections  
without finger-pointing.*

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<sup>1</sup> I completed the dissertation reviews during the lockdown due to Covid-19 in Italy (March 2020).

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## **Introduction**

### *Why and how*

The idea for this project comes from reflections – at first personal – about social constructions around the feeling of love and the monogamous model as the only socially legitimised one in our society.

It is a fact that several factors (such as the legalisation of divorce, changes in gender roles, the spread of contraceptive methods, changes in the socio-economic system and social incentives fostering individualism) have introduced changes in the way Western societies enact and conceive affective life. Many people today seem to have shifted from the expectation of having one lifelong relationship to the reality of experiencing different intimate relationships during their lifetimes (Noël 2006). With the model of “one eternal love” becoming more and more a myth, many people experience different forms of relationships with different degrees of commitment; nevertheless, the unique model that benefits from social legitimacy and recognition is still that of the stable monogamous couple.

These personal reflections were further developed and fuelled by my encounter with the discourses formulated by the feminist and queer movements, on the one hand, and the discovery of the concept and the practice of polyamory, on the other hand. More often than the second, the first combine thoughts on alternative ways of “doing intimacy” with a critique of the neoliberal economic system and considerations about how these two dimensions intersect. As part of my personal path, I encountered these ideas with my discovery of the first reflections carry on by Laboratorio Smaschieramenti (see Acquistapace 2011), later expanded thanks to discussions taking place within the transfeminist queer

network SomMovimento NazioAnale, on the one hand, and with my encounter with the Italian polyamorous “community”<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand.

It is clear that the process of increasing individualisation, together with the progressive growth of self-reflexivity (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Beck-Gernsheim 1999) have brought about these changes in intimate life. One of my goals was to historically and socio-geographically contextualise the models of Consensual Affective Non-Monogamy (CANM from now on) as part of these changes, asking myself if they could be seen as strategies for overcoming the conflict between two apparently contradictory social drives: the urge to cultivate autonomy and to detach oneself from traditional bonds, and the drive to cultivate emotionally significant intimate relationships (*cf.* Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). In this attempt, I also wanted try to transcend the most pessimistic theories about these changes, theories that emphasise and reiterate the elements of progressive weakening of solid emotional ties (e.g. Bauman 2001, 2003; Hochschild 2003; Illouz 2007).

While at the beginning Giddens’s conceptualisation of the “pure relationship” and “convergent love” (see Chapter 1) were much more at the centre of my reflection (because of what I saw as their proximity to polyamorous theory), with the development of my research I adopted a more critical perspective. In particular, Klesse’s (2007) and Bauer’s (2014) analysis helped me to reconsider the relations of power within intimate relationships (including queer ones) and the classist and racist ideas incorporated into the presentation of white middle-class couples as an example of gender equality (Carter 2007) (see Chapter 2).

Furthermore, while my approach to the study of relationships in keeping with polyamorous theory was more focused on rationalisation, I later questioned this approach. In particular, the reconstructions provided by Deri

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<sup>2</sup> I will talk more about both in Chapter 3. See also Chapter 3 for a reflection about the use of the word “community”.

(2011, 2015) and Herrera Gómez (2010) (see Chapter 1) helped me to deconstruct the emotions/rationality dichotomy. From my point of view, this approach also fits more coherently into my metatheoretical approach, influenced by post-structuralist and queer studies, in which the deconstruction of the dichotomies that characterise Western thought (such as woman/man, heterosexual/homosexual, and others) is a central point (*cf.* Chapter 1).

Considering all of these assumptions, I have tried to assume a critical perspective in multiple senses:

- focusing on the transformative and radical<sup>3</sup> potential of CANM relationships, often obscured by readings of polyamory as a lifestyle or as a private, apolitical and elitist relational behaviour;
- highlighting the elements that shape the polyamorous “community” as potentially exclusive (polynormativity, classism, racism);
- questioning the effectiveness of excessive rationalisation as applied to forms of affect.

To complete this premise to my work, with an awareness of how researchers’ personal, cultural and political trajectories as well as social perceptions of them influence the research process (Fabian 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Haraway 1988), I position myself as a white Italian who grew up in a rural setting in northern Italy, with a low middle class background and high cultural resources, socially perceived as a woman (even if I do not strictly identify

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<sup>3</sup> The term “radical” is often used to indicate very different concepts, so I clarify that I will use it throughout the dissertation with the meaning of actions/thoughts/politics that question social structures and aim to transform them (Eisner 2013).



as such) and bisexual. As for the elements that more closely concern this research, I can consider myself an insider of the polyamorous Italian “community” and a queer transfeminist activist. In Chapter 3 I will try to partially explain the impact that this positionality had on the research process and on the results obtained.

### *Terminology*

At the beginning my aim was to focus on comparing people who identify as polyamorous and people who identify as relationship anarchists. Progressing with my research, I decided to embrace the more comprehensive term of “Consensual Affective Non-Monogamies”, that allowed me to adopt a more nuanced approach. The label comes from the more widespread term “Consensual Non-Monogamies” (cf. Barker 2013; Easton and Hardy 2009; Taormino 2008) but it restricts the field to those relational models that envisage the possibility of simultaneously having several consensual relationships which are not only (or not necessarily) sexual<sup>4</sup>. Similar to the definition of polyamory, we can define CANM as models of relationships that imply the specific agreement of having the possibility to cultivate multiple intimate relationships at the same time and with the informed consent of all the people involved (see also Chapter 2).

Relationship Anarchy can be defined as the philosophy or practice in which people are seen as free to engage in relationships that are not bound by rules aside from those that the people involved mutually agree on; it can be distinguished from polyamory basically in that it is more radically non-hierarchical and refuses to define relationships with labels such as, for example: “just friends”, “in a relationship”, and so on (Anapol 2010). The term – coined by Nordgren (2006) – and the concept have been born within and align with anarchist thought, but the label has also spread in the polyamorous world with a

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<sup>4</sup> The term “Consensual Non-Monogamy”, instead, includes also relationship models that envisage the possibility of having sexual but not romantic/affective relationships outside the couple, such as open relationship and swinging (see note 10).

depoliticised meaning. In Chapter 2 I will delve into how the RA philosophy has been partially co-opted by neoliberal discourse.

My decision to adopt the more inclusive term of CANM derives from the ascertainment that many of my respondents preferred not to define themselves as either polyamorous or relationship anarchists. In fact, my sample also includes people who prefer to define themselves with more generic terms, such as “consensual non-monogamous”, “ethical non-monogamous”, or just “non-monogamous”, or even people who prefer to delimitate this attitude more specifically, defining themselves as “non-monogamous in this specific phase of life”.

In the definition of CANM there are thus four dimensions that must be taken into account:

- the *multiplicity* of the relationships (or at least the possibility of being multiple);
- their *simultaneity* (or the possibility thereof);
- the fact that those experiencing the relationship judge it to (also) contain an *affective* component;
- the verification of the *consent* of all the people involved.

Regarding this last dimension, I assumed a critical notion of consent (Klesse 2007; Bauer 2014) rather than the kind of liberal one that is often presented as an uncomplicated given. A critical notion of consent defines consent as always negotiated, is aware of the social context in which the negotiation takes place, is ongoing (not a one-time event) and relationship-specific (Bauer 2014). Williams *et al.* (2014) also problematise the notion of consent, proposing a conceptualisation of it according to three distinct levels:

- *surface* consent, based on clear and direct communication and on the assumption that people say exactly what they want (this level is usually exemplified in the phrases “no means no” and/or “yes means yes”);
- *scene* consent, which refers in particular to BDSM<sup>5</sup> negotiation between the top and bottom before the scene and includes the agreement to use specific word(s) or gesture(s) to withdraw consent during the scene. Here the authors highlight that “the fact that these kinds of obfuscating mechanics are used at all continues to point to the reality that BDSM largely operates on the basis of ‘blurred lines’” (p. 4);
- *deep* consent, which applies to situations in which the bottom is unable to say whether they<sup>6</sup> is consenting or not because of their emotional situation. In these cases, the person is often able to determine whether or not the consent was respected only after the end of the scene. Also, aftercare and later conversations can affect how the bottom thinks about the scene.

Although the authors' considerations focus on BDSM practices, they can be extended to a broader definition of consent. For instance, their recommendations to become aware of the possible ambiguities of consent and to “embrace them, talk about them, negotiate with them, and continually and constantly reassess” (p. 5) can also be extended to CANM.

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<sup>5</sup> The acronym stands for “Bondage & Discipline, Domination & Submission, Sadism & Masochism” and refers to a wide range of relational and/or erotic practices.

<sup>6</sup> I use they and its derivative forms as neutral singular pronoun. I will use them in any case in which the gender is indeterminate (as in this case) or in reference to people who do not identify as male or female.

## *Structure*

The dissertation begins with a more generic theoretical contextualisation of intimacies and sexualities (Chapter 1) before then focusing on the theories and state of the art of studies about CANM (Chapter 2).

In Chapter 3 I introduce my research, contextualising it and trying to account for my role as a researcher and the methods I used.

The last three chapters are dedicated to the analysis of the empirical material: in Chapter 4 I focus on the theories of CANM developed by my interview partners around the questions of the definition of love and the definition of affective relationships boundaries; then, in Chapter 5 I mainly take into consideration their practices (agreements and rules, timing, management of jealousy, relations among metapartners, difficulties); finally, Chapter 6 is dedicated to the theme of identity in different forms (polyamory as orientation or choice, community, social strategies and political positioning).

Moreover, I try to develop the analysis along the various main axes that I partially mentioned above and I will resume along the dissertation: personal autonomy/emotional security (mainly in Chapter 4, but also in Chapter 5); hierarchical/non-hierarchical approach (mainly in Chapter 4); emotions/rationality (mainly in Chapter 5); orientation/choice (Chapter 6); desire for social legitimacy/political radicalism (mainly in Chapter 6).

## Chapter 1

### “What we talk about when we talk about love”<sup>7</sup>

*Far from being just a personal, private phenomenon,  
love is very much a part of our public culture.*

(Jackson, “Even sociologists fall in love: an exploration in the Sociology of emotions”, 1993, p. 202).

*What does it mean to love someone? (...)  
[D]oes it mean the same thing across time and space,  
or does its meaning change with context?  
Is the emotional experience of love, regardless of how people define love,  
always the same, or does the experience of love vary with context?*

(Beall and Sternberg, “The Social Construction of Love”, 1995, p. 417)

This chapter offers a brief overview of studies and theorisations about intimacies and sexualities, focusing in particular on the birth and diffusion of romantic love and on the transformations that occurred in post-modernity<sup>8</sup>. It will function as starting point for the reflections about the flourishing of new models of CANM that are the main topic of my investigation.

From a constructivist perspective and building on the work of various authors, the first section of this chapter presents a brief reconstruction of different conceptualisations of love and sexuality that prevailed in different eras in

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<sup>7</sup> This title takes inspiration from the 1981 collection of short stories by the American writer Raymond Carver, and in particular from the title of one of the stories in the collection, where the four characters discuss the meaning of love.

<sup>8</sup> Some theorists disagree in clearly defining the end of modernity, and for this reason prefer to talk about “late modernity” or “reflexive modernity” (Giddens 1990). Even if they recognise some of the same elements of change recognised by post-modernist theorists, such as the decline of blind faith in science, the questioning of the idea of modern progress and the weakening of deference to authority, they hold that the project of modernity is not an outdated one. Personally, I am more convinced by the concept of “multiple modernities” developed by Eisenstadt (2002), which calls into question the idea of a single and linear road to modernity, modelled on the basis of Western conceptualisations. However, I prefer to use the term post-modernism because the concept was useful for highlighting some of the characteristics of CANM. However, I understand the concept as geographically situated in Western societies and as referring to specific social segments.

Western societies, beginning with their origins, passing through the Middle Ages and courtly love and, finally, focusing specifically on romantic love. In the second section I concentrate on modernity and post-modernity: first of all, I take into consideration the changes that have occurred in sexual studies, then I focus on theories developed around changes in intimacy. Subsequently, I give space to theories that help to decentralise the Western gaze, including perspectives different to that of the white, middle class hetero-cis and able-bodied man. In the last subsection I present the concept of “pure relationship” developed by Giddens (1992) and some considerations about the “queering tendencies” in Western societies offered by Roseneil (2000) that served as useful groundwork for my research. At the same time, I present some critiques of the concept of “pure relationship” and de-traditionalization theories in general. These critiques represent the point at which my theoretical positioning had arrived at the time of writing. In the last section, I dedicate some space to arguments about the need to overcome romantic love, offered mainly by feminist theorists and activists, and I accompany these reflections with some considerations about the need to also overcome the conception that casts emotions as opposed to reason.

### *1.1 Brief review of historical reconstructions of the Western conceptualisation of love until late Modernity*

This brief reconstruction aims to historically contextualise the changes that have occurred in the discourses and “taken-for-granted” notions about love in Western society, highlighting the sociocultural reinforcement of these accounts at different times, for example through narrative processes such as myths, legends, fairy tales, proverbs, jokes, songs, images, dramatic representations, and so on. Of course, we must keep in mind that, as with every project of typing, this too is partial and surely incapable of capturing all the nuances found in every single era. For example, as Biancheri (2011) remarks, although many theorists agree on the fact that economic and familial reasons had a huge weight in marriage choices

in premodern societies, the affective detachment between spouses was not so obvious in every case and, above all, not for all the social classes.

Moreover, a constructivist perspective must take into account that the taxonomy of sexuality that we use today was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the way we think of sexuality as an essential part of our identity was not present in pre-modernity (Phillips and Reay 2011). Before, “there was sex but not sexuality” (p. 12, *ibid.*) and sex was not conceptualised in terms of “orientations” or “identities”. Therefore, the historical reconstructions that use modern sexological taxonomy to explain pre-modern sex inevitably offer a partial if not distorted view of it (*ibid.*).

Another controversial issue concerns the debate over the supposed universality of passionate love. Authors such as De Rougemont (1939) or Dinzelbacher (1989) hold that this type of love is specific to Western societies, while others (e.g. Dronke 1966; Coria 2005; Yela 2002) highlight its cross-culturality. Other theorists (e.g. Jankowiack and Fisher 1992) warn against falling into Eurocentric traps in assigning the creation of passionate love to the West. Although I in no way seek to provide an exhaustive answer to this debate, in the first section of this chapter I mainly follow a constructivist perspective in the attempt to avoid overlooking sociocultural context under the concept of universality or “naturalness” and, specifically, in the attempt to “denounce the false truth taken for granted in the patriarchal order” (Herrera Gómez 2010, p. 307, my translation). At any rate, this attempt should absolutely not be taken as an attempt to assign affective superiority or intellectual priority to the West; rather, it sets off from a critical perspective, as I hope will be evident in the unfolding of the discussion.

### *1.1.1 Origins*

The term “amour passion” was first coined by Stendhal in its essay *De l'amour* (1926). This expression outlines a type of love so emotionally engaging that it

can alienate the person who experiences it from everyone else. It is also a type of love that is nourished by never being completely satisfied and, as such, is characterised by suffering and anguish (Herrera Gómez 2010).

According to Herrera Gómez (2010), the connotations of passionate love can be found in Greek literature from the beginning. Ortiz (1997) notes how, for the Ancient Greeks, passionate love was personified in the figure of a God (or demi-God) who perturbs and bewitches not just humans, but also other Gods, with his darts. In Greek society we also find the roots of the dichotomous contraposition between *logos* and *passion*, which follows and/or reinforces other contrapositions such as order (*logos*) and chaos (*passion*) and men (*logos*) and women (*passion*) (Herrera Gómez 2010). I will come back to these and other dichotomies in the last section of this chapter in an attempt to call them into question.

This vision of love is also praised in the lyrics of Roman poets, such as Ovid and Virgilio. Ovid even elaborates, in their *Ars Amandi*, a sort of manual for lovers (*ibid.*).

However, it is also important to take into account that the definitions and expectations related to love in Ancient Greece and Rome were different to later ones and to those of today in important ways. Most of the Greek philosophers' reflections about love were devoted to love for boys. In particular, Foucault (1984) recalls how, in the Platonic discourses (the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* in particular), Erotica is principally "conceived as the art of competition between the one who courts and the one who is courted" (p. 231, my translation).



### 1.1.2 *The Middle Ages and courtly love*<sup>9</sup>

Phillips and Reay (2011) claim that “[t]he power of heterosexuality resides in a strange combination of ubiquity and invisibility”. With this sentence the authors seek to highlight the fact that heterosexuality has often been taken for granted in historical reconstructions of sexuality, as if it represented History itself or “the totality of Romance” (Sedgwick 1994, p. 11). In telling the story of the Western romantic repertoire – which I am interested in mentioning here – authors often refer to the Middle Ages as the moment in which courtly love developed (*cf.* Herrera Gómez 2010). Phillips and Reay (2011) note that the medieval vocabulary about love was wide and varied. They mention: “*caritas* (selfless love), *dilectio* (admiration and high esteem), *amicitia* (friendship), *affectio* (affection), *cupiditas* (desire, often but not always sexual), and (...) *amor* (romantic love or passion, encompassing *caritas* and *cupiditas*)” (p. 50, italics mine). In the rest of this sub-section I will refer to this latter type, but it is important to keep in mind that the overall love lexicon was much more complex.

Speaking about courtly love (*amor*), Schultz (2006) claims that, although the lover and the beloved are always male and female (at the most, with their roles reversed), we cannot call it “heterosexuality” because the dynamics of love were substantially different. First of all, in his opinion it is not sex difference that generates love but rather courtliness: the beloved cannot be considered a sexual object; rather, it is the attractiveness of the beloved that invades the lover (*cf.* Phillips and Reay 2011).

Another recurrent question of courtly love scholarship is whether this type of love could refer to marriage or only to extra-marital relationships (*ibid.*). Otis-Cour (2000) distinguishes two basic types of *romances de pareja*: the

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<sup>9</sup> The term, created by the French critic Paris in 1883, was subsequently contested by some historians because it does not find correspondence in medieval texts (*cf.* Donaldson 1970). However, although it appears only in a poem, it is similar to the term *fin'amor* which appears frequently. Besides, the term has the advantage of underlining a particular conception of love based on courtesy, which represented its essence.

“idyllic” one in which the two protagonists have grown up together, and other type in which the two come to know each other as adults. According to the author, the idyllic type, which was the first type to appear, represents a “canonically correct” concept of love and marriage in that society – although with various exceptions in common life (*cf.* Phillips and Reay 2011) – and “a true hymn to monogamy” (Herrera Gómez 2010, p. 311, my translation): the lovers are “good Christians”, they promise each other eternal love but do not have sexual contact until the celebration of their marriage. At the end of the novel, the parents normally accept the love of the couple and the family is reconciled (*ibid.*). These novels fundamentally celebrate the unification of individual feelings with the political, social and economic order (Schnell 1985). The introduction of the adulterous component disrupts this harmony between love and social order: courtly love is cloaked in new obstacles and prohibitions and passion becomes a threat to the social order. According to Paris, Lewis and Capellanus, courtly love can be better expressed outside the institution of marriage, as this latter is, in most cases, merely a contract stipulated for economic and/or dynastic reasons (Herrera Gómez 2010; Phillips and Reay 2011). Despite this, courtly love is also exclusive, because the beloved is singular and unique. Its adulterous nature is one of the reasons for which this type of love comes into conflict with religions, and especially Christianity. Another reason is the fact that the idealisation and divinisation of the beloved casts adoration of the monotheist God into the background (Lewis 1936). It is no coincidence that De Rougemont (1939) affirms that “love-passion appeared in the West as one of the counterparts to Christianity (and especially to its doctrine of marriage) in the souls in which a natural or hereditary paganism still lived” (p. 118, my translation).

According to De Rougemont (*ibid.*), these romances inaugurate the novelistic tradition based on the narration of passion as suffering. Courtly love is a source of suffering because it remains unfulfilled, although it is not just spiritual: the erotic component is as important as the spiritual one. The lover must

maintain the right distance (*mezura* = measure) between erotic desire and spiritual tension, pleasure and suffering, exaltation and anguish (Lewis 1936).

Several authors have also debated what figure of woman emerges from courtly love. Some authors (e.g. Lipovetsky 1999) opine that courtly love elevates the social image of the woman, granting her new power in the process of love bargaining, and that this evolved into the freedom for women to elect their own spouses. Giddens (1992) recognises this mythification and divinisation of the female figure and an accompanying process of male feminisation due to the fact that strong and violent manners were no longer effective for conquering women. At the same time, the author highlights that this transformation is not sufficient to overcome the active/passive dichotomy in which the woman continues to play the passive role. According to Giddens, women continue to be identified as objects of love to conquer more than as subjects that can truly decide where to direct their love. What men love is the abstract and idealised image of the Woman more than women as people in flesh and blood with all their strengths and weaknesses (Herrera Gómez 2010).

Herrera Gómez (*ibid.*), following Fuchs (1911), describes the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the century in which love turned into gallantry: the expressions of love were games, strategies to ensnare women and make them feel special and unique, but with the sole purpose of enjoying pleasure. In this way, truth and frankness were substituted by courtesy and flattery in this period. According to Herrera Gómez (2010), this way of conceiving love is closely connected with the excess of social, political and economic power in the hands of men, who could afford to use women to satisfy their erotic desires and whims. I will return to this conception of love linked to seduction in Chapter 2 when speaking of polyamory and the culture of consent, a field of thought that was mainly created in opposition to this conception.

### 1.1.3 Romantic love

Argullol (1984) has identified two historical moments as important for the flourishing of romantic love: Renaissance and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his lecture, he notes that the pre-Socratic idea of a united and infinite universe towards which individuals tend but without ever succeeding in achieving this union returned during the Renaissance. This feeling was the cause of Renaissance angst as well as romantic pessimism. In this period, the myth of *Anima Mundi* – used by Plato to identify nature in its unity, as an organism – triumphed. In Renaissance times, the myth was used to humanise nature and to naturalise the “Newtonian man”, outside of the norms of scientific truth.

In Argullol’s (1984) opinion, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century nature was once again perceived as magic. According to the author, the romantic man of the 19<sup>th</sup> century refused the idea of dominating nature, instead exhibiting anti-positivistic and anti-Newtonian tendencies. The author reminds us of how John Kyats, Charles Lamb and others toasted against Newton, accusing him of having “destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow, by reducing it to the prismatic colours” (Haydon 1929, p. 231). Another myth supported by romantics was that of the Golden Age, a time in which truth, beauty and nature formed an organic unity to which humans, in turn heroes and gods, could have access. It was the impossibility of returning to this unity that gave rise to romantic despair (Argullol 1984).

Various authors identify this feeling based on suffering and constant torment as one of the main characteristics of Western romantic love (Giddens 1992; Herrera Gómez 2010). Along these lines, Tennov (1999, 2005), through her studies on the symptoms associated with (romantic) love, discovered that two feelings dominate: hope and insecurity. These findings seem to confirm pessimistic theories around (romantic) love, for example the one expressed by Bauman (2003) when he argues that love, in order to survive, needs to maintain a tension between the desire for unity with “the Other” and the impossibility of

achieving this duality because, according to him, (romantic) love cannot survive domestication. He writes, beginning with a citation from Levinas:

Eros is “a relation with alterity, with mystery, that is with the future, with which is absent from the world that contains everything that is...” “The pathos of love consists in the insurmountable duality of beings”. Attempts to overcome that duality, to tame the wayward and domesticate the riotous, to make the unknowable predictable and enchain the free-roaming – all such things sound the death-knell to love. Eros won’t outlast duality. As far as love is concerned, possession, power, fusion and disenchantment are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

In this lies the wondrous fragility of love, side by side with its cursed refusal to bear vulnerability lightly. All love strives to foreclose, but at the moment of triumph it meets its ultimate defeat. All love struggles to bury the sources of its precariousness and suspense; but if it succeeds, it quickly starts wilting – and fades. Eros is possessed by the ghost of Thanatos which no magic incantations can exorcise. This is not a matter of Eros’s precocity, and no amount of schooling and teach-yourself expedients can free it from the morbid – suicidal – inclination (*ibid.*, pp. 7-8).

De Rougemont (1939), Alberoni (1979) and Fisher (2004) also share the idea that (romantic) love is stimulated by adversity. Alberoni (1979) recalls various literary fictions in which the obstacles are necessary to build up the love story: the rival families in Shakespeare, Isolda’s marriage, the birth of a new child in Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, Beatrice’s death for Dante, and so on. The author, in his optimistic vision of the modern heterosexual couple, defines love as a nascent state of a collective movement composed of two people. In this sense, he suggests that romantic love can be revolutionary in that it causes a rupture with the past. Romantic love is born inside feudal society, where this type of love can call into question the social order if the spark ignites between people belonging to different social classes or different kinship systems; but it can, at the same time, causes other ruptures such as the adolescence who breaks with his or her family

of origin, the acts of adultery that ruptures marital harmony, breaking with political faith, cultural or linguistic difference, the rupture of age or orientation, and many others (Herrera Gómez 2010).

However, even if romantic love can be compared – as Alberoni (*ibid.*) does – with a revolutionary act, the romantic hero is fundamentally individualistic and asocial: even when he participates in national or social action, the collective is nothing more than a scenario in which the hero's battle can be set (Herrera Gómez 2010).

Normally, romantic love is characterised by a first phase described as an emotional state that can be compared to ecstasy or a hypnotic state (*cf.* Ortega y Gasset 1940). In this stage, the body is invaded by a whirlwind of emotions (included irrepressible desire, fear, attraction, and eroticism) that generates a very intense and continuous state of happiness which can be compared to an enchantment with the power to carry the lover away from his or her everyday routine. In this sense, Romanticism coincides with a removal of participants from the order of everyday reality and the creation of their own reality (Herrera Gómez 2010).

Fisher (2004) rightly points out that the body cannot tolerate the type of stress that this first stage of love entails for long, and this inherent limit is why this state is precarious: it can last a few weeks, a month, or two or three years at the most, but it is not eternal. Afterwards, the endorphins inaugurate a new stage, a stage of serenity and peace (Herrera Gómez 2010; Liebowitz 1983).

Herrera Gómez (2010) also recognises a magical component in the breakup of romantic love, because people feel powerless to control the dissolution of love. The researcher identifies different causes for the end of a romantic relationship: asymmetry in the relationship (of rhythm or intensity, expectations, or personal autonomy); the precarity of the emotional balance of human beings; the mythification of the object of love, followed by the frustration to open the eyes on reality; continuous feelings of sexual jealousy; the decreased

frequency of sexual relations and, more and more, inequality in the division of domestic tasks (Hendrick and Hendrick 1992; Yela 2002).

Romanticism as an artistic and literary current deeply affected the symbolic imaginary of the Western world and its main characteristics continue to be reproduced by contemporary media representations. Herrera Gómez (2010) suggests that the concept of romantic love involves a “collective emotional utopia” (p. 78, my translation). The researcher, starting from a constructivist perspective, sees romantic love as a socio-cultural construction and, in line with other feminist and queer theorists and activists whose ideas will be outlined below, links this construction to the maintenance of the capitalist, democratic and patriarchal structure (*ibid.*). However, the concept of romantic love is complex and contains contradictory dimensions; it also includes a transgressive component and, as such, can be seen as a small “personal revolution” aimed at overcoming the public order (*ibid.*). Giddens (1992), instead, distinguishes romantic love from passionate love. In his view, passionate love includes an erotic component so strong and overwhelming that it can be compared to religious ardour. For this reason, this type of love was seen as dangerous from the point of view of social responsibility and social order. According to the author, this transgressive drive in romantic love is mitigated by the component of Christian love, which causes the sublime to prevail over the ardour.

The role of women in Romanticism is likewise ambivalent (Herrera Gómez 2010; Biancheri 2011): on one side, the romantic drive towards freedom and equality can suggest more freedom for women as well, but on the other side Romantics continued to address and speak only for the male subject. In this model, women mainly remained tied to cultural norms that saw them as lacking in desire, as Kirkpatrick (1989) has also highlighted. According to the author, female writers such as Mary Shelley or Mme De Staël reveal the fallacy and oppression that the feminine model of the “angel of the hearth” entailed.

Other authors hold that modern romantic novels contrasted with medieval ones because the heroines in the former genre were able to play an

active role in that constant quest for “the Other” typical of these novels (Giddens 1992; Gil Calvo 1997). Ortiz (1997) argues that *Wuthering Heights* is the most non-conformist and brutal novel in this sense, and that Emily Brontë’s story contains a message that was radically opposed to Victorian morals: the idea that women and men can both love with the same intensity. The author also highlights the importance of the figure of Emma Bovary, created by Flaubert and treated by a number of commentators as a sort of female version of Don Quixote, as a woman addicted to romantic novels and who desires and pursues the same passion in her real life. Ortiz argues that Emma represents the female voluptuousness that threatens the social order. In the character of Emma – continues Ortiz – all the terrific images of the woman as a den of iniquity are brought back to life: Emma is no longer the woman that the man can simply abandon to return to his public affairs once his romantic excursion has ended (*ibid.*). This indomitable female passion reaches what may be its highest peaks with *Ana Karenina* and Bizet's *Carmen*. Ana refuses to enact a tame love, regulated and atrophied by everyday life; Carmen is “violent, terrible, free and indomitable” (Herrera Gómez 2010, p. 327).

According to Giddens (1992), romantic love strengthens the dichotomous division between women and men. In fact, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the centre of domestic life shifted from patriarchal authority to maternal care, and the maternal figure assumed more and more importance. Giddens (*ibid.*) speaks of romantic love as “feminised” but he also highlights the fact that feminine and masculine roles remained very clearly differentiated and that the double moral standard continued to apply. Taking care of the relationship was a female task, while men were permitted to live a “double life”: romantic love was reserved to wives and related to the serenity of home and everyday life, while passionate love was allowed to find expression outside of family life, with a lover or prostitute. In this sense, Giddens affirms that romantic love was more “respectable” than passionate love, and the latter never constituted a social force as romantic love does. Furthermore, the author highlights another important point: romantic love



requires a certain degree of self-inquiry and tends to isolate the individual from the social context in a different way than passionate love does: romantic love assigns a special primacy to dyadic matrimonial love in which “the Other” compensates for the deficiencies of the individual, completing him or her. According to feminist theorists, this idea of complementarity and fulfilment is one of the most critical aspect of the idealisation of romantic love.

Some of the classical sociologists (e.g. Comte 1830-1842; Spencer 1898), in contrast, exalt this gender role division in the monogamic union as a social cohesive force operating against individualistic disruption (Biancheri 2011). Durkheim (1888-1892) saw the monogamic marriage as a fortress protecting society from the insatiability of desires and Tönnies (1887) recognised the symbolic meaning of the domestic hearth as a “vital force” stabilised by family ties. Simmel (1906) warned against the risk of total openness on the part of the lovers in that, encouraged by the initial euphoria, in the long run such openness can consume the couple. For this reason, the author sustains that some spaces of our interiority must be kept hidden as the only way to maintain the craving for constant discovery. Parsons (1951) argued that the monogamic couple is the site for the creation of a supportive form of collectivity based on differentiation and functional specialisation. According to him, familial bonds in the nuclear family have finally become elective and no longer based on economic interests, which frees up the family as the place where affective ties can develop. Applying his AGIL<sup>10</sup> scheme to the family structure and viewing it as a social system, the father holds the instrumental leadership, performing the functions of Adaptation (providing income for the family), Goal attainment (making decisions) and Integration (coordinating and adjusting the relationships), while the mother holds the expressive leadership, performing the function of Latent

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<sup>10</sup> The acronym AGIL indicates the functionalist paradigm introduced by Parsons as a tool for analysing social systems. In the author’s opinion, every social system must enact the diverse functions recalled by the acronym (Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, Latent pattern maintenance) in order to work properly.

pattern maintenance with the task of transmitting the family values to the children and creating and maintaining a peaceful environment.

In general, debates about marriage, love and affective relationships became more widespread in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the increase in divorce rates. Some theorists interpret these signals as the beginning of the end of romantic love (Biancheri 2011).

Historically, some scholars have welcomed a shift towards freer sexuality and/or a departure from oppressive traditional ties. For example, Reich (1936) and Marcuse (1955) argued that sexuality had been repressed for too long and that an *eros* freed from the oppression of the patriarchal family was instead the fundamental basis for the development of lasting social and civil relations.

Before these authors, Marx and Engels (*cf.* Engels 1884) had already developed a strong critique of monogamous marriage and the hierarchies of power that it reproduces and their analysis is closely connected to the analysis of economic dynamics. For these two authors, the abolition of the capitalistic system of production, as well as private property, is essential to overcoming inequalities between women and men and dismantling female submission in marriage. Only a radical change in the economic system has the power to bring about a change in the relational system in the direction of developing relationships between genders based on equality and freed from external interferences and constraints.

Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) critiqued the modern economic reification and its interferences even in family life. They also contested the idea of “complementarity” in marriage, given that the wife and husband remain individual atoms who see marriage as nothing more than a device for collaborative benefits, on one side, or for ensuring greater security, on the other side.

## *1.2 Modernity, post-modernity and changes in intimacy*

Some authors identify one of the main characteristics of modernity as being the collapse of “one grand story” about society (Plummer 1996, 2003, p. 18; Simon 1996). This affirmation does not mean that in previous societies there was not ambiguity or conflicts, but that before it was easier to detect a single prevailing cultural paradigm (for example, around the big religions, such as Christianity, Islam or Hinduism). As Plummer (2003, p. 18) writes: “Our formerly strong conviction of unity, permanence, continuity – of one moral order under God – has started to collapse, and what we now find instead are fragmentations, pluralizations, multiplicities”. These changes have deep implications in terms of cultural and political change as well: Plummer (1996) underlines that new politics have appeared, such as the “politics of difference, radical pluralism, communitarianism, a new liberalism, cultural politics, life politics” (p. 38), a point that many other authors also affirm (*cf.* Young 1990; Connolly 1991; Giddens 1991; Barber 1992; Benhabib 1992).

One major axis in these “new politics” concerns gender/sexual/erotic politics: these politics have been able to develop thanks to the circulation of new narratives (“stories”, in Plummer’s words) about intimacies (Weeks 1995; Plummer 1996). The idea of “man”, “woman”, “the truth”, and “the body” has been challenged and it is increasingly difficult to provide one true narrative around these topics: some theorists began to speak, for example, of “genders” and “sexualities” in the plural (Plummer 1996, 2003). Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to assert an homogeneous discourse regarding so-called “sexual minorities” because different individuals can experience the same sexual behaviour in a very different way; for example, it is increasingly problematic to speak of “homosexuality” as a unique, monolithic identity (Simon 1996).

Likewise, it is important to highlight that postmodernity is also the stage for harsh conflicts between individual or collective actors who emphasise pluralities and individual or collective actors (for example, religious and

conservatory groups) who want to reaffirm traditional sources of power (Plummer 2003). Every “new story” has a rival “old” one: “new families” as the rival of the traditional family values, “new bodies” as the rival of “natural bodies”, new ways of being women and men in opposition to traditional gender roles, and new sexualities in opposition to traditional sexualities. The first response to these conflicts is a reaffirmation of tribalism, fundamentalism and separatism, “stories” that privilege one group, culture, or identity over others (Plummer 1996).

In the next sub-sections I try to reconstruct the paradigmatic shifts in sexual studies which broadly follow the shift I have briefly outlined above and some of the theories developed around the concept of intimacy.

### *1.2.1 Changes in sexual studies: from naturalisation to de-naturalisation*

In their reader *Sexuality and Society*, Weeks, Holland and Waites (2003) reconstruct the history of sexual studies in a way that sheds a great deal of light on the passage from modernity to late/post-modernity. Sexology was born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the work of authors with an Enlightenment and positivist background and who, as such, were convinced it was possible to identify one – and only one – biological truth explaining human behaviours (Simon 1996). Sexological pioneers, such as the Austrian scholar Krafft-Ebing and British Havelock Ellis, attempted to understand the “law of nature” behind human sexuality in the same way as early sociologists such as Comte, Weber and Durkheim were attempting to understand “the laws of society” (Weeks 1985; Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003). Their typical approach was that of examining sexual reactions as a natural, fixed phenomenon rather than investigating cultural and historical influences. They set off from naturalistic assumptions such as the inevitability of the male sex drive and the reactive character of female sexuality, and they saw the divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality as biologically given (*ibid.*). The underlying idea behind their work was that, once

every single aspect of sexuality had been thoroughly explored from a scientific point of view, every mystery would be unveiled. This narrow application of scientific methods also served to detach scholars from their object of study; in some ways, this semblance of objectivity kept sexual researchers far from the “dirty side” of sexuality. On the other hand, this a-historicism also produced a taxonomic flattening of sexuality (Simon 1996).

However, despite this dominant trend, some scholars began to recognise the importance of social and cultural factors. For example, Oosterhuis (2000), in his study on Krafft-Erbing, was initially only interested in understanding the sexual behaviour of emotionally disturbed patients but then gradually became increasingly aware of the importance of understanding the social factors that influence people’s behaviours in general. This analytical shift proceeded in parallel with his growing dialogue with a more and more self-conscious community, that of the “inverts” (as they were called at the time) who went on to become associated with the term “homosexuals” (Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003).

The most influential of this generation of pioneers is undoubtedly Freud. Although vulnerable to criticism – and criticised all throughout the century – for his deterministic vision of sexuality and his tendencies to impose the moralistic views of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Viennese bourgeoisie on all cultures, Freud was also sensitive to the variability of sexual patterns on a global scale (*ibid.*).

Progressively, more and more groups of people demanded recognition of their diversity in relation to what society (and sexology) identifies as “normal”, and scientists were not able to ignore them any longer. In fact, many of the pioneers, such as Krafft-Erbing, Ellis, Freud and, above all, the German Magnus Hirschfeld, became increasingly committed to the progressive liberalisation of ancient taboos and laws against “deviant” behaviours (*ibid.*).

The most influential of the next generation of sexologists was Kinsey (see 1948, 1953). He began his career as an expert in gall wasps and, when his interest turned to human sexuality, he sought to apply the same detached

scientific zeal to this relatively new scientific field (*ibid.*). The research conducted by Kinsey and his research group (with which he founded the *Institute for Sex Research*) was an ambitious study on human sexual behaviour that lasted 15 years and resulted in two reports: *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953). The reports are based on data collected on 16,392 people (7,789 women and 8,603 men) through biographical interviews, accompanied by materials such as sexual calendars, diaries, personal correspondence, photographs, paintings and more. The research results garnered a great deal of interest and attention even among ordinary people because they were considered controversial and sensationalist. In particular, the reports questioned many ideas that had been taken-for-granted in sexology up to that point, such as the fact that completely heterosexual behaviour represents the norm (statistically and ethically) (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953).

The impact of Kinsey's discoveries on North American society and on future studies on sexuality is ambivalent: for example, while on one hand the homosexuality-heterosexuality continuum that came to be known as the "Kinsey scale"<sup>11</sup> added nuance to the dichotomous homo/hetero distinction, on the other hand it evolved into the raw material for the creation of an homosexual figure whose difference is inscribed in nature, appearing almost "racial" in character (Epstein 1987 and Escoffier 1985 in Simon 1996). However, his exploration of the variability of sexual patterns in the 1940s USA had an unavoidable cultural and political impact on the society of the time. For example, the demonstration that homosexual behaviour is much more common than previously thought (37% of males interviewed reported having had some form of homosexual experience to the point of orgasm) contributed to increase the social acceptance of homosexuality (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953; Simon 1996).

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<sup>11</sup> The scale is used in research to describe a person's sexual orientation based on one's experience or response at a given time. It ranges from 0= exclusively heterosexual to 6= exclusively homosexual.

Gagnon and Simon (1973) posed a critique of what they called the “drive reduction model”, a model that reads sexuality as being based on sexual drive and as assuming patterns of repression or release in relation to it. Instead, they organised their work by emphasising the ways in which sexuality is shaped by culture, in different geographical spaces and in different times. They distinguish between the sexual and reproductive potentialities of the bodies (which are fairly constant across different cultures) and the importance that every culture places on reproduction, interpersonal relationships and relations between men and women (Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003).

This most critical break with the essentialist vision represented by the work of Gagnon and Simon (1973) influenced Foucault as well. The French theorist’s *History of Sexuality* (1976, 1984a, 1984b) offers a key contribution to the historical reconstruction of the organisation of sexuality in Western society. Foucault also suggests that the extent to which sexuality is central to people’s sense of self is itself historically specific. In fact, sexual desires and sexual behaviours become increasingly important to the construction of the self in modern Western societies from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards and this has helped minorities to achieve certain rights (Weeks 2000). In this sense, identity politics can be seen as a form of resistance against stigmatisation (Oosterhuis 2000; Weeks, Holland, Waites 2003). As bell hooks (1989) points out: “Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story” (p. 43).

Foucault undoubtedly contributes to recognising the mainly social nature of human sexuality and the role of power relations in shaping it. However, as Weeks, Holland and Waites (2003) highlight, it is also important to recognise the fact that Foucault’s conceptualisation is likewise built on forms of sexual knowledge already in development and heavily influenced by 1960s radical social movements, such as second wave feminism and the gay liberation movement. From a theoretic point of view, from the mid-70s onwards feminist theorists began to question the previous categorisation of sexuality (e.g.

Radicalesbians 1970; Firestone 1971; Millet 1971) and to contest the hetero/homosexuality dichotomy as fixed and natural, instead highlighting how cultural construction has contributed to delineating this division (e.g. Altman 1971; Smith-Rosenberg 1985; Katz 1976; Trumbach 1977; Weeks 1977). At the same time, post-colonial theorists began to question the Western assumptions about non-Western sexualities that cast them as “more primitive” or closer to nature (Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003).

### *1.2.2 Theories on modern intimacies*

Theorists (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Beck-Gernsheim 1999) have identified the processes of individualisation and de-traditionalization and increased self-reflexivity as the elements that played the most significant role in changes around intimacy in the contemporary world.

Individualisation and de-traditionalization are classical concepts linked to the sociological analysis of modernity (*cf.* Tönnies 1887; Simmel 1890). Weber (1922) – who prefers the term “razionalisation” – also analyses how this process was linked to the progressive dissolution of domestic communities. According to the author, the disintegration of domestic power had both internal and external causes. Inside the community, the progressive differentiation of work, functions, capacities and needs led individuals to feel more and more intolerant of the fixed and undifferentiated bonds of the domestic community. Individuals aspired more and more to individual autonomy, achievable through the use of their individual skills on the market. Outside the community, one of the factors of disintegration was the emergence of competing social formations that were often fuelled by interests contrasting to those of the domestic community (for example, a more intensive exploitation of the individual contributory capacity).

One of the consequences of these tendencies was the growing division of domestic community following inheritance or marriage of the offspring. The



functional shift in the domestic community contributed to weakening the incentive for the individual to submit to a large commune-type home. This functional shift consisted above all in the fact that the house changed from being a place of production to being a place of consumption, and this shift coincided with the physical separation between house and profession. At the same time, the domestic community lost its previous function of safeguarding security, replaced in this role by the institutional group of political power. Moreover, the domestic community also no longer served as the provider of education, obliged as it was to compete with or replaced by an array of “businesses” and institutions (schools, libraries, theatres, concert halls, clubs, meetings, etc.) (*ibid.*).

Some analysis (e.g. Bauman 2001, 2003; Hochschild 1983, 2003; Illouz 2007) see late modernity as the site in which this process played out to an extreme degree, coming to also affect the sphere of intimacy. In particular, these authors focus on individualisation and the commercialisation of feelings as critical aspects that prevent the construction of solid emotional bonds.

Bauman has coined the concept of *Liquid Modernity* (2001), a phase characterised by changeability and instability in which the social definition of the self also dissolves and individuals define themselves more around their own psychological specificities than around social or universal principles. Late modern love can be seen as “liquid” as well, with people looking for affective bonds to escape from loneliness but then becoming frightened by the possibility of getting caught up in definitive relationships that would put their autonomy at risk (Bauman 2003).

Illouz (2007) and Hochschild (1983), using the concepts of “emotional capitalism” and “emotional labor” respectively, highlight how the economic sphere and emotional sphere did not so much come into conflict as define and shape each other in late modernity. In their vision, the culture of capitalism uses emotions and emotional labour to affectively charge economic relations and, at the same time, intimate relationships are increasingly commercialised and defined by economic models.

Following Roseneil (2000), we could say that these analyses undoubtedly capture some trends that have become increasingly evident in late modernity, but the vision of late modern intimacy they offer might be excessively flattened and they may fail to recognise the (post-modern) social drive to improve oneself, including through intimate relationships. In the next sub-section I examine some of the suggestions that Roseneil proposes to develop the analysis of late modern intimacy.

Regarding the process of increasing self-reflexivity, I find it useful to draw on some of Giddens's (1991) considerations about self-reflexivity as one of the characteristics of post-traditional societies, in which the history of the self must be continuously modified and the lifestyle must be aligned with it. This trend is what Foucault (1984b) called "the Californian cult of the self", that is, the constant pursuit of a more authentic "self" that must be freed from social conventions and asphyxiating bonds.

Giddens (1991, 1992) also recognises institutional reflexivity as one of the main characteristics of late modernity: the continuous accumulation of knowledge offers further momentum to all of the changes already outlined by Weber (1922). For example, in the sexual field, texts that analyse sexuality (such as, for example, Kinsey's reports) are not simply limited to describing sexual behaviours in that specific historical moment; rather, they also stimulate new debates and discussions about and investigations into this topic. These discussions about sexuality also influence the thought of people who are outsiders in relation to the intellectual debates and, consequently, affect the sexual practices of a wider public. The development of this type of research is both an effect and a consequence of the increasing self-reflexivity around sexual practices that reflects a wider trend to self-reflexivity in general (Giddens 1992).

Foucault dedicates a large part of his thinking to the so-called "techniques of the self" and, in particular, the third volume of his *History of sexuality*, "The care of the self" (1984b), is specifically focused on mapping the

history of how different societies conceived and took care of “the self” from Ancient Greece to modernity.

As for the Greeks (from 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.), they had a specific word to indicate the care of the self, *epimeleia heautou*, which means “working on” or “being concerned with” something. What Foucault finds interesting in the self-mastery involved in classical terms is that Greeks and Romans developed a series of austerity practices, interdictions, and prohibitions that are normally linked to Christians. Foucault (1984b, 1994) uses this point to underline the fact that we cannot really locate a clean break between tolerant Antiquity and austere Christianity. At any rate, in Antiquity such work on the self was not imposed by civil law or religious obligation but was an autonomous individual choice: “it was a question of making one's life into an object for a sort of knowledge, for a *tekhnē* – for an art” (Foucault 1994, p. 271). I will return to the concept of *epimeleia heautou* when speaking about polyamory and the cult of the self in Chapter 2.

For Ancients, the art of living could not be learned without exercise: such training took different forms, such as abstinence, memorisation, examination of the conscience, meditation, silence and listening to others. Their *hupomnēmata* (notebooks), the opposite of modern personal diaries or accounts of personal experiences as in later Christian literature, were not aimed at illuminating the hidden or discovering the truth but, on the contrary, sought to collect the already-said and reassemble the fragments of the *logos* that was being taught, listened to or read. This practice collimated with the spirit of the time, in the context of a culture affected by traditionality, the recurrence of discourse and citational practices. Foucault argues that the main difference between classical austerity and Christian austerity lies in the fact that the first one was linked to an aesthetics of existence and the other one to the renunciation of the self and the decryption of its truth (Foucault 1984b, 1994).

With the coming of Christianity, *epimeleia heautou* was transformed into *epimeleia tōn allōn* (“care of the others”). It was then the pastor who was

tasked with taking care of souls and the classical care of the self was integrated into this practice, losing a great deal of its autonomy. Nevertheless, during the Renaissance some religious groups claimed the right to spiritual autonomy, detached from pastoral authority and guidance. Foucault sees these claims as signalling a revival of the culture of the self; in the same way, he also finds a reappearance, in this period, of the idea that one can make a work of art from one's own life (*ibid.*).

According to Foucault's reconstruction, in the period around the 16<sup>th</sup> century the reactions of Catholic confessional practices contributed to the development of new modes of relationship with the self. In these times, there were also some attempts to return to classical times, with the reactivation of certain Stoic practices (for example, the notion of proofs of oneself). All of the so-called "literature of the self", such as private diaries, narratives of the self, etc., must be included in the framework of these "practices of the self". According to Foucault, self-analysis is a cultural practice, and the self is constituted not only by symbols but also by real and historically situated practices: the "techniques" of the self are present in all cultures, in different forms (*ibid.*).

Coming to modernity, the philosopher makes a clear distinction between the ancient cult of the self and the cult of the self of modern society, which he calls "the Californian cult of the self". According to Foucault, the modern cult of the self coincides with a search for "the true self", which must be kept separate from whatever might obscure or alienate it, ideally with the help of psychology and/or psychoanalysis. He argues that the ancient cult of the self is diametrically opposed to this newer cult and he blames Christianity for having substituted the idea of the self as a work of art with the idea of the self as something to renounce because it goes against God's will (*ibid.*).

This trend seems to have amplified in the more recent decades, with a proliferation of therapeutic culture and self-help manuals that teach people how to be happy. This development, which Ahmed (2010) calls "the happiness turn" (p. 3), has been critiqued by several authors. In Ahmed's analysis, this demand

for happiness does not question the social values that caused the crisis of happiness but, on the contrary, strengthens them, “as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them” (p. 7, *ibid.*). The author’s analysis includes calling into question the fact that much of the research on happiness makes correlations coincide with causalities. To provide an example that concerns precisely our topic, the correlation between happiness and marriage becomes a sort of “moral obligation to promote marriage” (*ibid.*, p. 204). In this way, the suggested path to happiness becomes a reinforcement of social norms.

Speaking of the concept of rationality, Foucault situates the invention of this concept in Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, in Ancient Greek culture a subject was not believed to be able to access truth without working for the purification of the soul. This link between access to the truth and asceticism persisted in European culture until at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century. At that point, according to Foucault, Descartes broke this bond, replacing asceticism with the ability or possibility “to see what is evident” (Foucault 1994, p. 279). The real rupture here is the fact that, for Descartes, purity is no longer a necessary condition to access the truth: one can be immoral but still able to know the truth. The French philosopher see this passage as containing the fundamental precondition to the institutionalisation of the modern sciences: the idea that direct evidence is the only thing that counts (*ibid.*)

After Descartes, Kant reintroduced ethics “as an applied form of procedural rationality”, outlining a universal subject in *The Critique of Practical Reason* that “could be the subject of knowledge, but which demanded, nonetheless, an ethical attitude” (*ibid.*, p. 279). In so doing, Kant introduced into our tradition the idea that the self is not merely given but is constituted in relationship to itself as subject (*ibid.*).

### 1.2.2 *Decentralising the gaze*

As we have already seen, one of the characteristics of post-modernity seems to be increasing consensus around the idea that it is not possible to reach unanimous consensus because human variability is too complex to be reduced to just one paradigm. While on one side this produces insecurity and discomfort, the positive side is that we are moving towards the abandonment of a linear, one-dimensional and universal model to instead embrace a more incremental and incorporative idea of progress (Simon 1996). In this vein, the term “de-naturalisation” can be used to refer to a wider theoretical trend that began to question the categories of “nature” and “man”, especially if used in a universalistic sense. Regarding this last term, the core of the critique lies in recognising that the category of “man” implied in such universalisation is that of a white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle class, and able-bodied man. Theorists and activists began to reveal the socially constructed nature of dichotomies previously seen as “natural” – not just that of heterosexual/homosexual, as mentioned above, but many others such as man/woman, white/non-white, human/non-human, body/mind, and so on – exposing their role in reinforcing the hierarchical classification of these bodies (cf. Sedgwick 1990; Haraway 1988; Butler 1993; Braidotti 2013). These theories do not call for abandoning what has been learned about human’s biological substrate; rather, they encourage us to go further, recognising the cultural influences and power relations that operate in every society to suggest specific forms of categorisation and hierarchisation<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Between March and May 2019 I co-organised a series of seminars with my doctoral colleague Beatrice Del Monte at the University of Milan in order to open an interdisciplinary reflection on these approaches. The series was entitled *Posthumanisms, postanthropocentrism, postenvironmentalism: new critical perspectives in the human and social sciences* and took place in three thematic sessions: 1. “Ecofeminisms and Trans Studies” (Prof. Federica Giardini, Dr. Ludovico Vick Virtù); 2. “Postanthropocentrism and human-non-human animal relationships” (Prof. Massimo Filippi); 3. “Postenvironmentalism and new perspectives of criticism” (Dr. Chiara Certomà).

This increasing awareness of the hierarchically organised nature of the dominant classification of sexual variability has led to the formulation of concepts such as “heteronormativity”, first used by Warner in the article *Introduction: Fear of a queer planet* (1991) but rooted in a wider discourse influenced by queer theories, social constructivism and post-structuralism, as outlined above. The term heteronormativity refers to the entire system of institutions and cultural beliefs that strengthens the notion of heterosexuality as “normal” and “natural” and, consequently, organises the institutional system in such a way as to prioritise this type of relationship at the expense of others (consider, for example, marriage and the rights connected to it, or the right to adopt). The concept derives from reflections on the notion of “sex/gender system” by Rubin (1975) and the notion of “compulsory heterosexuality” as developed by Rich (1980). Heteronormativity takes for granted the binary classification of sex and gender into two – and just two – distinct and complementary categories (male and female, men and women) and the alignment of sex, gender, sexual orientation and sexual and affective behaviours along these binary axes. As Simon (1996) highlights, one of the more persistent sexual classifications that has been naturalised is the one categorising sexuality on the basis of the gender of the “object” of sexual desire. Although there are surely other attributes that contribute to characterising the “objects” of our sexual desires, such as age, physical appearance, ethnic origins, social status, and so on, gender obscures all the other attributes in all prevailing classifications of sexual orientation.

From the 1970s onward, different activists and theorists contributed to questioning the assumptions about the cultural nature of these dichotomous classifications, rendering less invisible people whose bodies do not fall into the sexual binary (*cf.* Fausto-Sterling 1993, 2000a, 2000b), those whose gender identity is not perfectly aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth (*cf.* Stone 1987, cited as the origin of transgender studies; Butler 1990; Feinberg 1992; Stryker and Whittle 2006) or does not align with the gender binarism (*cf.*

Wilchins 1997; Nestle, Wilchins and Howell 2002). Theorists have also questioned the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (*cf.* Sedgwick 1990; Ochs and Deihl 1992; Weinberg, Williams and Pryor 1995; Ochs and Rowley 2009; Eisner 2013). I will return to the concept of heteronormativity in the next chapter when exploring other concepts derived from it, such as mononormativity, homonormativity and polynormativity.

### *1.2.3 Between agency and structure*

Giddens (1992) proposes an analytical classification of the different types of love and, as outlined in the first section, one of his tenets is to distinguish romantic love from passionate love. In this sub-section, instead, I examine his definition of “convergent love” and how it gives rise to his definition of “pure relationship”.

The author (*ibid.*) defines convergent love as the type of love that has become mainstream in late modernity. According to him, convergent love differs from romantic love because, first of all, it requires greater equality in gender relations (women are more autonomous and emotional management is more equally divided) and it is tied to an idea of relationship that is more contingent and open to transformation, in opposition to the myth of eternal romantic love. Furthermore, convergent love is not necessarily sexually monogamous or exclusively heterosexual. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) seem to agree with this analysis: in their opinion, what characterises the late modern approach to intimate relationships is the fact that the reflexivity around these concepts is exponentially increased; what used to be taken-for-granted now must be discussed, justified, negotiated and agreed upon. Furthermore, they emphasise an important point: in wealthy Western industrialised countries, a tension emerges between the social drive towards personal autonomy and the increasing importance assigned to intimate relationships. Indeed, they see these relationships as becoming the “new religion” on which people rely in a time of employment precarity and lack of material security (*cf.* Barker and Langdrige



2010a). As noted in the introduction, this is an important point for the development of my reflection, and one which will also be engaged in the analysis of the empirical material (mainly in Chapter 4).

In exploring the agency of the actors who hold a relative degree of power to re-negotiate among these different – often conflicting – social drives, I have found it useful to draw on some points of view offered by Roseneil (2000, 2010). Specifically, she argues that “a set of counter-heteronormative relationship practices is emerging among (...) [an] increasingly larger group of the population, in which sexual/love relationships are decentered, and friendship is prioritized, and which involve, for many, experimentations with non-conventional forms of sexual/love relationships” (2010, p. 79-80).

Roseneil (2000) also offers interesting points of departure for interpreting the way queer and LGBT+ movement(s) have affected late modern intimacy and how their history intersects with and affects, at least partially, heterosexual intimacy. These points of influence, which Roseneil (*ibid.*) calls “queering tendencies”, consist in a set of trends that contribute to calling into question fixed identities (both hetero and homo: gay men who have sex with women, lesbians who have sex with men, bisexuality and transgenderism that enter into the LGBT+ agenda, etc.) and making the concept of family less univocal (indicators such as the rise of divorce rates, births outside of marriage, etc. can also be read in this perspective). Queer culture has also partially affected popular culture, both in media representation and in everyday life. These tendencies have also generated what Roseneil (*ibid.*) calls “hetero-reflexivity”: while at first heterosexuality was taken for granted, now that homosexual identities are more visible more and more people are questioning their own sexual orientation.

Even considering that these tendencies seem to display a higher concentration in urban areas and among younger generations with medium-high cultural capital – as Roseneil (*ibid.*) points out – they will remain difficult to grasp in the larger population as long as the heterosexual nuclear family continues to

be used as the only lens for observing intimate relationships. This point will be discussed in more detail in next chapter when I talk about the concept of mononormativity.

As mentioned in the introduction, while Giddens's concept of pure relationship accompanied by Roseneil's points on "queering tendencies" were initially my starting point for focusing on the agency of the social actors involved in the processes I have analysed, I subsequently assumed a more critical position that involved rebalancing my gaze between structure and agency.

Along these lines, Klesse (2007) adopts and expands the critique of Giddens's concept of pure relationship already advanced by some feminist authors (e.g. Jamieson 1998, 1999). In the author's opinion, using this model entails the risk of overlooking the gender inequalities that are still present (for example, in the division of domestic labour) and focusing on the couple leads to neglecting the wider affective network. The author argues that Giddens's work is illustrative of two tendencies of de-traditionalization theories in general which can be considered problematic: the first is that most researchers take as their reference point a one-dimensional concept of power (that of gender), disregarding other inequalities; the second one is that same-sex relationships are often taken as the example of relationships characterised by equality and presented as pioneers in de-traditionalization discourses. One example of this interpretive lens is that offered by Weeks, especially in his early works where he emphasised the commitment of lesbians and gay couples to having egalitarian relationships. This conceptualisation of his followed in the footsteps of Giddens work, which assigned a privileged place to homosexual couples in his analysis of pure relationships. Klesse (2007), while giving value to the non-judgmental analysis of same-sex relationships, points to the risk of over-romanticised them and, in so doing, overlooking the aspects of power inequality and violence that are found in same-sex relationships as well. In fact, some authors have questioned the egalitarian thesis: Carrington (1999), for example, has observed that the myth

is revealed as such when the concept of power is expanded to also include class and labour issues in the equation.

### *1.3 Overcoming romantic love and the “reason versus emotion” dichotomy: theories and critical issues*

Multiple theorists converge in recognising that romantic love contains a negative component, that of addiction (Herrera Gómez 2010). Fisher (2004) explains this effect biologically, as the outcome of dopamine affecting the mesolimbic reward system in the same way as many drugs. The author sees romantic love as also displaying the three specific symptoms of addiction: tolerance, abstinence and re-incidence (*ibid.*).

Some authors identify this component as prevalent in women; Dowling (2003), for example, calls this phenomenon the “Cinderella complex” and identifies it as the main mechanism reproducing women’s submission to men. It is important to highlight that the author believes that a certain degree of co-dependence is perfectly normal in human beings, but notes that it can cause problems when it becomes a true addiction.

Some feminist and queer theorists have developed and are developing critiques of romantic love – as well as heteronormativity – and the way in which some of their components and narratives are reproduced in our society. According to Kipnis (2003), for example, the modern couple is the site of conformism and boundary imposition and the place where the ethic of work is fomented. The author goes as far as using the term “familiar gulags” to refer to the degeneration of “love” in situations of dissatisfaction, oppression and even domestic violence (*ibid.*). Lehr (1999) has addressed the same critique to the mononuclear family, problematising the narrative that sees the nuclear family as a “safe haven”, especially for gay and lesbian youth. In her book, she dedicates a chapter to emphasising the responsibilities activists have in creating communities that can provide care, arguing that such care must not be the exclusive purview

of the family but must instead become a community value (*ibid.*). Esteban (2011, 2015) calls into question not only the idea of family, but also that of kinship, suggesting that it must move away from a biological perspective.

According to Rosa (1994), it is monogamy that confines women to the household and isolates them from the larger social context (friendships, network, community), preventing them from developing an interest in political activism. Working in the same vein, Jackson and Scott (2004) see consensual non-monogamy as a tool for avoiding this type of isolation, especially for women.

The collective *Luddistas Sexuales* (2013) and Vassallo (2015, 2018) have likewise produced interesting reflections on the intersection of the heteronormative system, the capitalist economic system and patriarchy. Both also criticise the way – in keeping with a capitalist logic – some components of the academic world tend to appropriate the observations and arguments developed by radical activism.

Moreover, Latin American feminist and lesbian theorists have developed a dissident political proposal: Mongrovejo (2016), together with other feminist theorists (e.g. Rosso, Neri, Montiel in Mongrovejo 2016), theorises *contra-amor* as a form of anti-romantic and anti-capitalist loving dissidence.

Evans (2003) sees the individual pursuit of romance and sex as the main distraction that turns people away from social engagement. She recognises the advantages of sexual liberation for women, contrary to the authors that Roseneil (2010) calls “the pessimist patriarchs” (Bauman 2001, 2003; Sennett 2000; Putnam 1998) but sharing with them, as well as with Hochschild (2003) and Illouz (2007), a critique of the increasing individualisation and commercialisation of feelings. Evans (2003) calls for demystifying contemporary Western romantic love and suggests that such a move can only come with a progressive return to the deployment of reason in the realm of intimacy.

Roseneil (2010) is sceptical of this analysis for two reasons, however. First of all, as described in the previous section, she prefers to concentrate her efforts of recognising counter-tendencies that go beyond the romantic

monogamous heterosexual couple. The second is that she does not believe that our affective lives can be based entirely on rationality, and indeed sees this belief in the panacea of rationality as a blind modernist trust in reason that must be overcome with the support of the psychoanalytical perspective. She proposes, instead, that “we should abandon our collective, public and political investments in the life-long, monogamous couple, as the source of our hopes and expectations of social stability, relational continuity and personal companionship” (*ibid.*, p. 81).

In the attempt to delve more deeply into the discourse around the study of reason and emotions that I see as being at the basis of every attempt to transcend romantic love, the rest of this section mainly focuses on the analyses and reconstructions provided by Herrera Gómez (2010) and Deri (2011, 2015) around these issues.

Deri (2011, 2015) approaches the study of emotions by differentiating between biologist and psychological approaches, on one side, and between strong/weak/postmodern social constructionism on the other side. In the end, she seeks to overcome the “essentialism versus constructionism” dichotomy by pursuing what she calls an “intersectional” approach to the study of emotions.

The psychological approach in this field has been deeply influenced by the dichotomous division between emotions and reason deriving from the thought of Descartes, Plato and Aristotle (Herrera Gómez 2010; Deri 2011, 2015). This approach has a very long tradition in Western culture and has been reinforced by Christian theologians in their identification of emotions and desires as temptations that must be resisted through the exercise of reason (Herrera Gómez 2010). As Biancheri (2011) highlights, Spinoza was one of the first to question the superiority of reason over emotions, arguing that passions are part of human beings and that an order based on reason alone is too cogent and not elastic enough, and must therefore be mediated by the openness of emotions.

Freud (1905) framed emotions as deriving from instinct: according to his theories, emotions are a response to the human libido and/or fear of death and

the failure to tame emotions can cause neuroses or fetishes in the individual and, in a wider context, a lack of social cohesion as all the individual neuroses caused by the failure to dominate the emotions come together in society.

Some theorists think that there are some universal and basic emotions from which all complex emotions arise. For example, Cornelius (1996, p. 40, cited in Deri 2011, p. 61) argues that there are facial expressions which are universal, such as those which express “happiness, sadness, disgust, anger and surprise”.

Conversely, and especially in the last decade, some theorists have recognised that, rather than seeing emotions as deriving from either instinct or culture, it is more accurate to approach emotion as the result of cognitive interconnections between these components (Evans 2001) and to recognise that emotions play a fundamental role in the construction of feelings, conscience and personal and collective projects (*cf.* Herrera Gómez 2010). For example, Fisher (2004) argues that the different parts of the human brain cooperate: feelings, thoughts, memories, and motivations are closely connected to decision-making and allow us to proceed with our lives. Likewise, the neurologist António Damásio (interviewed by Punset 2004) is engaged in demonstrating that emotions and feelings perform a fundamental function in our lives, contributing to assigning different degrees of value to different options. Lehrer (2009) agrees with the idea that there is no clear division between emotions and reason in our brains and that such elements are instead thoroughly mixed and interconnected. Emotion is social because it constitutes a habit, and feelings allow us to make decisions in non-habitual contexts. Evans (2001) comes to the same conclusion: all decisions are based on emotions as the first step, and if we were to rely on reason alone, we would never decide anything. Sacks (2010), a neurologist and psychologist, provides a practical example of this: a man that he was following was unable to experience emotions due to an accident that affected part of his brain; when trying to set up his next appointment with Sacks, the man could name all the reasons for select each possible time slot, but was unable to choose among

them. Without emotional preference, the man was unable to make a decision because all the options had the same number of good reasons to be chosen. At the same time, Siegel (2010) explains that social factors enable emotions to be relearned and rewired in the brain so that people can change how and when they experience emotion (*cf.* Deri 2011, 2015).

Like the “reason versus emotions” debate, the “nature versus nurture” debate has often polarised studies on emotions, emphasising either the individual while neglecting the social and cultural context or emphasising the social and cultural at the expense of the individual (Boellstorff and Lindquist 2004; *cf.* Deri 2011, 2015).

As for the socio-constructionist approach, Deri (*ibid.*), referring to Sedgwick and Frank (2003), distinguishes between weak and strong social constructionist theories on the bases of how extensive they consider the domain of influence of the social to be.

Referring to emotions, for example, Kemper (1990) developed a weak socio-constructionist theory by arguing that certain primary emotions are universal to all humans (fear, anger, depression and satisfaction/happiness) while secondary emotions (shame, guilt, pride, nostalgia, love, as well as jealousy) are the product of socialisation. According to this classification, Durkheim can also be considered a weak socio-constructionist but, while Kemper analyses the way culture shapes emotion, Durkheim (1893) looks at the role emotion plays in rituals that contribute to the formation of social solidarity. He concludes that social order is not solely dependent on reasoned behaviour, but that affective and emotional ties also perform a fundamental role in shaping it.

The strong socio-constructionist approach, in contrast, claims that all emotions are shaped by the socio-cultural context. For example, Gordon (cited in Turner and Stets 2005) believes that language plays a fundamental role in associating specific physiological reactions with a specific culturally-labelled feeling. In relation to my research object, then, according to Gordon the association that links specific physiological reactions (such as the flow of

adrenaline and an increased heart rate) to the feeling of love in our society is a cultural construction: if the same symptoms were to occur in a different context, people might label them in other ways, for example as anxiety or pleasure (Deri 2011, 2015). Other strong socio-constructivists are Averill (1980, cited in Deri 2011, 2015), who argues that no emotion is innate and all emotions are defined by socially-given evaluations and Harré (1990), according to which emotions have no inherent quality and are solely a product of socialisation. Denzin (1984) uses the term “emotional account” for the explanations that people give for their feelings, which are followed by a valuation of the feeling, depending on the context in which it is experienced. Obviously, these valuations are affected by the social context and some emotions may be simulated when the individual thinks it would be appropriate to display that specific emotion in that specific context (Deri 2011, 2015).

As many theorists have underlined (*cf.* Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003; Deri 2011, 2015), post-modernism arises in part from a critique of the modernist glorification of rationality, a trend that reached its peak in neo-positivism. As Rosenau (1992) argues, post-modernism involves an attempt to overcome the emotions/reason dichotomy by re-valuing the role of emotions, feelings, and intuition. At the same time, authors such as Shaviro (2004, p. 7, in Deri 2011) claim that post-modernism has “murdered” emotion or at least significantly and irrevocably altered its meaning. Applying Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum, Shaviro suggests that real emotions have been subsumed by representatives among post-modernist individuals; such individuals still have emotions, but they experience them in a distant and disinterested way.

As mentioned briefly above, some theorists have recently tried to recompose the biology and culture dichotomy. Deri (2011) cites Williams and Bendelow (1996), Williams (2001) and Petersen (2004), who critique both social theorists who ignore the role of biology and, at the same time, psychological theorists who ignore the influence of culture.



Nussbaum (cited in Herrera Gómez 2010) likewise deeply investigates the cultural construction of feelings and their cultural variability. Herrera Gómez (*ibid.*, p. 110, my translation) sums up her theory on emotions in six points that would seem to display this analytical direction:

- emotions shape the landscape of our mental and social life;
- emotions have a complex cognitive structure that is partially narrative;
- belief is the foundation of emotion;
- emotions are part of ethical reasoning;
- emotions are motivations for the election of the principles of action;
- emotions contain (cognitive) judgements that allow their valuation.

Deri (2011, p. 70) refers to these theories as “intersectional emotions”, thereby highlighting the importance of overcoming dichotomies and granting value to the intersections of physiological and social dynamics.

A new body of work is emerging that focuses on the revaluation of the body and emotional embodiment (Clough and Halley 2007), differentiating between affect, feelings and emotions: the term “affect” delineates non-conscious and pre-verbal sensations; when these sensations are labelled within a specific cultural context, they are designated with the term “feelings”. And finally, the term “emotion” refers to the expression of these feelings (Deri 2011, 2015).

This “third way” between essentialist and constructionist approaches can also be applied to the study of sex and gender. A reference point for this approach is the biologist and feminist historian of science Fausto-Sterling (2000a) with her Developmental Systems Theory. Fausto-Sterling, as a biologist, does not negate the biological bases of sex, but she argues that the way in which we read and categorise sex is culturally determined. This “cultural reading of sex” becomes emblematically – but also dramatically, by virtue of its consequences – evident in the case of the social perception and medical treatment

of intersex bodies<sup>13</sup>. The dichotomous vision of sex (female/male) is so deeply rooted in our society that bodies which do not fit perfectly into this dichotomy are perceived as a social emergency. For many decades (from the 1950s onwards), this social emergency has been “cured” through medical interventions: intersex bodies were forced into the sexual dichotomy with the use of surgery and/or hormonal treatment in the attempt to “normalise” them. Only the public speaking-out of intersex activists from the 1990s onwards began to question these medical practices and such practices nonetheless continue to be carried out in Western hospitals, with very serious negative consequences on the lives of intersex people.

Laqueur (1992), another historian of science, also questions our vision of sex as the “natural bases of gender”, highlighting the fact that this dichotomous vision, although perceived as “natural”, is not universal in Western society, varying not just in space, but also over time. In fact, according to Laqueur’s (*ibid.*) historical reconstruction, this binary model only began to spread from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Previously, the reference model was essentially monosexual: the dominant vision considered the male sex to be the only true sex and the female sex was considered a less perfect copy of this unique sex. The author thus highlights cultural influences in the definition of the “natural” within a specific culture and the role that social and political powers play in the construction of these “realities”.

Deri (2011, 2015) applies Fausto-Sterling’s theory in her study on jealousy, not rejecting biological explanations but assuming that biological experiences of jealousy are in part the product of socialisation and, above all, taking into consideration that these social components also influence the reading of what is natural and what is cultural. In other words, she argues that even the dichotomy nature/nurture is historically and culturally situated.

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<sup>13</sup> My Master’s thesis, titled *Being women, being men. Perception and treatment of sexual variability between biological truth and cultural construct* (2011), was entirely dedicated to this theme, with the analysis of narratives from specialists and “patients” in Italy.

In the same way, I try to adopt the same approach in the following chapters and the empirical ones in particular when investigating the way in which the concept of love and the way of enacting relationships is built in both Western culture and the subcultures that constitute the reference points for my field of investigation.

According to Herrera Gómez (2010), romantic love is a product of the political and economic interest of the hegemonic ideology and is reproduced by social institutions, specifically education. In her vision, therefore, romantic love is patriarchal, monogamic and heterosexual because it is the product of a patriarchal, monogamic and heteronormative culture.

In next chapter, I explore in more depth the reactions and reflections of polyamorous and queer groups regarding this issue.

### *Conclusions*

Studies of the transformations that have occurred in theories and practices around the concept of love, intimacy and family demonstrate that these concepts are, at least partially, socially constructed and that the structures of power in different societies affect these constructions.

In this chapter I have tried to synthetically reconstruct the changes that took place in intimacies in Western societies, focusing on the ideas developed about modern and post-modern intimacies that have served as the starting point for the research I present more fully in the following chapters.

Although it is important to consider the criticisms that some authors have addressed to the way in which capitalistic structures can invade and shape the intimate life of post-modern individuals (see e.g. Bauman, Hochschild, Illouz), my approach has more in common with theories that seek to highlight the cultural challenges that some post-modern tendencies can pose to heteronormativity and other normative hierarchical classifications of sexualities,

instead of looking back on an idyllic past of familiar unity that concealed gender inequalities.

Social movements (gay and lesbian, queer and feminist, above all) have also contributed to generating these changes in theories and practices of intimacy from the 1970s onwards. It was above all feminist theorists and activists who initiated reflections about the necessity of overcoming romantic love. These theories and reflections are undoubtedly important to the development of the new models of affective non-monogamy, as we will see in the next chapter.

Some authors have identified modern changes in intimacy around two main issues: the process of progressive individualisation and de-traditionalization and increasing self-reflexivity. In terms of the transformations of intimacy more specifically, Giddens (1991) and Roseneil (2000, 2010) have identified certain characteristics such as: a greater sexual and emotional equality in gender relations (women are generally more autonomous or at least more aware of their emotional work in relationships); an idea of intimate relationship that is more contingent and open to transformation but also characterised by the ideal of deep emotional sharing and more recreational sexuality; more fluidity around sexual identities (questioning fixed ones) and an increasingly plural concept of family. Another important point that some theorists have underlined (*cf.* Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) is the tension that emerges in (late) modern societies between the social drive towards personal autonomy and the increasing importance assigned to intimate relationships. While these theories are useful for highlighting some focal points that are also central to polyamorous theory, however, it is also important to take into account some of their limits: first of all, the risk of neglecting the gender inequalities that still exist, and then the risk of disregarding other inequalities such as class and race and, finally, the risk of over-romanticised same-sex relationships by overlooking the aspects of power inequality and violence that can appear in same-sex relationships as well (Klesse 2007; Jamieson 1998, 1999).

At the same time, it is also important to engage with some considerations developed by new psychological perspectives that question the secular dichotomy that sets reason against emotions while assigning priority to the former.

## Chapter 2

### **Multiple loves between polynormativity and radical politics**

*Merecemos amores que nos reciban con calma y alegría.  
Merecemos amores que reconozcan y celebren nuestros amores pasados y presentes.  
Que celebren lo que hemos aprendido y lo que otrxs nos han regalado.  
Merecemos amores sin posesión, comprometidos con trabajar en los celos, en las  
inseguridades y en los dolores que todxs andamos en el cuerpo<sup>14</sup>.*

(La Coneja, 2019<sup>15</sup>)

This chapter will focus on models and reflections about affective non-monogamy that have been developed in the last decades in Western societies. This analysis will be accompanied with a reflection on the necessity of a structural analysis of contemporary society. In particular I will raise questions as: to what extent these new models challenge or affect the structure of society? And to what extent, on the contrary, can they be assimilated into the existing structure?

I begin in the first section with a reflection on the social constructions around which type of relationships are considered significant and legitimate in our society, describing concepts as mononormativity, amatonormativity and relationship escalator, as well as how the transgressions of these norms are managed. In the second section I focus on polyamory as the more popular “burgeoning sexual story” (Barker 2005) among these Western CANM models, with its own particular theory and cultural practices: its origins and influences, its values of reference and its own vocabulary and the academic and non-academic literature and the media that have flourished around this issue in the last decades. The third section, instead, is dedicated to the critical aspects that

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<sup>14</sup> We deserve loves that receive us with calm and joy.

We deserve loves that recognise and celebrate our past and present loves. (Loves) that celebrate what we have learned and what others have given to us.

We deserve love without possession, committed to work on jealousy, insecurities and pain that we all have in the body (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> <http://tiny.cc/mn5y5y> (last consultation: 30/04/2019).

some activists and authors have raised about polyamorous communities, in particular regarding their relationship with neoliberalism, the possible risks to strengthen class and race privileges and that set of characteristics that can be summarised in the term “polynormativity”. Finally, in the fourth section I analyse the most radical reflections about the overcoming of romantic love, focusing in particular into Relationship Anarchy, the reflections raised from questioning the compatibility between queerness and the couple form, and some considerations about the concept of care, the building of communities and the management of the emotions.

### *2.1 The cultural construction of social significant relationships*

Petersen (2004) notes that many studies on sexuality and intimacy start from the implicit assumption that monogamous heterosexuality is the norm for human relationships and, for this reason, when they venture to study other types of relationships, they study them as deviations from the norm. These premises influence the methodologies with which the phenomenon is studied and also, consequently, the findings reached and the interpretations of these findings. This has led to a naturalisation of monogamy as model, that is the assumption that monogamy is natural for humans and any deviation to this norm can only have negative consequences, especially for women (Ryan and Jetha 2010; Deri 2011, 2015).

In this section, beginning from a point of view that consider monogamy just one of the possible relationship models, I present different conceptualisations that start from the analysis of the relationship model dominant in Western societies as a social construction. Through these analysis I try to deconstruct it taking into consideration three different components of this construction: the sexual and affective exclusivity (mononormativity), the hierarchisation of romantic relationships above others and the assumption that this type of relationship should be necessary for the well-being of everyone

(amatonormativity), and the assumptions about the way in which this relationship had to be carried on (relationship escalator). Finally, I will explore some transgressions of these norms, some more codified and constructed within a reference community (such as polyamory), and other less codified but more and more common around us. I will also analyse the marginalisation of these forms, putting it in relation with the dominant construction regarding the form that legitimate and important relationships must have.

### *2.1.1 Mononormativity*

In the wake of the term heteronormativity, Pieper and Bauer (2005) coined the term mononormativity to identify that set of cultural and institutional norms and beliefs that strengthens the notion that monogamy is “normal” and “natural”. Other authors have coined other terms to refer substantially to the same device: Bergstrand and Sinski (2010), for example, put the accent on the moral point of view, designing with the term “monocentrism” “the unquestioned assumption that monogamy, or marriage to one person only, is morally superior to all other marital forms” (p. 99); Anderson (2012) speaks of “monogamism” and reads cheating as a rational response to the cultural mandates of sexual exclusivity; different authors use the expressions “compulsory couple” or “compulsory monogamy”: e.g. Emens (2004) to identify the pressure that laws and norms exert on people to succumb to monogamy, Heckert (2010) “to criticize monogamy as institution intertwined with hierarchy” (p. 257), Acquistapace (2011) stresses that today the couple is mandatory for both heterosexual and homosexual people and for both women and men, but also how this obligation has its own gender specificities, Ziga (2011) focuses on the effects that the pressure of the compulsory couple together with the slut shaming has on women, leading them to accept situations of domestic violence, Willey (2015) as well thinks that compulsory monogamy reduce women’s ability to imagine alternatives, Schippers (2016) insists on gender and race privileges hidden behind compulsory



monogamy; then, MacDonald (1995) reconstructs how “social imposed monogamy” has been maintained through social controls and ideologies; Noël (2006) speaks of “heteronormative monogamy” to highlight the systemic and intersectional nature of the model and, similarly, Vassallo (2018) uses the term “monogamous thought” to highlight the fact that monogamy is not a practice but a system of thought.

Jointly with heteronormativity, mononormativity gives rise to a variety of cultural, institutional, and legal mechanisms that prioritise this type of relationships at the expense of others. In Vassallo’s (*ibid.*) opinion, the monogamous thought is so pervasive that in the contemporary Western society the idea of monogamy is perceived as synonymous of couple or even love. As a system, it can tolerate a number of exceptions to the practice of exclusivity, and this explains the fact that a couple where one of the members – or both – cheats is still considered a monogamous couple, also once that the cheating has been discovered: the cheating is just an “exception”, a transgression of the implicit pervasive rule. Moreover, the monogamous system includes the possibility to cultivate a multiplicity of affects, as long as they remain platonic and subordinate to the monogamous couple<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, it is not the exclusivity of the couple to define monogamy but, rather, the hierarchical ordering: the monogamous system erected a set of mechanisms to establish the superiority of the monogamous couple over all other affective bonds (Gahran 2017; Vassallo 2018); immediately below we find the blood ties, and, at the last place, the not-blood ones (Vassallo 2018). Vassallo (*ibid.*) detects in particular three mechanisms in this system: the positivisation of exclusivity, the identity conjunction and the enhancement of competition and confrontation. These mechanisms are strictly correlated: in fact, the monogamous system strengthens

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<sup>16</sup> However, it should be added that, for many monogamous heterosexual couples, close friendships with people of different gender are often not well tolerated but, indeed, seen as a potential threat (e.g. Williams 2005).

the identity of the group through an idea of reproduction that is mostly biologicist (rooted on the idea of “gene transmission”) and exclusionary (reproduction of the reference group(s), family name transmission, transmission of material and non-material goods, such as contacts, opportunities, social status). Exclusivity enhances also competition: when goods are perceived as scarce (and expensive) – as, in this case, love is – they seem more valuable. So, we can say that the positivisation of exclusivity enhances competition to bag The True Love<sup>17</sup>. As well, it enhances the idea of supremacy (to be or to have something that everyone wants) and the positivisation of the power that the access to True Love and monogamous couple gives (*ibid.*).

Some authors (e.g. Heckert 2010; Vassallo 2018) extend the discourse to the economic and political systems, highlighting the fact that both exclusivity and competition are not limited to the relational system but they fit perfectly within the capitalistic system, in which competition is extremely valued. As well, the concept of exclusivity leads other aspects of Western contemporary world, specifically the borders tracking and the construction of national identities (Vassallo 2018). As well as it does, at a micro level, for the monogamous couple, the monogamous thought builds up, at a macro level, the we/they differentiation, strengthening the (familiar and national) identity, with a similar fiction of homogeneity and a similar promise of happiness. All the structures of the concept of nation are monogamous and built starting from the basic principles of the monogamous thought: “hierarchy, exclusivity/exclusion, reaffirming competition” (*ibid.*, 133, my translation).

Particularly important is also Vassallo’s (*ibid.*) look towards people on the margins of the monogamous system, those who cannot fully enter but that are in any case forced to be part of it, those that are “the monstrous that confirm the normality of normality” (p. 64, my translation). When the author speaks about

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<sup>17</sup> Capital letters are used to emphasise the pervasiveness of the construction around the concept of love (that it is “true” only if it is unique) into the monogamous system.

obligation obviously she does not mean a physical constraint but she refers to that variety of cultural, institutional, and legal mechanisms that contribute to enforce this system and that Foucault called biopolitics (see also Rosa 1994; Kipnis 2003; Emens 2004; Bergstrand & Sinski 2010; Ferrer 2018). Everyone helps to reproduce unconsciously these mechanisms, contributing to maintain this “society of coupleism where if you do not have romantic relationships you do not exist” (Vassallo 2018, p. 72, my translation) or, in the best scenario, you are associated to deviant attributes as “unnatural, dysfunctional, or even perverse” (Ferrer 2018, p. 6) (see also Sheff and Hammers 2011; Conley *et al.* 2012; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2016).

Ferrer (2018) uses the term “monopride” to refer to the “the psychosocial consideration of monogamy as variously natural, optimal, or superior” (p. 9), that has its roots in mononormativity and it is opposed to what he calls the “polypride”. The author highlights some attitudes of the monopride such as: denying the prevalence of affairs in Western societies despite the evidence emerged from many researches (see Buss 2000; Treas and Giesen 2000; Schmitt 2005; Barbagli, Della Zuanna and Garelli 2010; Anderson 2012) or perpetuating the “monogamous myth” (see Vaughan 2003), that is “the belief that people are essentially monogamous and that affairs happen only to ‘bad’ or ‘weak’ people” (Ferrer 2018, p. 8). The monopride is often associated with polyphobia, that is displayed with the more or less explicitly condemn of non-monogamy as “immature, morally pernicious, and even religiously sinful” (*ibid.*, p. 9). Ferrer (*ibid.*) takes note of how monopride and polyphobia are often also present in literature, for example he refers to Jenkins’s (2015) analysis, who points out that most Western philosophers of love, such as Solomon (2006) and Soble (1987), associate romantic love with sexual exclusivity (*cf.* McKeever 2015). Also Robinson (1997) pointed out that Hite’s (1991) report on attitudes toward love and sexuality in England described monogamy as spiritually and emotionally superior, as well as counsellor and couple therapist as Kane (2010) or Charny (1992). Ferrer (2018) continues highlighting that people who have

multiple relationships are normally pathologized (see also Hymer & Rubin 1982; Page 2004; Weitzman 2006), especially women, that are often diagnosticated as “histrionic” (Apt and Hurlbert 1994) and narcissist (see Buss and Schackelford 1997). Other authors (e.g. Masters 2007; Barash and Lipton 2009; Brandon 2010) accept non-monogamous desires as normal, but think that they have to be repressed to live more mature forms of relationships. Non-monogamy is also often associated with animality (e.g. by Barash and Lipton 2009; Chapais 2013; Tucker 2014). Others, such as Young (2004) and Faye (2014) insert non-monogamy within that individualistic and capitalist tendency of post-modern relations which, as we have seen in Chapter 1, was highlighted by several authors. Sheff (2014) in her analysis registers experiences of fear, mistrust, and projections of hypersexualisation by monogamists, as reported by her interviewers.

Also Barker and Langdridge (2010b) highlight that mononormativity influences the academic work around family and coupledness, as well as relationship therapy (e.g. Crowe and Ridley 2000). As Barker and Langdridge (2010b) remember, in the last decades some critics to mononormativity have emerged in different ways: some display more essentialist arguments, simply trying to overturn the “natural” side, underlining the rarity of monogamy both amongst human and non-human species; others (e.g. Giddens 1992; Plummer 2003; Weeks 2007) take a more constructionist path, focusing on modern changes in intimacy. Then, within sociology and psychology, the focus is put on the fact that monogamy is often just a facade only: some studies, in fact, estimate rates of hidden infidelity in marriage around 60-70% (Robinson 1997; Vangelisti and Gernstenberger 2004) or, in Italy, an adultery rate of 1/3 in long-lasting relationships (Barbagli, Della Zuanna and Garelli 2010).

### 2.1.2 Amatonormativity

Strictly associated to mononormativity, is what Brake (2012a) calls amatonormativity, defined by “the assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, (...) that it is a universally shared goal, and (...) that it *should* be aimed at in preference to other relationship types” (pp. 88-89, italics in the original). Brake (*ibid.*) adds that these assumptions cause a devaluation of other types of relationship not romantically connoted. Amatonormativity is expressed in everyday life in questions or affirmations such as: “She hasn’t found the one... yet” or “aren’t you lonely/immature/irresponsible because you are not married/partnered?” (Brake 2012b) and public transgressions of it can be dining alone by choice, putting friendship above romance, bringing a friend to a formal event or attending alone, cohabiting with friends, or not searching for romance. These assumptions are not just limited to social interactions, but they affect the legal system and the social structure, that are centred on the monogamous couple, creating structural—as well as cultural—barriers to the recognition of other types of relationship such as friendships, asexual romances and some forms of polyamory as central to one’s life. Amatonormativity affects the life of people who are single causing institutional discrimination (since many governments continue to favour the coupledness) and social stigmatisation (Wilkinson 2012, 2014; Budgeon 2008), this later especially for women (Budgeon 2016; Lahad 2017). Another effect is that people feel the social pressure to mate, also when a dyadic sexual relationship do not fit them. This can lead to being in unhappy and not positive relationships to comply with socially accepted requirements (Brake 2012a, 2012b).

Both mononormativity and amatonormativity overlap with heteronormativity, described in the previous chapter. For example, “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980) can undermine the importance of strong relationships between women, pushing womens’ attention towards male partners

(Brake 2012a). Besides, as well as heteronormativity, amatonormativity can be seen in relation to other systems of oppression, as in relation to the sex/gender system. In relation to normative gender roles, Brake (2012a, 2012b) makes the examples of the different social perception of motivations to marry for women and men, or the different ways in which single men or single women are perceived.

### *2.1.3 Relationship Escalator*

Another concept related to those seen above is the concept of “relationship escalator”, focus of Gahran’s (2017) book, who defines<sup>18</sup> it as “the default bundle of societal expectations for intimate relationships” in Western societies and “the standard by which most people gauge whether an intimate relationship is significant, serious, good, healthy, committed or worthy of effort” (p. 19). First of all, this standard refers to the achievement of a sexually and romantically exclusive relationship between two —and just two —people, either in different or same-sex relationships. Then, there is a set of steps that the relationship must go through, more or less chronologically ordered and that may have slight variations depending on the society of reference.

The author identifies eight steps:

1. **Making contact.** Flirting, casual/social encounters, possibly including making out or sexual hook-ups.
2. **Initiation.** Romantic courtship gestures or rituals, emotional investment or falling in love, and usually sexual contact (except in religious or socially conservative circles).

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<sup>18</sup> Gahran declares in her book that she does not coined the term and that she is unable to trace the exact origin of it.

3. **Claiming and defining.** Mutual declarations of love, presenting in public as a couple, adopting and using common relationship role labels (boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.). Having expectations, or sometimes making explicit agreements, for sexual and romantic exclusivity. Ending other intimate relationships, if any, and ceasing to use dating sites or apps. Transitioning to barrier-free vaginal/anal intercourse, if applicable, except if this would present health or unwanted pregnancy risks. Once this step is reached, any further step, including simply remaining in the relationship, may be considered an implied intention to continue the relationship indefinitely.
4. **Establishment.** Adapting the rhythms of life to accommodate each other on an ongoing basis. Settling into patterns for regularly spending time together (date nights and sexual encounters, time at each others' homes, etc.). Developing patterns for keeping in contact when not together, such as email, phone calls, video chat or texting.
5. **Commitment.** Explicitly discussing, or planning, a long-term shared future as a couple. Adopting mutual accountability for whereabouts, behavior and life choices. Meeting each other's family of origin.
6. **Merging.** Moving in together, sharing a household and finances. Getting engaged to be married, or agreeing to similar legal or civil formalization of the relationship.
7. **Conclusion.** Getting legally married or making similar equivalent formal, recognized, legally binding arrangements. The relationship is now finalized; its structure should remain fairly static until one partner dies.
8. **Legacy.** Purchasing a home together, if possible. Having and raising children — not mandatory, but still strongly socially venerated. This part of the Escalator is no longer as obligatory as it once was. However, often couples may not feel, or be perceived as, fully valid until they hit these additional milestones post-marriage (*ibid.*, pp. 23-24).

These steps are internalised as “normal” because we grow up in a society where the only intimate relationships that have social legitimacy are those that follow these implicit rules. Normally, people who are dating seek to determine whether a new connection has an “escalator potential” at the first stages of dating, and proceed accordingly to these considerations. The escalator is strictly connected with amatonormativity, in fact, as the author herself points out, also the vocabulary of reference used to define relationships follow the assumptions of the escalator: friendship is normally defined by subtractions, as “a potentially significant relationship that usually is defined by its lack of sexual or romantic connection, or of family ties”, friends are “*just* friends” (*ibid.*, pp. 24-25). A similar treatment is also reserved for asexual or aromatic relationships, which are socially devalued. On the other side, intimate relationships are described as “real” or “serious” when they are riding the relationship escalator (*ibid.*, p. 25). To conclude, Gahran (*ibid.*) sums up the hallmarks of the relationship escalator in five points: monogamy (sexual and romantic exclusivity); merging (moving together, sharing finances and in general presenting as a unit); hierarchy (escalator relationships are more important than other type of relationships, with few exceptions, such as parenting); sexual and romantic connections (partners have sex with each other and feel romantically “in love”); continuity and consistency (the escalator is seen as a continuous and one-way trip, the partners have permanent roles and the relationship is supposed to last forever).

#### *2.1.4 Transgressions*

Although strongly invisibilised and delegitimated, there are relationships that do not follow the social prescriptions described above. Gahran (*ibid.*) recognises that consensual non-monogamous relationships are the most visible way to “step off the Escalator” (p. 30). Consensual non-monogamies include CANM such as polyamory and other types of relationships in which people experiment (or can



potentially experiment) both sexual and affective involvement with more than one person, that represent the focus of the next sections. In addition to these, there are other types of non-monogamies, such as swinging<sup>19</sup>, “don’t ask don’t tell” and being “monogamish<sup>20</sup>”. Outside of consensual non-monogamies, there are many other ways to not fit into amatonormativity and the relationship escalator: for example, there are people that, although being in a monogamous couple, decide not to live together<sup>21</sup> (or not all the time) or maintain separate their social life, or make big choices as career moves independently, or, in general, do not treat their partner as the primary or the unique source of support. Also for people that fall along the spectrum of asexuality or aromanticism it is difficult to ride the relationship escalator, because sex and romantic love seem to be default requirements of any “healthy” couple. Besides that, there are also people that, although not being asexual or aromantic, decide to form committed relationships with people who are not sexual or romantic partners. Finally, “many intimate relationships are *fluid* (shifting form or roles over the time), *discontinuous* (on/off or pause/play) or *finite* (agreeably limited by time or context, such as a summer romance)” (*ibid.*, p. 31, italics in the original).

## 2.2 Polyamory: what it is?

The two main Italian websites born within the polyamorous community define polyamory in this way:

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<sup>19</sup> The term identifies the practice of engaging in sexual activities with people outside the couple, specifically swapping the partners of a heterosexual couple or engaging in group sex. Swingers normally have a community of reference and meet in swingers clubs.

<sup>20</sup> The term was coined by Dan Savage – the American journalist author of the international relationship and sex advice column “Savage Love” – to identify couples that are mostly monogamous but allow occasional infidelities.

<sup>21</sup> The so-called LAT (Living Apart Together) (see Levin 2004).

With [the term] polyamory we mean the practice (or the possibility) of having more than one intimate, sexual or emotional relationship at a time, with the explicit consent of all current and potential partners (poliamore.org, my translation).

With [the term] polyamory we mean the practice, or the possibility, of having several intimate relationships at the same time, with the awareness and consent of all the people involved (rifacciamolamore.com, my translation).

The word as substantive has been coined in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States, but as adjective its traces have been found before. Cardoso (2011) reconstructs the history of the word trying to expand and deepen the work carried out by the blog *Polyamory in the News* by Alan M. The author finds that the first occurrence of the word dates back to 1936, when Alfred Charles Ward uses the adjective “polyamorist” in the book *Illustrated History of English Literature, Volume 1* referring to Henry VIII; the term is here used in an ironic and derogatory form. Always in derogatory form, it is found in *Hind's Kidnap* by Joseph McElroy published in 1969, where the term “polyamorous” identifies the crisis of the (traditional) “family”. Another reference comes some years later (in 1971), this time in France, where Joséphine Grieder in her work *XVIIe Siècle* links the polyamorous attitude to paganism and spirituality of druidic inspiration. Then, in 1972 Harold Hart in the book *Marriage: For & Against* wonders if people are polyamorous by nature. The first anthropological reference is found in 1975, in an abstract of the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the American Association of Anthropology. Here Carol Motts, speaking of the future of humanity, mentions among the characteristics of the future man (*homo pacifis*) that of being polyamorous (as well as individualistic, free thinker and vegetarian). As Cardoso (*ibid.*) points out, in this presentation the academic field meets the science fiction, which will remain one of the most recurrent references for the birth and development of the contemporary polyamorous movement. Interestingly, the next reference regards Italy: Holger Klein in his book *The First World War in*

*Fiction* of 1977 describes Italy as “polyamorous-incestuous”. Two years later we find the first link between polyamory and the LGBT community: in the book *The Gay Report: Lesbians and Gay Men Speak Out About Sexual Experiences and Lifestyles*, the adjective polyamorous is used to extend the idea of bisexuality, with the meaning of “many types of loving relationships with many types of people”. The two last references before that the word sees light as a noun are in the ‘80s: first, Matt Cohen in 1986 speaks of a “polyamorous perversion” in his book *The Disinherited*; then, in 1989 an article of *New Scientist* cites the “polyamorous wefts” referring to an erotic poem written by Charles Darwin's grandfather, in which plants are treated as people (Cardoso 2011).

The first use of the word which will kick off the meaning attributed to it today is traced back to the essay “A Bouquet of Lovers”, written by Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart for the Neo-Pagan newsletter (that later became magazine) *Green Egg* in the Beltane [May] 1990 (Alan 2010; Cardoso 2011). In the essay the word is still in form of adjective (polyamorous), polyamory as noun is used in August of the same year by the “Church of All Worlds” (a Neo-Pagan church founded by Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart’s husband Oberon Zell-Ravenheart) for a Terminology Glossary presented during a public event in Berkeley (Cardoso 2011).

As we will see later, the Neo-Pagan community has been very important to construct the basis of polyamory. However, until then the use of the word had been limited within the community itself. The diffusion of the word seems to follow another path: in 1992 Jennifer L. Wesp uses the word polyamory in the mailing list *alt.sex*, probably unaware that it had already been used in the Neo-Pagan context. That discussion had enough relevance within that mailing list to create a new Usenet mailing list named *alt.polyamory*, on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1992 (Alan 2010; Cardoso 2011).

Nowadays, polyamory can be considered as an umbrella term for many different relationship configurations. Polyamorous people may engage in configurations that can be more or less hierarchical (some people differentiate

between primary/secondary partners, others do not make this differentiation), more or less shared (some people are in triads or larger groups where all have bonds – not necessarily romantic or sexual – and are comfortable to spend time with all the other people involved – the so called “kitchen table polyamory<sup>22</sup>”, other people maintain more parallel and less shared relationships) and more or less committed (from “tribal” cohabitations to “solo poly<sup>23</sup>”).

### *2.2.1 Origins and influences*

As we have partially anticipated, the roots of the polyamorous community must be sought within the 1960s geek, sci-fi/fantasy, alternative spirituality and technology community in the San Francisco Bay area, although the word was born and developed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Anapol 2010; Aviram 2010). Since then, polyamory has spread to other nearby sex-positive<sup>24</sup> communities and in the last decades it has increased its popularity in Europe, also reaching the mainstream media (Plummer 1995; Barker and Langdridge 2010a, 2010b).

Anapol (2010) tried to reconstruct the complex history of the intersections with other communities and personalities in the United States, that have also influenced the core values of the polyamorous theory at its origins. Many of the communities or personalities that the author mentions seem to clash with the values that polyamorous communities today carry out (especially in the European context). Anyway, I have chosen to follow her reconstruction, adding brief comments from my side wherever I think it is necessary.

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<sup>22</sup> See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a definition.

<sup>23</sup> See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a definition.

<sup>24</sup> The term “sex-positivity” connotes a positive attitude towards sex and sexuality in general, with an emphasis on safer sex and consent. Sex-positive feminism, for example, is a movement that began in the early 1980s, especially in response to efforts by anti-pornography feminists (McElroy 2002).

The first community is Oneida, a “spiritual community” founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848. One of the aims of the community was that of overcoming the traditional gender roles and their members practiced the so called “complex marriage”. This type of marriage established that all the women were married to all the men and all the men with all the women, so both gender had the same “rights”, but the marriage remained within the heterosexual and heteronormative framework. They also tried to avoid the exclusive attachment forbidding long-term relationships. Besides that, there were other rules concerning the sexual life of the members: males were forbidden to ejaculate (except in the case of procreation purpose) and the older ones introduced the youngsters to sexual and spiritual life. Anapol (*ibid.*) remembers that the Oneida community continued to be an inspiration for many polyamorous people in United States.

One of the other Anapol’s (*ibid.*) reference is the Mormon polygamy. The Mormon Doctrine of Plural Wives was introduced by Joseph Smith in the 1840s. This type of polygamy is more adherent to traditional gender roles respect to the Oneida’s one, in fact only men are allowed to have multiple women. Both communities seem to have been influenced by the Christian preacher Jacob Cochran, who supported the practice of “spiritual wifery”. He was imprisoned for this reason and later founded a community of which many members then converted in Mormon missionaries. This is one of the most controversial mentions, as the gender inequality of the Mormon community clashes with what are the principles of contemporary polyamorous communities. Besides, it also surprised me considering the efforts of the contemporary polyamorous communities to differentiate between polyamory and polygamy.

The author continues referring to the Utopian Community called Brook Farm, founded by George Ripley and his wife Sophia. The community was connected with the Transcendentalist Movement, born in the 1800s in New England, that involved many famous literary figures, including Walt Whitman. The Brook Farm was at the beginning an agrarian community that had among his

objectives to carry out a healthier life. Brisbane, translator to English of Charles Fourier, convinced the community to become fourierist. The French philosopher thought that a harmonious society needed knowledge of “laws of passionate attraction” and that every person had a predetermined capacity to love a particular numbers of lovers simultaneously (from 0 to 8, with the majority of people in the middle of the spectrum). He was also supporter of women and gay rights and of sexual freedom (*ibid.*).

As well, Anapol (*ibid.*) tracks the connections between the polyamory of the beginnings and science fiction. First of all the romance *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961) of Robert Heinlein, based on the story of a human raised on Mars that finds the concept of sexual possession very weird and starts a religion based on sharing. Anapol (*ibid.*) finds that the language of the book is sexist and attributes its diffusion in the polyamorous context to Oberon Zell, founder of the Neo-Pagan religious group “Church of All Worlds” and of the early Neo-Pagan periodical *Green Egg Magazine*. As we have seen above, he and his wife Morning Glory seem to have been the first to use the term “poly-amorous”. They lived in a triad for some years and later in a group marriage. The connection between Neo-Paganism and polyamory was strengthened by other neopagan such as Starhawk, renegade priest and creator of the Macro Cosmic Mass. As Winston (2017) highlights the connection between the Neo-Pagan counterculture and polyamory was due to the fact that pagans think that sexuality is indivisible from divinity and see the erotic force as a palpable force often used in rituals. This created within these type of communities a safe space to develop different forms of sexual and affective relationships.

Polyamory was popular also among other sci-fi writers, such as Thea Alexander, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ernest Callenbach, Spider Robinson, John Varley. Leaving science fiction, the criticism of the assumption of monogamy as a societal norm is a recurring theme in all or almost all of Rimmer's writing. As well, we can find references to consensual non-monogamy in the books of authors such as Anaïs Nin, Doris Lessing, Alice Walker (Anapol 2010).

Another theorist of reference for the polyamorous community was Emma Goldman. The Northern American philosopher, anarcho-feminist, was also supporter of “free love”. The expression, whose creation is attributed to Noyes, initially (at the beginning of 1900) meant freedom for women from the dependence to men through marriage. While the Oneida community’s model was more similar to polyfidelity<sup>25</sup>, Goldman’s idea (and that of her fellow anarchists) was that no structures or rules limited the free flow of love<sup>26</sup>. This was the idea that inspired also Anapol (*ibid.*).

Winston (2017) remembers also other intellectual women who lived a non-monogamous affective life: Edna S. Vincent Millay (poet and writer; she maintained open her marriage for all 26 years of relationship and entertained in parallel relationships with both men and women); Simone de Beauvoir (writer, philosopher, feminist and political activist; she lived an open relationship with the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre for over 50 years, with a number of lovers); Elizabeth Holloway Marston (psychologist and lawyer; she lived in a triad relationship with her husband, the psychologist Charles Moulton, and one of his student, Olive Byrne, and the three raised together four children).

Anapol (2010) identifies as a fundamental antecedent also the so-called “Second American Sexual Revolution”, occurred between the 1964 and the 1984 and that consisted of shifts in sexual values and cultural norms that increased acceptance of non-monogamy, allowing experimentations of forms of non-monogamy for the first time in the Western societies since the advent of the Catholic Church. At this point, the author highlights an element that can sound unusual, especially for the European readers, that is that many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century non-monogamous utopian communities were founded by Christian preachers and

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<sup>25</sup> See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a definition.

<sup>26</sup> This idea is partially recovered by Relationship Anarchy.

in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is a Christian clergy again to spread ideas that will lead to the emergence of other forms of non-monogamy (especially polyamory). In fact, Dr. Robert Francouer, a married Catholic priest but also biologist and sexologist, was among the most prolific academic authors to advocate a greater range of sexual and marital choices. With his wife Anna Kotlarchyk, he wrote the book *Hot and Cool Sex: Cultures in Conflict* (1974), where the concepts of fidelity, jealousy, post-patriarchal sex and open marriage are re-examined, followed by dozens of other books dedicated to sexuality (Anapol 2010).

Then, there is what Anapol (*ibid.*) called “The Last Generation”, that includes the previous self-employed business consultant James Ramey, who conducted 40 years of research looking for marriage groups. He found the first one in 1952, long before that the sexual revolution made them visible, and he collected his research in the book *Intimate Friendships* (1976). Always in this last generation, Anapol (*ibid.*) remembers the Kerista Village, a late 20<sup>th</sup> century commune based in San Francisco, founded by Brother Jud, Even Eve and Blue Jay Way in 1971, who lived in a triad. The community reached the number of 30 members, divided into different group marriages that were called Best Friend Identity Clusters (or BFICs), which could include a variable number of members (from four to 24). The community was profoundly influenced by the Oneida community, although more inclined to trace their lineage to the Israeli kibbutz movement. Like the Oneida community, this community practiced polyfidelity, and they are also considered creators of the term. They organised their life with a system of “balanced rotational sleeping schedule<sup>27</sup>”, they tested regularly for Sexual Transmitted Infections, and men were required to undergo a vasectomy; they managed their property in common and practiced their own religion. Besides, the exclusive or preferential attachment was hugely discouraged

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<sup>27</sup> This schedule consisted in changing the bed every night so that each member of the BFIC shared the bed with a different member of other gender each night of the week.



between the members of the BFCIs, relationships were rigidly monitored and controlled and this was also one of the motivations of their disbanding (*ibid.*; Winston 2017). Similarly to the Oneida community, their organisation of sexuality seems hetero-centred (in fact the “balanced rotational sleeping schedule” were organised respecting the gender division).

Then, Anapol (2010) mentions Stan Dale, founder of the Human Awareness Institute in 1968. In the website the vision of the Institute is presented in this way:

The Human Awareness Institute (HAI) holds a bold vision of a world where people live in dignity, respect, understanding, trust, kindness, compassion, reverence, honesty and love. Every human being is worthy of love, without exception. At HAI, we walk alongside you as you explore the possibilities of a life of your choosing – a life enriched by self-acceptance, love, and a deep sense of belonging (Human Awareness Institute a).

The Institute offers experiential workshops to give the opportunity to explore love, intimacy and sexuality. Stan Dale, that was a Transactional Analyst, educator, workshop facilitator and author (Human Awareness Institute b), was also in a group marriage (Anapol 2010).

During the 90s, the advent of the Internet played an important role in spreading the concept of polyamory. Indeed, the first tools for social networking, such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), Usenet groups and chat rooms constituted important spaces to disseminate ideas, concepts and communities and to put in contact geographically distant people with the same interests. In this way, the word polyamory began to circle online and the first polyamorous support groups began to ticking, parallel to the first books on non-monogamy with a broader diffusion (Winston 2017).

Anapol herself can be considered one of the “key thought-leaders in launching the modern-day polyamorous movement” (Winston 2017, section 1, par. 1): in 1992, she founded with Ryam Nearing *Loving More* (and *Loving More*

*Magazine*), a non-profit organisation with the aims to providing education and raising awareness around polyamory and relationship choices in general (Anapol 2010; Winston 2017). Nearing was a closer friend of the Kerista Village and in a triad with two husbands. She was already founder of the *Polyfidelitous Educational Productions* when Anapol met her, and author of the book *Loving More: The Polyfidelity Primer* (1992). Then, in 1997 Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy published *The Ethical Slut*, for many years considered to be “the Bible of polyamory” (Anapol 2010; Winston 2017).

From then on, much of the expansion of polyamorous communities took place online, especially after the advent of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, that have allowed polyamorous people to meet, exchange experiences and ideas, ask for advice and share resources. Outside the Internet, the meetings of the polyamorous communities take different forms, which go from question-and-answer meetings to *cuddle parties*<sup>28</sup> (*ibid.*). The organisation *Loving More*, in addition to publishing a magazine and organising two regional events a year, also organises workshops on weekends, as well as does the Human Awareness Institute (Aviram and Leachman 2015). The online communities are present at national and local events also in Europe<sup>29</sup>.

### 2.2.2 Values and vocabulary

We can say that today the Neo-Pagan component is minoritarian within polyamorous communities, which have also expanded in Europe. On the other hand, there are important overlaps with the BDSM community and the queer and LGBT communities (*cf.* Bauer 2010). Although the “mainstream” polyamorous communities have a rather heterosexual focus, the sexual minorities played an

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<sup>28</sup> See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a definition.

<sup>29</sup> For a contextualisation of the Italian situation see Chapter 3.

important role to spread the polyamorous concepts, and in particular the presence of bisexual women was always important. Bauer (2010) (co-producer of the first academic conference dedicated to polyamory in Germany in 2005) thinks that gay men consider heterosexuals to be “Johnny-come-laties” in non-monogamy, but when gay men try to have more structured relationships, they seem to have difficulties similar to heterosexual and bisexual people. Also many trans people seem to be attracted to polyamory and, more recently, queer people<sup>30</sup>.

As Anapol (2010) highlights, this relationship model is born as an alternative to both serial monogamy and adulterous monogamy and the values that connote the community are more important than the form that the polyamorous relationships can take or the number of the partners involved in the relationships. In fact, polyamorous communities have a strong focus on ethics, as opposed to infidelity. The values that Anapol (2010) individuates as fundamental for the “new sexual ethics” of the polyamorous community are: honesty, commitment, agreements and decision making, integrity, equity. Kőrösi (2008) adds: love, openness, friendship, emotionality, (self-)respect, trust, communication, cooperation, negotiation, consensus, (self-)reflexivity, responsibility, interdependence, intimacy, compersion<sup>31</sup>, commitment, intentionality, ethics, honour.

In Anapol’s (2010) lecture, this new sexual ethics represents a radical shift with respect to what she calls the “old paradigm values” related to intimate relationships. The old paradigm values gave importance to stability and longevity in the relationship, financial and emotional dependency from the partner was not problematised; loyalty and commitment to the spouse and to the blood family were important moral code; keeping some secrets for themselves was seen as appropriate and normal, as well as withhold information and controlling the

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<sup>30</sup> This issue will be taken up again in Chapter 3 and in Chapter 4, when I will explore the sexual and romantic orientations in relation to my sample.

<sup>31</sup> See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a definition.

partner's behaviour by lying about one own actions was valued over telling the truth and accepting the consequences. Since in Anapol's lecture there is a lack of gender analysis, we can add that the person to be financial and economical dependent was normally the woman and this had repercussions also on her personal freedom, while it was easier for men to carve out spaces of personal independency outside the family (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Rosa 1994). On the contrary, in the new paradigm dependency is problematised and seen as a potential source of conflict and dissatisfaction; the focus is on letting the love spread and allowing the relationship to change their form is the primary ethical standard; loyalty and commitment are still important but the area of application is broaden; higher emphasis is put on total honesty and transparency toward the goal of creating more authentic and growth-producing relationships (Anapol 2010). This idea of relationship, which normally promote also a greater gender equality, is very close to that theorised by Giddens (1992) as "pure relationship", and has also the same criticalities (which we have already seen and which we will return to later).

The values associated with polyamory and new sexual ethics are mostly the same that are associated with self-help discourses and "couples therapy". The focus on ethics becomes in some self-help books about ethical non-monogamies and in the polyamorous theory more in general prescriptive discourses on how to be "proper" polyamorous (Petrella 2007). Often the involvement in the polyamorous practice and the adhesion to this new sexual ethics is been read as a process that brings people closer to the discovery of a truer and authentic self. As Petrella points out, in fact, Anapol (1997) herself wrote: "I had to pretend to be someone other than who I really was", highlighting that polyamory open to her the path towards the discovery of her true self.

These discourses which offer advices and rules on how to be a good polyamorous can be assimilated to those discourse that Foucault (1984b) called "techniques of the self" (see also Rose 1996), as we have seen in Chapter 1. The criticism of the risk of normalisation that this attitude entails will be deepened in the sub-section dedicated to polynormativity.

I think it is also important to spend a few words on the space that polyamorous communities dedicate to the culture of consent. The culture of consent is opposed to the so-called “rape culture”, a sociological concept that highlights the pervasiveness and normalisation of the objectification of women’s body and gender-based violence in society (Herman 1994). In the website *11th Principle: Consent!* there is an infographic that represents the pyramid of rape culture to make clear how the so-called rape culture is present in different degrees in our societies: from sexist attitudes and rape jokes to more evident displays such as harassment and rape (Chandra and Cervix 2018). This reflection has also been extended to the way men and women are socialised to flirting. As Easton and Hardy (1997) point out in *The Ethical Slut*:

Men in this culture are taught to push, to insist, never to take “no” for an answer; women are taught to be coy, to refuse, never to offer an outright “yes.” The more polarized we get in this silly equation, the further we push one another away – with results that range from hurt feelings to date rape (p. 82).

In opposition to this, the culture of consent encourages people to unlearn these behaviours and to “feel free to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ with no concern for anything but their own desires” (*ibid.*, p. 82-83). However, as I already anticipated in the introduction, the concept of consent is often presented too naively.

The polyamorous community coined also new terms to indicate new ways to experiment and express relationships (see Appendix 1). This quite prolific creation of new terms is particularly important on a symbolic level, from the moment it emphasises the fact that the polyamorous community is creating something new in their way to experiment and express feelings and relationship forms (Ritchie and Barker 2006). In turn, the creation of new terms influences the perception of reality and contributes to shape the identity (*cf.* Burr 1995; Ritchie and Barker 2006). For these reasons, it is typical of sexual minorities to

invent new languages to claim their identities, feelings and relationships in societies that erase them (Ritchie and Barker 2006). In this sense, an easy parallelism can be made between the term *ethical slut* and the term *queer*, both used—respectively by polyamorous communities and by queer communities—as positive re-semanticisation of terms originally used to denigrate people who had a sexual behaviour perceived as deviant (*cf.* Sedgwick 1990; Bernini 2017). In this way, these terms become useful to be used as empowerment tools and as recognition badges by the members of these subcultures and/or communities. Ritchie and Barker (2006) identify three thematic areas in which the polyamorous jargon has been developed: the area of identity, with term such as “ethical slut”; the area of relationships (e.g. “metamour”; “V”; “N”); and the area of emotion, with terms such as “compersion”.

### 2.2.3 Literature and media

The first ground-breaking publications that focus on consensual non-monogamies were two chapters in *The State of Affairs* (Duncombe *et al.* 2004), written by Jamieson (2004) and by Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks (2004). This marked an important step, since before consensual non-monogamies were excluded from any scientific writing about non-monogamy, that focused, instead, on secret infidelities and affairs (Barker and Langdrige 2010b).

Furthermore, in 2005 the first international academic conference on polyamory took place in Hamburg, followed by a special issue of the journal *Sexualities* dedicated to the same topic. After that, there have been some post-graduate theses, journal articles, monographs and, in 2010, it was published the first edited collection about consensual non-monogamies which brings together research and theory (Barker and Langdrige 2010a). There was also a Yahoo group devoted to discussion of research on this topic (PolyResearchers 2009) that in 2019 migrated to the platform IO changing its name in PolyamoryResearchers.

In 2015, ten years after the first one, the *Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference* took place in Lisbon, launching a project intended to be continued and replicated in the following years, in other places. The second edition of the Conference was held in Vienna in 2017 and the third in Barcelona in November 2019. There was also a special issue of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science* arising out of the second NMCI (En-Griffiths *et al.* 2018).

Barker and Langdrige (2010b) make a first distinction between celebrative and critical works. Celebrative works come above all from feminist, marxist and queer theorists, who identify monogamy as a tool of patriarchy and capitalism (see last section of Chapter 1). Besides these more political discourses, there has been a proliferation of self-help books, that insist on the necessity to work on themselves to be polyamorous, because the management of polyamorous relationships requires skills in communicating their own emotions, a great personal autonomy, self-responsibility, equality between the people involved and skills to negotiate within the relationships (see Easton and Hardy 1997; Taormino 2008; Veaux and Rickert 2014).

On the other side, some authors criticise excessive celebrative interpretations accusing them of speculation detached from empirical evidence because, according to their analysis, most people who live polyamorous relationships have apolitical motivations (Jamieson 2004; Wilkinson 2010). Other authors (e.g. Noël 2006; Willey 2010) raise doubts about the very same radicality of polyamory, detecting normative discourses also in the polyamorous environment. Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse (2006) see a risk that self-help books build a new normative model, a universal polyamorous model that ties easily with the imperialistic narrative that see Western world as emotionally and sexually advanced. In fact, the accent on “ethics” and “transparency”, compared with the hypocrisy of “monogamy” with secret infidelities, induce polyamorous people to consider themselves “superior” (see also Ritchie 2010). Furthermore, according to Petrella (2007), the way in which self-help books suggest that oppressive socialisation can be overthrown once it is detected is rather naïve. In fact, she

argues that the call of such books to self-awareness and open communication is not enough, because they forget to analyse the way in which emotions and desires are socially constructed within power relations.

Furthermore, Finn and Malson (2008) find, through empirical research, that a consistent number of polyamorous people continue to use time, energy and resources in a way that reinforces the primary couple. Besides, according to several authors that we have already met talking about amatonormativity (Budgeon 2008, 2016; Wilkinson 2012, 2014; Brake 2012a, 2012b; Lahad 2017) polyamory reinforces the idea of superiority of romantic love compare to friendships and relationships that are purely sexual, as well as other hierarchies as private/public and inside/outside, in ways that are distant from the scenarios of open communities and networks evoked by queer and feminist theorists.

There are also authors who place themselves outside the dialectic celebration/criticism. For example, Klesse (2007), in his extensive study of British polyamorous people, captures the complexities within the polyamorous movement (from couple-centred to sexual radicals), and Barker (2005) reports that her polyamorous participants showed a variety of narratives: from essentialism (“born this way”) to choice, and in different degrees of distance from monogamy, depending on the convenience.

Speaking of themes, one of the most common is the comparison between consensual non-monogamous practices and monogamy and/or infidelity (e.g. Phillips 2010; Ritchie 2010). Another common theme is the distancing of forms of non-monogamy from one another, especially swinging and polyamory (e.g. Franck and de Lameter 2010; Ritchie 2010). Then, Sheff (2011, 2014) and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2006, 2010) have concentrate their attention on the study of polyamorous families. Other authors have explore the cross-over between consensual non-monogamies and other identities/communities, for example: lesbian (Wandrei 1999), bisexual (e.g. Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004; Gusmano 2018a), trans (e.g. Richards 2010), kinky/BDSM (e.g. Bauer 2014; Wosick-Correa 2010), asexual (Scherrer 2010), goth, geek, pagan (e.g. Aviram 2010),



disability (Iantaffi 2010).

For what concern the Italian production, the first Italian books that deal with the theme of CANM are *La coppia flessibile* of Ballabio (1997)—coach and trainer, who presents the idea of “flexible polygamy” (to be distinguished from the “institutional” and non-reciprocal one) as an idea of non-monogamy not exclusively sexual and focused on relational quality—and, then, *L’amore con più partner* written by Consiglio (2006)—biologist who also knew the organisation *Loving More* and who concentrates more in the biological justification of non-monogamy.

As I already mentioned in the introduction, the theme of consensual non-monogamies and its intersections with the living conditions under the neoliberal regime have been deepened by the queer transfeminist network SomMovimento NazioAnale. In particular, some of the reflections emerged from the network are collected in the fanzine *S/COPPIA. Il librino di San Valentino* (S/COUPLE<sup>32</sup>. TheValentine’s Day booklet) (2016).

Within the academic production, at the moment, we can count some MA and BA thesis from the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards (Acquistapace 2011; Arrigoni 2016; Serafini 2016; Iammarrone 2017); one doctoral thesis (Acquistapace 2017) and a 5-year long project (*INTIMATE - Citizenship, Care and Choice: The micropolitics of intimacy in Southern Europe*, 2014-2019) dedicated to the exploration of intimacy from the perspective of those on the margins of social, legal and policy concerns in Southern Europe (lesbian women, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people with a focus also on polyamorous relationships). The research team involved Italian, Spanish and Portuguese researchers coordinated by A.C. Santos. Gusmano (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d), one of the Italian researchers involved in the project, conducted an empirical research in Italy about polyamory among LGBTQ people.

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<sup>32</sup> In Italian the prefix s- is used to form negative adjectives, nouns or verbs with respect to the basic element; in this case, it is a neologism to indicate the disruption of the concept of couple. As well, in Italian “scoppia” means “bursts” or “breaks”, if referred to the couple.

Recently a book dedicated to polyamory edited by Grande and Pes (2018) was also published. The volume focuses above all on the legal point of view, but it also collects two sociological contributions: the already mentioned Gusmano (2018b) and Bertone (2018).

In the last decades polyamory became more and more an issue of interest also for the media: we have seen a proliferation of articles in magazines, services in TV programs and appearances on talk shows, documentaries and even the insertion of polyamorous stories in TV series and films.

For what concerns documentaries, we can mention in particular: *Three of Hearts: A Postmodern Family* (Canada, 2004), *I Love You. And You. And You.* (UK, 2006) and *PolyLove* (Canada, 2017).

There have been also a number of web and TV series, such as: *Family* (USA, 2008-2009), *Poliamor* (Brazil, 2009), *Las Aparicio* (Mexico, 2010), *The Ethical Slut* (USA, 2013-2015), *You Me Her* (USA-Canada, 2016-in production) *Unicornland* (USA, 2017) and *She's Gotta Have It* (USA, 2017-).

Regarding film production, we can remember, with a more specific focus: *Castillos de cartón* (Spain, 2009), *Dieta mediterránea* (Spain, 2009), *Diverso da chi?* (Italy, 2009), *Drei* (Germany, 2010), *3 on a bed* (India, 2012), *El sexo de los ángeles* (Spain, 2012), *En, to, tresomt* (Denmark, 2014), *Lutine* (France, 2016), *Somos tr3s* (Argentina, 2018), *Alex Strangelove* (USA, 2018).

In 2012-2013 a Northern American reality series (*Polyamory: Married & Dating*) was also broadcast. It provides an inside look to different polyamorous relationships.

### 2.3 Polyamory: critical issues

Some of the criticisms seen in the previous sub-section have been extended and deepened by authors and activists even from within the consensual non-monogamous communities. In this section I try to present some insights that focus on three of these issues: the relationship that polyamory maintains with the

neoliberal economic perspective, the privileges of race and class within the polyamorous communities, and the development of the so-called polynormativity.

### *2.3.1 Polyamory and neoliberalism*

The French economist Attali (2007), starting from a pseudo-economic analysis, predicted that the polyamorous model (or, at least, its basic characteristic, that is the fact of having multiple relationships simultaneously and transparently) will become the most widespread model in the future. His analysis started from the consideration of the relationship between humans and objects: from his point of view, we are moving towards a collaborative economy, in which goods are less and less privately possessed and increasingly used for a limited amount of time and shared with other users. Tracing a parallelism between the relationships with goods and intimate relationships, the author thinks that human relationships will be increasingly managed in a collaborative way, that is by sharing sexual and love relationships between different people. This analysis recalls that of some authors we have already seen in Chapter 1 (Bauman 2003; Hochschild 2003; Illouz 2007), who present a rather pessimistic point of view on contemporary human relations, pulling together—similarly to Attali (2007)—the fluidity of commercial exchanges with the fluidity of affective exchanges.

If undoubtedly some characteristics of the polyamorous model can be interpreted in a neoliberal key, it is precisely the polyamorous community that distances itself from this interpretation. For example, after that Adinolfi (2015)—Italian journalist and politician who defends traditionalist values (heterosexual families, traditional gender roles, anti-abortion)—commented Attali's (2015) article using it to reiterate his defence of the traditional family from the “rented loves” of polyamory, the Italian site poliamore.org responded distancing itself from Attali's interpretation of polyamory. The reason for the replay is that

Attali's interpretation "objectivises people and ignores their feelings" while "polyamory (...) is a relational philosophy based on ethics in relationships and respect for the feelings of all the people involved" (Boschetto 2015, my translation). This defence seems to be in line with the defence of the "ethical primacy" which, as we have already seen in the previous sections, is one of the fundamental characteristics of polyamory.

Despite the defences, some authors and activists have identified some political weaknesses in the polyamorous theory and practices. Vassallo (2018), for example, connects the increasing success of polyamory in the mainstream media with the risk of becoming prey of the neoliberal discourse and effectively describes this risk in the following way:

The neoliberal discourse offers the non-monogamous relationships like who sells frippery in a mobile telephony fair. All shine, all facilities, all superficiality: to pay in instalments, insurance against contingencies, glamour, social capital, sexual capital, guaranteed fun and little more. Supermarket happiness. A lot of freedom and little care. A lot of possibilism and few pains. A lot of heteronormativity. Many men getting on their high horses and many women abiding. Many girlfriends of, wives of, lovers of. A lot of the same disguises of other things. A lot of outdated modernity, a lot of organised travel adventurism, and a lot of 30s crisis, 40s crisis, 50s crisis... (*ibid.*, p. 14, my translation).

Vassallo adds that this "affective consumerism" does not spare libertarian environments (*ibid.*, p. 14). The author advances a wider criticism towards a way to theorise or live polyamory or consensual non-monogamy that does not put in discussion the structure of society. She makes a parallelism with the institutionalised LGBT activism, which contributed to the normalisation of the dissidence from the heterosexual norm without changing the structure of oppression. The author criticises, from a radical perspective, an activism that simply asks to be considered "normal" because, from her point of view, it reproduces the norm. In the same way, a polyamorous activism that does not

question the monogamous way of loving is limiting itself to the reproduction of the monogamous thought, multiplying relationships without changing the substance (*ibid.*). Along the same lines, Cardoso (2015) calls for a complete rejection of marriage to decentralise romantic and sexual love.

In Vassallo's (2018) opinion, it is not the sexual and/or affective exclusivity to define monogamy but the priority of the couple respect to friends or other people and the sexual exclusivity is just the symbol of this hierarchy. Coherently with this, she thinks that, to disrupt the monogamous thought, it is not sufficient to dismantle the symbol (that is sexual exclusivity) but it is necessary to disrupt the hierarchy of the couple. More explicitly, she explains:

You do not dismantle monogamy fucking more, neither falling in love with more people simultaneously, but [you can do it] by building relationships in a different way, that allows to fuck more and to fall in love with more people simultaneously without anyone breaking on the road (*ibid.*, p. 31, my translation).

More widely, to dismantle monogamy is necessary to dismantle the binary system of sex and gender, which is the basis of the social construction of the couple, and the dynamics of hierarchy, competition and exclusion in all the fields of the society, including the work system (*ibid.*). Similarly, the Aromantic Manifesto points out, “‘freedom to love’ within a hierarchical structure of desire replicates that very logic” (yingchen and yingtong 2018).

Apparently, the polyamorous communities today do not put forward a political criticism of the social structure. At this regard, Aviram (2010) traces the apoliticisation of the polyamorous community to its origins. For the author, the fact that polyamory was born within the 1960s, sci-fi/fantasy, alternative spirituality and technology communities facilitated the creation of spaces oriented to the growth of the self and suitable for creative and utopian

explorations “outside the box”, but discouraged the foundation of a practical and political platform that questions the structure of the society.

Some of the core concepts of the polyamorous theory, as well as all the de-traditionalization theories, suffer from the lack of this analysis. Bauer (2014) questions the concept of “consent” normally presented as an uncomplicated given in the larger BDSM community. In his analysis, the concept of consent, that has been a feminist achievement in the 1970s, continues to be discussed in terms of its absence, but hardly any conceptualisation defines it positively. The concept of positive consent taken for granted in the larger BDSM community, which he identifies as a liberal notion of consent, assumes that contracts between individuals are always stipulated in the symmetrical agreement between the parties and by free choice (*ibid.*). Some lesbian feminists criticised this concept from the perspective of gender differences, that is, starting from the consideration that women, within a patriarchal culture, are socialised to consent to male domination invalidating the concept of self-determination. In Bauer’s (*ibid.*) opinion, both the liberal notion of consent and the lesbian feminist critique fall into what Klesse (2007, p. 116) calls “myth of equality” and he thinks that the lesbian feminist critique has to be integrated with the dimensions of class, ability/disability, race, age and also physical/sexual attractiveness. In his work (*ibid.*), he tries to adopt a critical concept of consent, that conceives consent as negotiation within power situations that are mostly asymmetrical. Besides, he tries to analyse how the consent is established within the dyke and queer BDSM community. The notion of consent that he advances is also cooperative and relational (not unidirectional), ongoing (not a one-time event) and relational-specific, that is difficult to define *a priori* but depends on the specific relationship (*ibid.*).

This same discourse, including the myth of equality, can be applied to the polyamorous discourse. In fact, some authors have criticised not paying attention to inequalities precisely because they start from a definition of consent and equality that is not problematised (e.g. Vassallo 2018).

### 2.3.2 Class and race privileges

Some of the characteristics of the polyamorous culture, such as “the endorsement of reflexivity, relationship talk, the rationalisation of emotions and carefully scripted negotiation” (Klesse 2013, p. 207) can facilitate exclusion on a class basis, as they are all features that characterise middle class cultures (Skeggs 2004; Klesse 2012, 2013).

Researches into polyamorous and BDSM communities seem to confirm this impression. In fact, Sheff and Hammers’ (2011) review of 36 research studies reveals that in the samples examined there is a predominance of white subjects, with above-average education and advanced socio-economic positions. Also the longitudinal qualitative study conducted by Sheff, *Polyamorous Family Study* (divided in 3 waves, from 1996 to 2012, with 131 in-depth interviews in total), is illustrative of this trend: 89% of the respondents identify as white, 74% have professional jobs and, regarding education, 88% had some college education, with 67% attaining bachelor’s degrees and 21% completing graduate degrees (Sheff and Hammers 2011; Goldfeder and Sheff 2013). In other Sheff’s (2005) study about overlapping identities (polyamorous/swingers/fetishists/BDSMers), where 31 identified as BDSM practitioners, 19 as polyamorous and 6 as swingers, the percentage were even higher: 90% identified as white, 95% completed or were enrolling in an undergraduate degree and 75% completed at least some undergraduate school. Also Weber’s (2002) survey for the magazine *Loving More* with a sample of 1000 respondents confirms this trend: 40% have a postgraduate or graduate University degree, 30% a college degree, 26% attended some college and just 4% have an high school diploma or lower qualification.

Patterson (2018), writing from the perspective of a black North American polyamorous man, highlights in his book how the polyamorous community and other alternative communities are not exempt from fetishization, discrimination and harming of black people. He points out that, if communities

do not actively commit to being inclusive, the result is inevitably that of bringing the same problems of society as a whole within communities formed by common interests.

Also self-help books on polyamory (e.g. Easton and Hardy 1997) seem to be written for people who have sufficient financial resources to own a home or pay a certain amount of rent (Klesse 2013). Moreover, even to maintain long-distance relationships (quite common in the poly world) it is necessary to have sufficient resources to travel with a certain frequency (Jackson 2011; Klesse 2013).

Besides the hypothesis already reported at the beginning of the section, that is that some specific characteristics of the polyamorous community are prevalent in middle class cultures, Klesse (2013) takes into consideration a range of possible explanations for these exclusions on class and race basis. As Sheff and Hammers (2011) highlight, many of the researchers in this field do not scrutinise the intersections with class, race, age and disability, do not worry about power and neglect the aspect of power relations. Besides, also researchers who tried to recruit participants from within subordinated groups find difficulties due to the scepticism toward research among those groups, often because previous researchers have misrepresented or stereotyped their concerns (Phoenix 1994; Klesse 2007, 2013). Other hypothesis is that this is one of the consequences of classed and racialised politics of respectability, that stigmatise sexual conducts deviant from monogamy and, at the same time, associate black people and other ethnical minorities, as well as working class people, to oversexualisation and lower ethical standards (Mosse 1985; Bhattacharyya 1998; Klesse 2013). This had implications in terms of tighter social and political control over minority groups and working class, especially regarding women's sexual behaviours (Skeggs 1997). So, since people who live in consensual non-monogamy are subject to stigmatisation and discrimination due to mononormativity, it is more difficult for already stigmatised social groups to live non-conforming relational and sexual behaviours openly. In this sense, we can say that polyamorous people



are subjects to stigmatisation and discrimination but many of them hold class and ethnic privileges, too (Klesse 2013; Rambukkana 2015). In particular, following Klesse (2013), we can individuate three ways in which these privileges can have manifestation:

- a) The structural exclusivity of poly communities in terms of class and race,
- b) the marginalisation of certain groups within poly communities and c) the difficulties of intersubjectively negotiating power differentials within crossclass or crossracial intimacies (p. 208).

Some authors also detect signals of islamophobia in the insistence of polyamorous communities to strongly trace the distinction between polyamory and polygamy (Rambukkana 2015; Vassallo 2018). In Vassallo's (2018) opinion, this distinction follows the dichotomy East/West and presents the risk to depict the other (from the West) as "barbarian", with a legacy of the first anthropology that in the classification of kin adopted an ethnocentric perspective. The tendency, in fact, is to start from the model of the monogamous bourgeois couple as central and classifying everything else encountered as marginal. In this case, it is the polyamorous movement that, to avoid the stigmatisation, adopts the strategy of drawing a clear line between its own community and other stigmatised communities. This strategy is founded on the aprioristic definition of polyamory as ethics and can have the risk to nurture a "suprematist and messianic" discourse, which follows an evolutionist perspective (from barbarity to civilisation) (*ibid.*, p. 146, my translation). This ethical supremacy that differentiates polyamory from polygamy is based above all on the idea that polyamory guarantees gender equality, unlike polygamy. This "clause", according to Vassallo, makes it very difficult to criticise gender inequalities within polyamorous communities, while, on the other hand, an orientalist perspective and a racist and homophobic construction against Muslim polygamy are adopted, without confronting the practices (*ibid.*, p. 146-147, my translation). Rambukkana (2015) in his

researches about Muslim women who live in polygynic families in Canada, show that the reality is more nuanced. Although, on the one hand, from their narratives conflicts and disappointments emerge—and also, in some cases, coercion and deception—some women interviewed explain their choice saying that they prefer to have the benefit to have an husband without the drawbacks to have him all the time, or they value the possibility of sharing the care of the children with the other wives and so to have space to pursue careers (*ibid.*).

### 2.3.3 Polynormativity

In the last decade, with the growing interest in polyamory it has also grown the criticism that most radical activists move to what has been called polynormativity (*cf.* Zanin 2013). As Zanin (*ibid.*) points out, the fracture between the polyamorous movement and those who I will call “radical affective non-monogamous” follows the fracture between the more institutionalised LGBT movement and the queer movement. Klesse (2007) identifies this fracture as the contraposition between “the good homosexual” and “the dangerous queer” (p. 12)<sup>33</sup>. In these fractures the first part represents the most easily normalisable and assimilable part because it does not challenge the structure of society. Normally, this part of the movement distances itself from the non-assimilable part because it condemns its more socially stigmatised behaviour, for example sexual promiscuity (*cf.* Klesse 2007).

Polynormativity, in this sense, can be defined as the set of polyamorous characteristics that the mainstream representation of polyamory highlights. Zanin identifies four of these norms:

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<sup>33</sup> Although, in Klesse’s (2007) analysis, the “good homosexual” is “mere rhetoric” because “it cannot exist, except from complete self-annihilation through assimilation” (p. 12).

- the centrality of the couple: polyamory is approached as “a thing that a couple does” (*ibid.*) and that begins with a couple; this maintenance of the couple-centrism is also detected by Finn and Malson (2008) who in their research speak of “dyadic-containment” that non-monogamous relationships continue to reproduce, mainly because framed into a “liberal-humanist” framework (p. 519), which aims to improve the heterosexual couple (making it freer) rather than changing the structure of emotional relationships;
- the hierarchy: this point is strictly connected to the previous one, in fact to maintain the couple at the centre it is necessary to put emphasis on the distinction between the primary partner and the secondary (or secondaries);
- the emphasis on rules: a “control-based” (Zanin 2013) approach to polyamory, almost inevitable in particular to preserve the status of “primary couple” but not limited to these cases. Examples of rule can be: having the power of veto over (potentially) new partners, not using the shared bed, having to text to the partner immediately after a date, and so on;
- heterosexuality, cuteness, youth, whiteness, sexiness: these are all attributes that are prevalent in the polyamorous representation in mainstream media and they all respond to the need to present polyamorous people as not only acceptable but also cool.

Ferrer (2018) suggests to adopt a wider definition of polynormativity, that includes “any discourse defending polyamory as the right, best, or superior way of intimate relating” (p. 11). These discourses can include, for example, the tendency to represent themselves as “good polyamorous person” that Ritchie (2010, p. 50) identifies in her analysis of “confessional” representation of polyamorous stories in the British media (p. 47). The main strategy of this representation, both in media and in polyamorous groups, consists in distancing themselves from other forms of non-monogamy, especially those that focus on sexual experimentation and promiscuity (casual sex, swinging) or those that are not “ethical” (infidelity), focusing rather on what Wilkinson (2010) calls “polyromanticism”, that is a narrative on polyamory centred on love and intimacy (see also Ritchie and Barker 2006; Klesse 2006; Ritchie 2010). The risk is that these representations can reinforce dominant mononormative and heteronormative narratives, losing the most radical potential of polyamorous theory (Klesse 2006, 2016; Ritchie 2010).

However, these more assimilationist discourses do not cover the totality of the polyamorous narratives, that are much more complex and ambivalent (Barker 2005; Klesse 2006, 2007; Aviram 2010). Aviram (2010), for example, reports that many of her interviewees explicitly refuse strategic identity politics and biologist essentialism. To better understand this complexity, a first distinction can be made — following Wilkinson (2010) — between “a [simple] rejection of monogamy and a rejection of ‘mononormativity’” (p. 243), that contested also the hierarchisation of affects.

#### *2.4 Radicalising Love: beyond romantic love and polyamory*

In this section I focus on affective non-monogamous discourses that, while maintaining some overlap with the polyamorous discourses and communities,

position themselves outside the assimilationist discourses and the liberal-humanist framework, declaring the aim to overcome romantic love and couple-centrism.

#### *2.4.1 Relationship Anarchy*

The foundations of Relationship Anarchy (RA from now on) have been formalised by Nordgren, a Swedish activist, in her “short instructional manifesto” (2006), originally written in Swedish. Starting from some premises similar to the polyamorous ones — such as: “You have capacity to love more than one person, and one relationship and the love felt for that person does not diminish love felt for another” — , then the manifesto displays its controversy against hierarchisation and couple-centrism (“Don’t rank and compare people and relationships”, “One person in your life does not need to be named primary for the relationship to be real”). Besides this, RA contrasts relationships based on control and “entitlement” (“Your feelings for a person or your history together does not make you entitled to command and control a partner to comply with what is considered normal to do in a relationship”) and encourages to find “your own set of rules” without following rules based on specific relationship models. Nordgren (*ibid.*) warns also about heterosexism, defined as “a very powerful normative system”, but at the same time she encourages to “don’t let fear drive your relationships”. She values spontaneity (free from fear of punishments or sense of obligation) but she is also aware of the difficulty to “handle all the norm breaking involved in choosing relationships that don’t map to the norm” (*ibid.*), so she suggests the strategy to “fake it ‘til you make it”, that consists in creating some simple guidelines in positive times in which you can rely on when you feel more vulnerable. The manifesto also suggests privileging a confident approach in relationships rather than an approach that constantly casts doubt on trust in other people. Also communication is valued, as a fundamental tool to deviate

from the pattern of the norm in relationships. Last but not least, the manifesto highlights that RA is not about avoiding commitment but it is about “designing your own commitments with the people around you” outside the norms that prescribed that “certain types of commitments are a requirement for love to be real, or that some commitments like raising children or moving in together have to be driven by certain kinds of feelings” (*ibid.*).

Although RA is born as something other and outside the “poly-norm”, actually that of relationship anarchists seems a label that is gaining popularity also within the polyamorous communities. The interpretation of RA that seems to take hold in these communities is that of a polyamory with fewer rules – and perhaps less responsibilities. For example, Fenza<sup>34</sup> (2013) in the blog *Skepticism, Properly Applied: Criticism is not uncivil* situates RA in a pole of a relational continuum constructed on the sole dimension of the relationship control, in which at the opposite pole there are the total master/slave relations (where one partner mainly decide for the other for all major decisions) and in the intermediate positions, in the order: traditional monogamy, “monogamish”, swinging and egalitarian polyamory<sup>35</sup>.

This progressive appropriation of the RA label from the polyamorous community produced some reactions from within the RA community and, apparently, a further segregation between the two communities. These reactions aim above all to delineate the differences between RA and polyamory in terms of (radical/anarchist) political awareness and relationship structure (*cf.* Foxtale 2015). For example, the blogger “The thinking aro” (2016) writes:

Relationship anarchy is not just a shiny, new label that people get to use when they want to sound different or special or better than everyone else. It’s certainly

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<sup>34</sup> The activist was a member of the Polyamory Leadership Network (an international association that has the aim to raise awareness about polyamory), from which he was removed for abusive behaviour and sexual assault allegations, and later he was also removed as a collaborator from the blog.

<sup>35</sup> The term indicates a form of polyamory without hierarchisation among the partners.

not a label that fuckboys get to use when they want to make themselves sound enlightened for having casual sex or get away with having casual sex that they don't have to negotiate emotionally with their sexual partners. (...)

Relationship anarchy doesn't have to include sex at all, and sometimes it doesn't. It doesn't have to include romance at all, and sometimes it doesn't. What it does have to include, as a practice that is legitimately different from polyamory and other forms of consensual nonmonogamy, is a politics that actively resists relationship hierarchy as a coercive structure reflective of our culture's value system. That value system includes amatonormativity, compulsory sexuality, heteronormativity, the sexualization and romanticization of touch/affection/emotional connection (for the purpose of reinforcing heteropatriarchy via homophobia and on the basis of the sexualized inequality between males and females), individualism of the neoliberal sensibility, and above all, capitalism.

According to Rotten Zucchini (2016), RA is founded about the basic anarchist principles of: rejection of interpersonal coercion (including that operated by the State), community, mutual aid and commitments made through communication and not through contracts.

Regarding the issue of community building, the blogger "queeranarchism" (2016) writes:

Relationship anarchism (...) means community. A community of two or of many. A community that rejects the 'rules' of relationships, of enforced heterosexuality, enforced monogamy, of partners being entitled to sex, of marriage, of childcare being a two-person job and of the idea that we need a romantic or sexual relationship to be complete. A community that instead chooses care, cooperation, equality, acknowledgement that we are more than our relationship and that we all have different needs. And in that community, we make the rules that suit us, and end them when they no longer suit our community.

In 2019 it took place the first *Relationship Anarchist Discussions* in Detroit, an “unconference” dedicated to Relationship Anarchy that in its site makes clear the desire to draw a clear line of demarcation between RA and (especially hierarchical) polyamory or other forms of non-monogamy:

This is not a space for honoring hierarchical polyamory or any rules-based relationships that rely on entitlement, power and control, limiting autonomy, the couple unit, and prioritizing the relationship escalator over friendship and community.

We recognize the dominant system of monogamism as a patriarchal, heterosexist, cissexist, ethno-nationalist, white supremacist, and capitalist mode of relating to others that creates unnecessary social conflict and isolates people from their communities. We are finding ways to resist that domination, as well as the proliferation of its spin-offs (hierarchical polyamory) and its effects on our communities.

What do the alternatives to systemic monogamism and hierarchical polyamory look like? How do we apply the anarchistic values of anti-authoritarianism, individual autonomy, and community cooperation to all of our relationships? What is the connection between anarchy, friendship, the erotic, sex, love, and family? How do we create a more liberatory future for our communities?

With this description the unconference organisers want to exclude hierarchical polyamory from RA spaces, considering it as a “spin-off” of the monogamous system. We will find similar claims in Chapter 6, when I will report some of the queer activists’ explanations regarding the reasons for moving away from the polyamorous community. In the next sub-section I try to offer some theoretical ideas about the relationship between queer and coupledness.

#### *2.4.2 Queer and Couple/ Queer and Romance*

From a philosophical perspective, Brilmyer, Trentin and Xiang (2019) start from questioning the compatibility between queerness and the couple form. Taking



into consideration several feminist and queer scholars, they try to construct a queer numerology of the couple at different historical moments. What I find particularly interesting in their reconstruction, is the position of those authors who refuse “to positivize zero into one” (*ibid.*, p. 231). The “zero”, here, represents the position of those who play the disadvantaged role in the position of power within the couple: historically the woman in the heterosexual couple, but also the “Black, Brown, Trans, Subaltern, and Terrorist” (Edelman 2017, p. 140). What these authors propose is “an ethics of passivity in which passivity is not understood as the privation or negation of an activity that is always deemed more desirable” (Brilmyer, Trentin and Xiang 2019, p. 231-232). Edelman in *No Future* (2004) insists that the queerness persists over the figure of “the homosexual”: “long after ‘the homosexual’ himself exits the position of the Other [through the process of social legitimization of his sexuality], queerness endures, merely transferred onto others who come to occupy the zero of the Queer” (Brilmyer, Trentin and Xiang 2019, p. 235). More explicitly, work as that of Edelman (2004), but also of Puar (2007) and Haritaworn (2015) criticise progressive liberal discourses focused on “rights” that seek to subsume “the other” within their flattening unity.

yingchen and yingtong (2016), in their formalisation of aromanticism, go beyond the question of compatibility between the queerness and the coupledness, and begin their manifesto with a clear statement: “queer liberation must abolish romance as their long-term goal”. Indeed, in the authors’ opinion, the pursuit of romantic desires by queer people reinforces their oppression, and the rhetoric of “freedom to love” is destined to fail because it is created within a system of oppression and a hierarchical structure of desire where many remain marginalised and excluded from this politics of affects.

### 2.4.3 Overcoming romantic love(?): care, community building and emotions

As we have already seen in the previous sections, some authors moved a critic against the centralisation of romantic love in the polyamorous discourses (*cf.* Wilkinson 2010; Vassallo 2015, 2018; Vagalume 2015). Starting from this critique, Vassallo (2018) asks herself (and us): “How can we concretise the construction of an affective network that defies the dynamics of monogamy defined from its backgrounds and not its forms, from its relational structure and not from the numbers of people involved?” (p. 80, my translation). Although she anticipates not to have a magic formula, she suggests to move from an “ethics of justice” to an “ethics of cares” (see Gilligan 1982, 2011; Gilligan and Richards 2009; Tronto 1993 for a wider debate). The ethics of justice, in Vassallo’s (*ibid.*) analysis, is based on commercial (and monogamous) thought, where the change has always to be perfectly symmetric: “[I]f you offer x you receive x” (p. 80, my translation). Instead, the ethics of cares is based on the necessities of everyone in distinct moments rather than on symmetry. In a non-monogamous structure which aims to change the social structure, the needs of the entire network must be taken into account rather than thinking of being able to live on the basis of individual commercial exchanges. For Vassallo (*ibid.*) the difference between a polyamorous relationship and the construction of an affective network is the following: in a polyamorous relationship it is sufficient that the metapartners know each other (or are aware of each other’s existence), while in an affective network they *recognise* themselves. In the author’s opinion, it is also important to abandon relationships in which we do not feel cared, overcoming what she calls “the big trap of polyamory: that nobody leaves anyone anymore” (*ibid.*, p. 82, my translation).

Different authors and activists (see e.g. Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse 2006; Petrella 2007; Gusmano 2018c; Vassallo 2018) criticise the individualistic approach of self-help manuals on consensual non-monogamies because they set the discourse on a neoliberal conception of choice and trust in the myth that one

has to learn to be alone, to be a fully functional individual by themselves. The point is, instead, to build a network of relationships, to construct an affective network based on care that will not make you feel lonely, also in material terms (SomMovimento NazioAnale 2015, 2016; Gusmano 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; Vassallo 2018).

The challenge is, therefore, to redistribute the care functions into a wider network than that legitimised by monogamous thought. But how? In Vassallo's (2018) opinion the starting point can be to put into question the social normalisation around romantic love as an uncontrollable desire that must to be consumed. She recognised this belief also in polyamory, where, besides this, the overcoming of the limit of exclusivity leaves the illusion that every desire can and must be pursued. At the same time, the author recognises the difficulty of building a different way to feel outside of the social system, as we are completely embedded in it. What she suggests is to become aware and make decisions based on this, letting oneself be guided by the evaluation of the well-being of the affective network rather than by the romantic impetus of the moment.

Vassallo's (*ibid.*) discourse on the possibility of directing emotions leads us back to the discussion begun in the previous chapter, and in particular to the need to overcome a rigid dichotomisation between reason and emotions, which dates back to Descartes (*cf.* Deri 2011, 2015). One of the problems with this perspective, in fact, is that it suggests that emotions (and therefore also love) are not controllable and that the individual is totally at the mercy of them (Parkinson, Fischer and Manstead 2005).

In conclusion to this section, although having found no magic formula for overcoming romantic love, I can reiterate that the approach that Deri (2011, 2015) calls intersectional, which integrates biological explanations with reflections on cultural constructions on emotions, continues to seem the most convincing one to me.

## *Conclusions*

In the introduction I asked: to what extent these new models challenge or affect the structure of society? And to what extent, on the contrary, can they be assimilated into the existing structure?

I can answer that polyamory challenges the structure of society questioning taken-for-granted such as mononormativity (Pieper and Bauer 2005), amatonormativity (Brake 2012a, 2012b) and the relationship escalator (Gahran 2017). At the same time some authors warn for the risk of assimilation respect to different aspects: its ambiguous relationship with neoliberalism (*cf.* Vassallo 2018); the risk of excluding people on class and race basis (Sheff and Hammers 2011; Klesse 2012, 2013; Rambukkana 2015; Patterson 2018; Vassallo 2018); and polynormativity (Zanin 2013; Ferrer 2018), that includes couple-centrism (Finn and Malson 2008), hierarchisation, emphasis on rules and a reassuring representation in media (Ritchie 2010). Then, I also took into consideration more radical theories and practices of affective non-monogamy, that start from questioning the socially recognised relational structures and aim to change the structure of society as a whole, in particular Relationship Anarchy (Nordgren 2006). These theories aim to overcome some of the core characteristics of romantic love than, in their analysis, polyamory does not completely overcome, such as the centrality of the couple, the hierarchisation of relationships that gives priority to romantic ones and the canalising of care to romantic or family relationships instead of extending it to an enlarged affective community. However, the risk of assimilation is always around the corner.

These reflections will be the starting point for the analysis of the empirical material in the next chapters, in particular in relation to the axis desire for social legitimacy/political radicalism, in addition to that of personal autonomy/emotional stability.

## Chapter 3

### **The research: methods and sample**

*There is (...) no way to exploring love except through the ways  
in which it is talked and written about.*

*Language itself, moreover, contributes to the cultural construction of emotions  
and is a means by which we participate in creating a shared sense of what emotions are.*

(Jackson, "Even sociologists fall in love: an exploration in the Sociology of emotions", 1993, p. 202).

In this chapter I aim to offer at least a partial account of the "praxis" and "procedures" that shaped my research. While the two previous chapters were dedicated to the theory that led my gaze, in this chapter I try to report my experiences about "the observational role taken up, the research techniques used, the implicit or explicit form of sampling adopted, and more in general the line taken up during ethnography" (Cardano 2014, p. 5).

The first section is specifically dedicated to reflexivity and in particular I elaborate some reflections about my role of insider researcher. Then, the second section tries to reconstruct the elaboration of the research design. In the third section I refer to the context in which the research took place. The fourth section is dedicated to the account of my fieldwork experience. In the fifth section I deepen the discourse about the choice of the sample and the sociodemographic characteristics of the same. Finally, the last section is dedicated to the analysis process.

#### *3.1 Reflexivity*

My metatheoretical approach is influenced by the critical theory perspectives and the constructionist research approach. In the introduction I have already anticipated in which ways I consider my research perspective as critical.

Concerning the constructionist approach, I can say that my main research purpose is to present alternative interpretations of reality, trying constantly to question the taken-for-granted and to make visible the structures and the dynamics of power (*cf.* Keso, Lehtimäki and Pietiläinen 2009). Methodologically, I was firstly influenced by the line of interactionism. In Plummer's (1975) words:

Rather than viewing behaviour as a simple 'release' from pre-existing psychological structure (such as drives, personalities, emotions or attitudes) or as a consequence of an external coercion by social 'facts' (cultures, structures, organizations, roles, power), the interactionist focuses upon emergence and negotiation – the processes by which social action (in groups, organizations or societies) is constantly being constructed, modified, selected, checked, suspended, terminated and recommenced in everyday life (p. 13).

In my case, the “meanings” on which I focused are overall the personal re-elaborations and reflections around the concept of love and intimate relationship of the people who live more than one intimate relationship at the same time with the knowledge and consent of all the people involved. In this specific case, the interactionist approach helped me to value the actors' agency in their attempt to conciliate and to negotiate different social drives (e.g. towards personal autonomy from one side and towards emotional stability from the other side) within a specific social and historical context crossed by tendencies and counter-tendencies. However, during the research process I took a more critical stance, inspired in particular by the reflections of Klesse (2007) and Bauer (2014), that induced me to problematise a liberal notion of agency (and in particular of sexual agency), and reconsider the structural limits on personal choice. I hope this has resulted in a more balanced stance between agency and structure.

The research had an inductive approach – the idea for the PhD project came from my previous experiences “into the field” – and an insider perspective. In fact, at the moment I entered the fieldwork, I was already familiar with the

polyamorous community from nearly five years and I think I can dare to say that I was already considered as an insider, both at local and national level.

This position offered some advantages: the first one is the possibility to overcome the gatekeepers that keep watch in particular to avoid instrumentalization (*cf.* Hermann 1989), overall by the media, but in some cases also by academics. This function became more and more visible as the theory and practice of polyamory widened their diffusion and, at the same time, the interest of the media became more intense. My advantage, in this case, was to have begun to participate in the live meetings of the polyamorous local groups (initially in Milan) in 2012, when the polyamorous community was in its infancy in Italy. Probably, if I had made my appearance in the community only later and only for research purposes, the access to the fieldwork would have been much more difficult.

In addition to this, another advantage of my position was having had an earlier socialisation to the community languages, which protects me from potential misunderstandings or too naïve interpretations. As we partially saw in the previous chapter, the polyamorous lexicon display a certain level of complexity and my insider position aided in the comprehension of the nuances of the language used (e.g. when they spoke about “relationship”, or “jealousy”, or “consent”) (*cf.* Deri 2011). As Geertz (1983) already pointed out, in fact, to have access to a culture (or sub-culture, in this case) it is not enough to observe, but it is necessary to have access to the meanings that the members of that culture attribute to their practices, and to have access to those meanings often is not sufficient to inquire people through interviews, but it is necessary to look at those practices from their perspective. To do this, it is not strictly necessary to be an insider, but in my case this facilitated the process, and the ethnographic work strengthens it, through the observant participation in the different local contexts and the informal exchange of information.

Besides, my earlier socialisation to the group dynamics made me easier to understand the different positionings and the internal conflicts within the

community, and to know whom was better to address also for my research purposes (*cf.* Smyth and Holian 2008).

On the other hand, the insider position presents also some disadvantages: the first one consists in people's expectations on my research. About this, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) distinguish two models that represent two different predominant images that gatekeepers and sponsors can have of the researcher: the "expert" and the "critic". They describe these two figures in this way:

The model of the 'expert' often seems to suggest that the social researcher is, or should be, a person who is extremely well informed as to 'problems' and their 'solutions'. The expectation may be set up that the ethnographer seeking access is claiming such expertise, and is expecting to 'sort out' the organization or community. This view therefore leads directly to the second image, that of the 'critic'. Gatekeepers may expect the ethnographer to try to act as an evaluator (p. 60).

In particular, as an insider researcher, in my case the risk was that gatekeepers – but also interviewees in general – expected an exclusively celebratory representation of polyamory.

This consideration is directly related to the second of the potential disadvantages: the respondents' perception of my own expectations. For example, this expectation of a celebratory representation can lead people to adapt their narratives avoiding the most critical aspects of their stories that could paint polyamory in a bad light. Besides, if on the one hand my position reassured the interviewees that my gaze was not judgmental, on the other hand it could place them in a position in which they were afraid of not saying things in the "right" way according to the polyamorous theory or language, or in the way I expected. This dialogue with one of the interviewees (Rebecca, 24) reveals this fear, that led the interviewee to apologise for not knowing exactly the terminology:



R: They were a quartet, I don't know how to say...

N: Mh-mh.

R: Then the quartet... ehm, yes, I'm sorry I am... I don't have much... knowledge of the terms. Sometimes I get lost...

Another time after an interview I had a feedback from an interviewee about the fact that my non-verbal language leaked my disappointment in reaction to a statement made during the interview. In that case, I explained my point of view and the causes of my disappointment in a transparent manner. I made the decision to be transparent because I had the will to establish a relationship based on trust with the people interviewed and because I had the intention to balance, in this way, the imbalance of power that exists between interviewee and interviewer.

Another potential disadvantage regards the ethical issues related to the role of insider researcher, which can be synthesized by the question: is it legitimate to use information that I have accessed as an insider for my research purposes (*cf.* Smyth and Holian 2008)? Regarding this, it is also necessary to consider that for an insider researcher the risk related to that which can be perceived as a violation of ethics is bigger because this violation can have direct repercussions also on life outside the academy, such as marginalisation or exclusion from the group where they did research. An example of the issues I had access to as insider can be the internal conflicts that passed through the community in these years and that involved many people both on a personal level (also relating to manipulation and abuse) and their role on activism/associationism. About this, I decided to only mention these conflicts but avoiding talking about them thoroughly, because they represented a sensitive and delicate topic for many people to handle and because this kind of conflicts were not one of the central themes of my investigation.

Finally, another limitation of insider research is the risk that the analysis would be subject to biases. Anyway, post-modernist and feminist analysis

already advanced scepticism with respect to the supposed objectivity of the researcher's gaze (Spiro 1996). The researcher's gaze is always subjective and the difference lays in the way in which this subjectivity is unveiled and accounted for (Fabian 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Haraway 1988).

Another experience related to my position as an insider – which I did not personally perceived as a disadvantage but which could present some risks – is the curiosity of the interviewees regarding my personal relational situation. Often, in fact, I was asked for information of this kind before or after the interview or during the participation to the events. Personally, I considered the sharing of some of my personal information as an integral part of the informal interactions and it also helped me to mitigate the asymmetry of power between interviewee and interviewer.

Finally, I try to make some assumptions about how some of my personal characteristics that I listed in the introduction may have influenced the research. First of all, I reflected on how my role as an academic was perceived (Westhaver 2003) and I noticed that since I started doing research it has often happened to me, similarly to Deri (2011), to be perceived as a sort of relationship expert and people asked me for suggestions in this sense, even outside the polyamorous community. I have often pulled out of this expert role by offering, at most, suggestions as a person who experienced CANM relationships. As for being perceived as a woman, I have not noticed an evident greater ease in interviewing women (as opposed to what was highlighted e.g. by Oakley 1981). Probably this is also due to the fact that – as we have already seen – polyamorous people generally have a certain habit of reflecting on their relationships and talking about their experiences. Then, I believe that having high cultural resources but, at the same time, having grown up in a rural context has offered me skills to understand and relate to people with different backgrounds. On the contrary, my positioning as (trans)feminist may have been an obstacle for some people to express sexist positions or, especially for heterosexual men, to highlight imbalances of power in their relations with women. My positioning as activist

was not something that I talked about with all my interview partners but it is easily inferable from my Facebook profile, which I often used for recruiting.

### *3.2 Research design*

The idea of the project was led by a first broad research question:

*What is the definition of “love” of people who identify themselves as polyamorous or relationship anarchists in Italy, and which is their idea and practice of “intimate relationship”?*

I can say that this general research question has been maintained, but during the research I adopted a less dichotomous perspective regarding people who call themselves polyamorous and people who define themselves as relationship anarchists; in fact, I chose to adopt the more generic term of CANM. The overcoming of this dichotomy is not due to a failure to recognise the differences (above all political) between the two groups, but rather to the observation of the consistent presence of people who prefer not to define themselves in either of the two ways, or who totally refuse labels.

Regarding the sub-questions of the research, they have partially changed in the course of the fieldwork, partly due to the overcoming of this dichotomy that I have illustrated above, and partly to the decision to focus also on the political aspects. Then, in the final phase of the analysis, the different interpretative axes that I anticipated in the introduction were outlined. So, the final sub-questions were:

- 1) How do people who live CANM manage the conflict between individual autonomy and emotional needs? Is there a critical approach to romantic love in their narratives? And, if so, how is this criticism presented and managed in their affective practice? (See Chapter 4)

- 2) How do people who live CANM manage the potential conflict between rationality and emotions in their affective practice? (See Chapter 5)
- 3) What is the individual strategy/theoretical approach of the social actors? They are closer to an essentialist approach or a constructivist one? Can the community be considered a collective subject? And if so, what is the role of this subject? Is the possibility of changing the social structure a shared goal? And, if so, are there shared strategies for acting on the social structure? (See Chapter 6)

Getting to the research design, it was articulated in three work packages, that should not be seen as rigidly ordered in chronological order but often overlapped:

- 1) public discourses on CANM: first of all, I collected and reviewed guidelines and models provided by self-help books and international activists (through blogs and articles) and the material available in Italian in the two websites that are references for the Italian polyamorous community;
- 2) the study of online discourses and participant observation: first of all, I tried to be constantly updated on new posts on the two Facebook groups that are the main references for the Italian polyamorous community, especially those focusing on discourse around the concept of love and of boundaries of intimate relationships, and I collected the most interesting for my central questions; simultaneously, I made participant observation in different polyamorous events, attending meetings in all the cities with some continuity in the local groups;
- 3) face-to-face semi-structured interviews: I recruited people online, especially in the local groups, with the criteria of having (or having had) at least two

self-defined “intimate relationships” at the same time for at least six months and with the knowledge of all the people involved.

At the beginning I planned to include a fourth step, that was the compilation of diaries from part of a selected sub-sample of around ten people, but during the research I realised that the project was a bit too ambitious and I preferred to concentrate my energies on the analysis of the rich material already gathered.

This lack is directly linked to one of the limits of the research: that is, the fact that the only tool for studying the practices was the analysis of the narratives of the interviewees, that are clearly partial and filtered by their interpretation of facts at the time of the interview and/or the image they wanted to convey about themselves. Furthermore, speaking of limits, considering that the research was mainly configured as exploratory, many topics were discussed during the interviews, some of which would have deserved further study. I hope that at least some of these could be the subject of further investigations.

### *3.3 Context*

Concerning the socio-political context, Italy is a Southern European country strongly characterised by the Catholic imprint. Its welfare state has been classified as Mediterranean (or “familistic”) (Esping-Anderson 1990; Ferrera 1996): in this type of welfare regime – in which Spain, Portugal and Greece also fall into – it is the family that is conceived as the main source of assistance and care for its components (Leitner 2003; Naldini and Jurado 2013). These elements help to strengthen a conservative attitude towards family values and family structure, characterised by heteronormativity and mononormativity. This attitude is also reflected by the legislation that regulates partnering: also the Law n. 76/2016 (called “Cirinnà Law”) confirmed the hierarchy between couples formed by a woman and a man – who are the only ones that can have access to marriage

– and same-sex couples, to whom a specific formula for formalising the couple called civil union is reserved. Besides this, no recognition is provided outside the couple<sup>36</sup>. As already highlighted by Gusmano (2018b), “the heterosexual and monogamous marriage maintains its institutional and redistributive force, reproducing family solidarity and deleting other non-heterosexual support networks not based on the couple or on cohabitation” (p. 56, my translation).

Although the social context is not favourable, in the last ten years – at least – also in Italy people started talking about consensual non-monogamies. Among the bottom-up experiences in which these reflections about other forms of intimacy developed, Gusmano (*ibid.*) distinguishes between radical approach and experiential approach.

Regarding the radical approach, this type of reflection has been carried out mainly by the SomMovimento NazioAnale and other queer transfeminist collectives located throughout Italy. The SomMovimento is an informal network of queer transfeminist singularities and collectives from various parts of Italy that has been meeting since 2012. As we have already seen, the SomMovimento fanzine (2016) critically deals with the discourse of couple and love, combining the reflection on the material and emotional support of relationships not codified by our social context with the reflection on precariousness and exploitation within the capitalist system. The SomMovimento claims the enhancement of “other intimacies” and the redistribution of resources within these networks in an anti-assimilationist perspective, which therefore does not aim to widen civil rights to some categories of people but to perturbate the established social order.

On the side that Gusmano (2018b) called “experiential” we found the experiences of the polyamorous community, based on the creation of a network of support and exchange of ideas. I decided to use the term “community”,

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<sup>36</sup> The same law (Law of the 20 May 2016 n. 76, so-called “Cirinnà Law”) that disciplines same-sex civil unions regulates also the so-called “de facto co-habitation”, with a more flexible structure and accessible both from same-sex couples and couples formed by a woman and a man, but coupledom remains at the centre (for a more extensive comment see e.g. Vercellone 2018).

although partially contested also by the same members (as we will see in Chapter 6), because it seems to me that it synthesises better than others the importance of the shared values (partially different from those of the wider society) and one – though often contested – common identity. However, I use this term with a more fluid meaning than that of its origins, that includes also “virtual” communities born on the Internet and that have more blurring boundaries for their very nature.

The birth of the first nucleus of the polyamorous community in Italy can be dated November 2009, date of the foundation of the first group dedicated to polyamory on Facebook. The name of the group was “Poliamore Italia Polyamory Italy”, but then it changed in *Poliamore e altre non-monogamie etiche: discussione, confronto e supporto (Polyamory and other ethical non-monogamies: discussion, exchange of ideas and support)*.

In 2012 the transition from “virtual” to “real” took place: some people of the online group organised the first meeting in Milan, followed by Bologna, and then other Italian cities.

At the moment of my fieldwork the polyamorous community was mainly active in two national Facebook groups: the first one counted around 4000 members and the second, created in 2013 after an internal conflict and called *Policome: gruppo di confronto e supporto sul poliamore (Polyhow: group of exchange of ideas and support about polyamory)*, counts today 3775<sup>37</sup> members, but with a strong overlap of members with the other group. The first group has been archived on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2019, so at the moment the only active national group is the second one.

Furthermore, there are two websites that are reference points for the community: *poliamore.org*, online from 18<sup>th</sup> April 2012, and *rifacciamolamore.it* (let's remake love), born in 2013 after an internal secession within the editorial board of the first website.

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<sup>37</sup> Updated to 14/03/2020.

Outside the internet, there are regular meetings in different Italian cities (Milan, Rome, Turin, Padua, Tuscany among those with more continuity). The meetings may have different forms, from informal happy hours to thematic meetings in circle where participants exchange their ideas and experiences about different topics correlated to polyamory (e.g. management of jealousy, agreements within the relationships, relationships with the partner(s)' partner(s), consent, ...), but also workshops and “cuddle parties”.

In 2015 R.Eti. – Associazione per la promozione delle relazioni etiche non-monogame (Association for the promotion of the ethical non-monogamous relationships) – is born: it organises local meetings in Rome and, overall, the OpenCon Italy, that takes place once a year from 2016. The OpenCon is a conference (or, better, a “non-conference”, as specified in the site of the association) about polyamory and other ethical non-monogamies where the contents are proposed by the same participants.

### *3.4 Fieldwork*

I began the fieldwork officially in October 2017 and closed it in July 2018. I conducted observant participation and/or interviews in ten cities/regions (in chronological order): Turin, Rome, Bologna, Padua and Veneto region, Tuscany region, Milan, Genoa, Sardinia region (Cagliari and Sassari), Naples, Palermo<sup>38</sup>.

I began the tour in Turin because it was also the city of my domicile for the previous ten years, and I was also one of the organisers of the local polyamorous group for some years. As well, it is the city where I assisted to the greatest number of events through participant observation and I conducted the largest amount of interviews. Concerning the other cities, I spent an entire month

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<sup>38</sup> See Appendix 3 for a more detailed outline of my movements. Where I also indicate the region is because I conducted interviews and/or participant observation also in other places in the region during my stay. In the case of Tuscany region my domicile was in Florence but I always conducted interviews and participant observation in other cities of the region.



in Rome, Bologna, Florence (Tuscany region) and Palermo; three weeks in Padua; two weeks in Cagliari and one week in Naples. I could not spend time in Milan due to material conditions (I could not find affordable accommodation for the month I planned to stay there), but I attended the events and conducted interviews in Milan holding Turin as a base and going to Milan the same day. I spent one day in Genoa where I conducted an interview and I assisted at the local event in the evening. Finally, I conducted one of the last interviews in another city in Emilia-Romagna region.

The choice to spend a period in the different cities was important to extend the possibility of recruiting people for interviews, but also to establish informal relationships with people from the local group and/or people who lived in polyamorous relationships. These informal relationships can be considered for all intents and purposes part of the ethnographic work, although it is difficult to account for them formally.

As expected, it was relatively easy to enter the field due to my previous socialisation into the polyamorous community. In each city that I visited I previously contacted the local organisers on Facebook to ask them if I could publish an announcement on the local group to recruit the respondents and to anticipate them that I would participate at the local events in that period. All the organisers answered me affirmatively and many of them even enthusiastically.

I had some recruitment difficulties in the Southern regions, since the local groups with periodic events are few. There is a Facebook group named “Poliamore Sicilia & sud (Polyamory Sicily and South)”, but at the time of my fieldwork the events were a little more sporadic and not always in the same city due to the work nomadism of the people who organise them: the events are organised in Catania (Sicily), Cosenza (Calabria) and more occasionally in Naples (as in the case of the happy hour I attended) and are open to both the poly and kinky/BDSM communities. Besides, there is a Facebook page for the city of Bari and for the Puglia region, but in the period of my fieldwork the events were

very sporadic, also if in the moment I am writing (September 2019) they met monthly or even more frequently.

Regarding participant observation, I attended 22 events [see Figure 1], among which six thematic events of discussion in circle (five in Turin and one in Viareggio, Tuscany region); one workshop on the topic of consent (in Rome); one cuddle party (in Padua); six happy hours (in Milan, Rome, Padua, Viareggio, Genoa, Naples); one informal meeting of some people of the polyamorous circle in Bologna. I participated at two of these events (one in Turin and one in Milan) before of the beginning of the fieldwork, taking ethnographic notes for an exercise for Professor G. Semi's course, but they are to all effects part of my ethnographic material. However, the boundary between informal interactions and "real" ethnographic work is even more nuanced in the case of an insider perspective, and I can say that all my previous experiences of participations at polyamorous events or of interactions with people living in multiple consensual affective relationships have been preparatory and essential to the development of my ethnographic work (*cf.* Lobo 2013).

Concerning more specifically the organisation of the observative work, I valued that it was feasible to take ethnographic notes during the events of discussion in circle, but not during all the other events, because it seemed to me that it would have been too alienating and would have taken spontaneity to the interactions. In fact, in some circumstances (for example during a happy hour) the use of the notebook could have activated reactions that Paulhus (1984) described as "social desirability" (*cf.* Semi 2010). So, in all other cases, I took notes on the event just back home or on the way home, in the case of return by public transport. In the case in which I took notes during the event, instead, I anticipated my intention first to the organisers and then, having had their consent, to all the participants before the start of the circle, specifying that before each of their interventions they could asked me not to take note of what they were about to say (however this never happened). In the other cases, I always presented myself (also) as a researcher and I paid attention not to report personal

information that I had learned during informal interactions or, in general, outside of the interviews.

Coming to the interviews, the recruitment of people inside the community followed three channels:

- online, through recruitment announcements published on the local polyamorous groups (normally two or three weeks previously to my planned trip to that city) and through direct contacts with people who had ideas or experiences that I considered useful to diversify my sample<sup>39</sup>;
- in person, during the participation at local meetings;
- through snowball sampling (see e.g. Noy 2008), asking interviewed people if they knew other people that responded to my recruitment criteria.

To avoid the risk of a too homogenous sample, I also tried to reach people who were not insiders of the polyamorous community. For example, I activated my informal networks to reach people in communities who had some intersections with the polyamorous one, such as queer spaces, kinky/BDSM/sex-positive communities, LGBT+ groups.

I tried to diversify my sample above all on the basis of the following variables: number of partners, network density (how much tight the relationship between partners' partners is), proximity to the polyamorous community, political/apolitical approach. At a certain point in my research, considering the difficulty of reaching people who lived with more than one partner, I started to specify that I would give priority to this specific profile. However, I was able to

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<sup>39</sup> This evaluation was made on the basis of the information I had for direct knowledge of the person or because they had shared this information online. However, I was always cautious in contacting people with whom I had never had a direct interaction because on polyamorous groups it is expressly forbidden to contact people in private. This activity was therefore very limited and, in all cases where it was possible, I first asked publicly their consent to contact them privately.

interview only two people who lived with more than one partner (or with a partner and the metapartner) and, moreover, the two were partners with each other. However, I believe that this difficulty can also be considered as a result.

I conducted in total 62 face-to-face semi-structured interviews, but regarding four of them I realised only during the interview that they did not meet all the criteria I had requested to participate, for different reasons: two of them never had two relationships at the same time, although they had relationships with a partner who had other partners at the same time; another person did not respond to the criterion of transparency for all the people involved, in fact only one of the partners was aware of the situation; and another person cohabited with his former partner, the new partner of his former partner and their 3 children, but he did not actually had multiple relationships at the same time, even though he had had some brief relationships over time. At the end of the fieldwork, I decided to exclude the first two from the analysis but to keep the last two, since they presented some peculiar characteristics that could be interesting for comparison with other situations examined in the sample. Besides, one of the interviewees did not strictly meet the minimum time criterion (six months) because one of her relationships was in progress since only few months, but I decided to be more flexible with this criterion.

Among these 60 respondents, 30 of them proposed themselves voluntary after reading my announcement on Facebook groups, but 12 already knew me in person (one just online, 11 also in person). For the remaining 30 people I proposed the interview to, I already knew in person 18 of them while I proposed the interview to other four of them during the participation to a local event, or few days after. Then, I contacted online three other people, and reached through the method of the snowball sampling the remaining five people.

The interviews had a biographical approach (Berger and Berger 1972), with a specific focus on the narratives correlated to the discovery and the practice of CANM. During the interviews we spoke about the following topics:

- definition of love and relationships;
- definition of sexual-romantic orientation (and gender identity in some cases);
- CANM: instinct or choice?
- polyamorous community;
- coming out and visibility;
- politics.

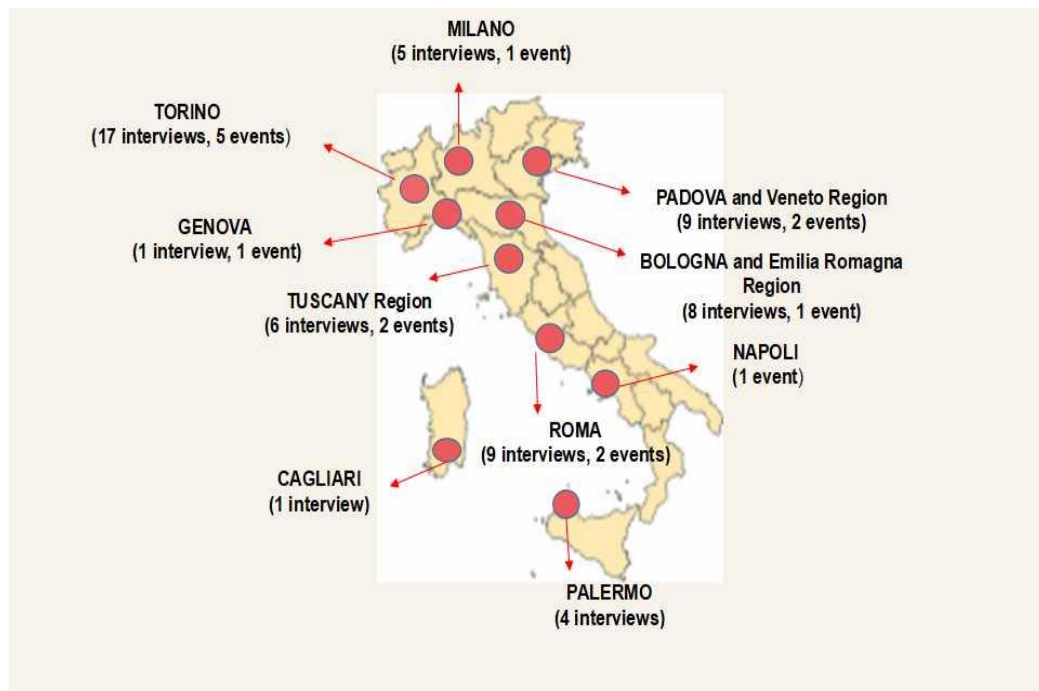
In all cases I asked the interviewee to choose the place for the interview, with the sole conditions that it was a place where one could have privacy and that it was not too noisy. When this was possible, I also proposed the possibility to receive them in the house where I stayed in that period. In total, 24 people chose a café, 20 received me in their house, four people prefer to visit me in my house, five people chose other public spaces (three locations of LGBT associations, one a library, one a squat), and four other private spaces (two the house of a partner, two their office/workplace), three prefer to stay open air (two in a park, one in a square).

All the interviews were audio-recorded with my mobile phone, asking first orally the consent of the interviewees. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two and a half hours, but most of them lasted around an hour and a half. For all the people I will quote in the dissertation, the names have been replaced by fictitious ones and all identifiable characteristics were changed, deleted or made more general (e.g. “Piedmont” became “a Northern region”) to protect their identities.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim before proceeding with the analysis.

### 3.5 Sample description

Beginning with the geographical areas [see Figure 1], I conducted 17 interviews in Turin, five in Milan, nine in the Veneto region, one in Genoa, nine in the Emilia-Romagna region, six in the Tuscany region, nine in Rome, one in Sassari (Sardinia) and four in Palermo, but among these last people one person lives in Calabria, another lives in another Sicilian city and another is originally from Palermo but normally lives in a city in Centre Italy for study/work reasons.



**Figure 1**

Concerning the age, at the moment of the interview the respondents were aged between 23 and 69, with an average age of 35,9 and a median of 33,5. Divided by age groups, six people have less than 25 years, 29 are in the age group 26-35, 15 have an age between 36 and 45, eight between 46 and 55, one between 56 and 65 and one between 66 and 75.

Then, regarding gender identity, there are nine people who do not strictly identify in gender binarism (one agender AMAB<sup>40</sup>, five genderfluid: two AMAB and three AFAB<sup>41</sup>, two transgender non-binary AFAB and one “non cis” AMAB), 25 women (one intersex and trans AMAB and one trans AMAB; 23 cis) and 26 men (one trans and 25 cis). Coming to their sexual/romantic orientation, nine are homosexuals (two lesbian and seven gay), 24 bisexual or pansexual, three heteroflexible, three questioning/confused, one asexual “queer-romantic<sup>42</sup>”, 19 heterosexual and one prefers to not define themselves but if they have to make a choice, they prefer to identify as “political lesbian”, because they think that their political path is more important to define themselves than the gender of the people with whom they had sexual and affective experiences<sup>43</sup>.

Regarding their self-definition about relational orientation/model, 38 identify as polyamorous (but some of them use the term to identify the relationship model that they are following rather than an identity); one person uses either the term polyamorous or ethical non-monogamous; two people use either polyamorous or non-monogamous; another person reports oscillating between polyamory and relationship anarchy; another respondent prefers to say that she decided to have polyamorous relationships but refuses the polyamorous identity; another says that she lives ethical non-monogamies; then, six identify as relationship anarchists; one uses either the term relationship anarchist or polyamorous depending on the people with whom he is speaking; three people prefer to use a more generic term such as “non-monogamous”; one person prefers

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<sup>40</sup> This expression identifies a person that has been Assigned at the Male sex At Birth.

<sup>41</sup> Assigned Female at Birth.

<sup>42</sup> The term is meant to describe a relational orientation that defies the divide between romantic partnerships and friendships. She uses it as a synonym of “queerplatonic”, more widespread, even if used usually to identify a type of relationship more than a relational orientation.

<sup>43</sup> For a reflection about the meaning to name themselves “political lesbian” living consensual non-monogamous relationships see Wandrei (2018).

do not define her relational orientation in other ways than “queer”; three do not use any label; and, finally, two people have monogamy as ideal, but they are living or lived CANM relationships.

The configuration of their relationships is very heterogeneous: four are (or have been in recent times) in a triad<sup>44</sup>, 20 in a non-hierarchical<sup>45</sup> V<sup>46</sup>, 7 in a hierarchical<sup>47</sup> V, 18 in a situation of non-hierarchical polyamory with more than two people, four in a situation of hierarchical polyamory with more than two people, and seven are relationship anarchists.

Concerning the educational level, three have a PhD, 37 a Master Degree, five a Bachelor Degree, 13 completed high school and only two people have a lower educational level. Professionally, 24 are employees, 20 freelancers, seven are BA or MA students, six are unemployed, two people are doing a PhD and one is retired.

Regarding their housing situation, from the information gathered during the interviews I can say that 20 people live alone; 11 with friends or roommates (but one of them had previously an experience of co-habitation with two partners); ten live with a partner; five with their family of origin; other five people live with a partner and one child (in one case is their biological child but not of the partner, in one case is the biological child of the partner, and in three cases is the biological child of both, but two of them are married to each other); three people live with their child/children; two live with a partner and other roommates; one with two partners and her child; one with a partner, their child

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<sup>44</sup> A triad is a polyamorous relationship composed of three people, in which each of the three people is sexually and/or emotionally involved with the other two members of the triad.

<sup>45</sup> The configuration is non-hierarchical when there is not a distinction between primary and secondary partner(s).

<sup>46</sup> A V is a polyamorous relationship involving three people, in which one person is romantically and/or sexually involved with two partners who are not romantically and/or sexually involved with each other.

<sup>47</sup> The configuration is hierarchical when there is a distinction between primary and secondary partner(s).



and a metapartner; one lives with his former partner and, finally, one lives with his former partner, the new partner of his former partner and the three children of the new couple. It would have been interesting to take note of the type of housing situation (whether owned, mortgaged, rented, squatted, etc.) also to investigate the class dimension. Not having registered it can be considered one of the weak points of this research, as well as not having investigate more on the class dimension in general.

Speaking about children, 12 of the interviewees have at least one child (three of them have two – two of these are partners and have two children each from previous relationships). Four people are raising children in a polyamorous context, but just two with co-habitation, and two of them are married to each other.

Besides, 13 people are local organisers or administrators of one of the two main Facebook groups (or have been in the recent past). Then, some of them have strong connection with other communities: ten belong to LGBT+ associations or groups, eight are very close to the BDSM community, seven are queer/transfeminist or feminist activists, and three people have strong connections with more than one of these communities.

Finally, all my interviewees are white and Italian.

Trying to provide a brief commentary of these sociodemographic characteristics, we can say that, first of all, most of my respondents are between the first and the second adult age. Regarding gender identity and sexual-romantic orientation, it seems to be a tendency to overcome dichotomies (I will elaborate the analysis on this topic in Chapter 4). It can also be important to highlight that most people are non-hierarchical in their relational configuration, i.e. do not have a partner who they identify as primary. Coming to their socio-economic status, the people interviewed have on average middle-high or high cultural resources but around 1/3 of them have precarious job conditions. Then, 1/3 lives alone and in general very few seem to cohabit with more than one partner or to raise children in a polyamorous context for the moment. Regarding other communities,

my sample seems to confirm the overlapping with other communities, such as LGBT+, BDSM, transfeminist queer and feminist.

The last point of my results (i.e. the fact that all my interviewees – as well as almost all the people present at the events – were white) deserves a separate discussion. Three moments were particularly important to start a reflection about this point: the presentation of some preliminary results of my project at the Slam Seminar (organised by the nucleus DECIDe) at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (Portugal) (commentator: Gaia Giuliani), and the informal exchange and the reading of a draft chapter of the PhD dissertations of two friends and colleagues (*cf.* Granelli 2019; Nessi 2019). These occasions aided me to “decolonise” my gaze (Barlet 2000) about this result, starting to consider it a data that speak about the race exclusivity of the polyamorous community (*cf.* Chapter 2) – but the same discourse can also be made about queer spaces in Italy. More generally, my stay in Coimbra for my six-months doctoral internship (September 2018-February 2019) aided me to gain greater awareness of the fact that some theories I was using (and some of the polyamorous theory) display a rather racialised concept of modernity and late/post-modernity, presenting the West as the motor of post-modernisation. Thanks to these dialogues, I tried to expand my bibliography, not limiting it to authors of the Anglo-Saxon area, as well as not limiting it to academic production, but including materials produced by collectives and/or activists. However, I feel this as a work in progress.

### *3.6 Analysis*

Data collected had been coded using the data management software application Dedoose. I organised the analysis of the material using these codes and sub-codes:

- self-description:

- age;
- character, mood, etc.;
- city/region;
- activism;
- hobbies, interests;
- occupation;
- relationships;
  
- gender, sexual-romantic orientation, relational orientation:
  - gender;
  - sexual-romantic orientation;
  - relational orientation;
  
- discovery of polyamory:
  - practice first;
  - theory first;
  
- relationships:
  - ideal;
  - changes;
  - sharing;
  - care;
  - definition;
  - agreements;
  - difficulties;
  - partners of partners;
  - past:
    - monogamous;
    - non-monogamous;

- present;
- relations with metapartners;
- sex;
- timing;
  
- love:
  - definitions:
    - love/friendships;
    - to fall in love/to love;
  - changes;
  
- jealousy:
  - felt;
  - suffered;
  
- polyamorous community:
  - live;
  - online groups;
  
- other groups:
  - LGBT+;
  - BDSM;
  - feminism;
  - queer transfeminism;
  
- society:
  - coming out;
  - public events;

- poly families;
- legal recognition;
- other.

The creation of the codes followed partially the themes introduced by the interview questions, but partially were constructed on the basis of the recurrent themes that emerged from the fieldwork.

Then, I analysed each code separately with the help of schemes and, in the case of the definitions of love and relationships, also of conceptual maps on A4 sheets which were followed by further schematisations.

For the definition of love the conceptual map had these entries:

- complicity;
- intellectual attraction;
- sexuality;
- intimacy;
- care;
- to sustain;
- “make my world better”;
- to let free;
- spontaneity/authenticity;
- political project;
- to want the good for the other;
- vulnerability;
- symbolic meaning;
- definitional crisis;

- many loves;
- transformations;
- love/friendship (they make this difference?)
- love/fall in love (they make this difference?)
- romantic love.

From some of these entries I created the typology that I present at the beginning of Chapter 4 to better explain the variability of the narratives around love. Some other entries were useful to support reflections developed during the rest of the chapter.

Regarding the definition of relationships, the conceptual map had these entries:

- continuity;
- sharing;
- complicity;
- consent;
- compersion;
- care;
- sex;
- people to say goodnight/good morning;
- to begin (a relationship)... (what they need?);
- projects;
- different to love;
- against amatonormativity;

- against relationship escalator;
- transformation relationship;
- fluidity.

Similarly to the conceptual map of the definition of love, some of these entries were useful to create a typology for the definition of relationship I present in section 4.2, and some others were useful for the reflections I develop in the rest of Chapter 4.

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter I tried to reconstruct the steps of my research and to reflect about them. First of all, I started from an account of my metatheoretical and methodological influences (critical theory, constructionism, interactionism). I also reported my attempt to re-balance the stance between agency and structure, at first much more focused on the actors' agency: I tried to reconsider the structural limits on personal choices and problematising a liberal notion of sexual agency. Then, I made an effort to offer an account of my role as insider researcher, highlighting advantages (possibility to overcome gatekeepers, earlier socialisation to community languages and perspectives and to group dynamics) and disadvantages (interviewers' expectations and perception of my own expectations, ethical issues, risk of biases) of this position. I also attempted to reflect on how my personal characteristics influenced the research.

Then, I retraced the steps of my research design construction, explaining how progressing with the research I overcame the dichotomies between polyamorous people and relationship anarchists and I decided to focus also on political differences. Subsequently, I itemised the three work packages (public discourses, study of online discourses and participant observation, face-to-face semi-structured interviews), as well as some of the limits: the fact that the

only tool for studying the practices were the interviews and the fact that many topics were discussed, to the detriment of the deepening.

My aim was also to socially contextualising the research: Italy is a country with a familistic welfare regime shaped by heteronormativity and mononormativity. However, in the last decade some reflections started about consensual non-monogamies, overall around two nucleus: the transfeminist queer movement and the polyamorous community.

I also accounted for my fieldwork experience, that began in October 2017 and ended in July 2018 touching almost all the Italian cities with a local polyamorous group with some continuity, where I did participant observation and interviews.

Then, I reported my sampling choices and the characteristics of my sample: for the most part aged between 26 and 45, with a tendency towards the overcome of dichotomies both for gender identity and sexual-affective orientation, mostly non-hierarchical in their relationship configuration, on average with middle-high or high cultural resources but around 1/3 of them with precarious job conditions, 1/3 lives alone and in general very few seem to cohabit with more than one partner or to raise children in a polyamorous context, many belong also to other communities (LGBT+, BDSM, transfeminist queer and feminist), all Italian and white.

Finally, regarding the analysis, all the data had been coded using the data management software application Dedoose. I organised the material in codes and sub-codes, and subsequently in conceptual maps and/or schematisation to arrive to typologies. The results of the analysis will be present in the next three chapters.



## Chapter 4

### Theories of CANM: many loves, different loves(?)

*If we think about cinematography, about love narratives, they are... they are always the same,  
they are always uniform concerning the timing — right? (...)  
[E]ven if you do not recognise yourself [in these narratives] you feel their pressure  
—don't you?  
You think that relationships have to be in that way, and... and then you finish (...) with...  
contaminate yourself with this terrible idea.  
And then, at the end, it leads to serial monogamy — isn't it?  
Start relationships. End them. End them. End them. Re-start them and end them  
when they run out. And to get tired.*

(Rachele, 26)

While in Chapter 1 I presented dominant theories around love and intimacy developed in Western societies, in this chapter I will report and discuss some of the findings of my empirical research around these issues. In doing this, I will try to keep in mind two main areas of reflection. The first one is: how do my respondents manage the conflict between individual autonomy and emotional needs (*cf.* Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995)? And the second: is there a critical approach to romantic love in their narratives? And, if so, how is this criticism presented and managed in the affective practice?

In the first section I concentrate on the definition of the feeling of love, trying to organise the presentation of the different definitions into an analytical classification. In the second section I report some results about the definition of affective/intimate relationship. The third section focuses on the narratives of changes in the affective approach before and after the discovery of CANM. The fourth section is dedicated to the narrative of blurring the boundaries (of sexual and emotional orientation, gender identity and intimate relationships) that is a recurrent topic in my interview partners' discourses. Finally, in the fifth section I concentrate on the doubts, the contradictions between theory and practice and some critical issues.

#### 4.1 (Re?)defining Love

From the aggregation of the entries of the conceptual map that I have listed in the last section of the previous chapter, I came to the creation of a typology with the aim of synthesize the variety of my respondents' definitions of love.

The typology consists first of all of three categories which cover almost all the answers. Then, there are three other categories that can be defined as residual because they cover a little minority of answers. The three main categories are:

- *ego-centred*: definition that put at the centre the feelings of the respondent;
- *partner-centred*: definition that put at the centre the (potential) partner(s)';
- *relationship-centred*: definition that put at the centre the relationship between two people who love each other.

The residual categories are:

- *symbol-centred*: definition that put at the centre the symbolic meaning of love, that is it do not takes into consideration the feelings or behaviours related to the act of loving but rather what the person want to demonstrate by saying "I love you";
- *blemish-centred*: definition that put at the centre negative or not-always-positive aspects linked to love;
- *society-centred*: definition that put at the centre the relationship with the society.

Obviously, this distinction is a simplification, as often the answers of the interviewees were articulated and nuanced and, accordingly, with many overlaps between the three main categories. Regarding the residual categories, just the society-centred category overlaps with another (the ego-centred), while the other two do not overlap with anyone of the others.

The typology is based on 39 answers, considering that 21 respondents did not directly answer the question, or their answer focused more on changes in the definition, a topic that I will discuss in the third section.

Trying to get a closer look at the contents of the answers, first of all just one person gave me an answer that was totally ego-centred (Paolo, 41): “I love a person when I realise that their presence in my world makes it better and they cannot be replaced with another [person]”. Then, Michele’s (28) definition combines ego-centrism and society-centrism, specifically he showed concern for how the people around see the relationship: “[A] combination of the need to be physically close to a person (...) and to be emotionally close to them, and to be seen also by others as emotionally and physically close”.

The answers of Manuel (32), Eleonora (32) and Morena (37) combined, instead, partner-centrism and ego-centrism. Manuel’s answer is connected with the dimension of care and to “take into account in an important way (...) the words [of the other]”, but the dimension of care is also ego-centred, in fact he highlights the fact that love is also connected with the desire to take care of oneself. Eleonora, instead, focused on the concept of freedom: love to her is to leave the partner free, but she demands the same from the person she is in a relationship with. Finally, Morena says that when she loves she donates herself completely, but she demands the same intensity from the partner.

Emilia’s (30) answer situates in the intersection between the three main categories (ego, partner and relationship): at the beginning her definition was very similar to Eleonora’s one, but then she added more relationship-centred elements and, finally, she concluded: “If I had to give a simpler definition, [love] is precisely the desire to grow together”.

Other people (Enzo, 60; Sam, 37 and Pietro, 30) combined ego-centred elements with relationship-centred ones. In particular, Enzo thinks that love is “to feel good” in a relationship, and he described it as a sense of individual wellbeing, but also as a wellbeing of the relationship. Sam’s answer focused on the importance of having a “deep emotional intimacy” but for them love is also “the desire to make yourself vulnerable in front of someone”. I will speak about Pietro’s answer at the end of the section.

The partner-centred category contains the largest number of answers and it is the category with less overlap with other categories. Going into more detail, we can say that two people (Mario, 42 and Federica, 27) think that love is “to care for the other’s wellbeing”, or to feel a sense of protection for the other or to worry about the other; while Luigi (40) said that love is “to donate without demanding anything”. Other three people (Silvia, 36; Fabio, 37; Patrizia, 23) focused the definition of love in the dimension of care<sup>48</sup>, both emotional and/or material (“to be there for the other”, “to be a space for discussion and support”, preparing food). Besides, Barbara (38) and Cinzia (32) gave priority to the dimension of respect of the personal freedom: for them to love corresponds to not wanting to change the other person, leaving them free even if this means having to renounce to their presence. In addition, for some people these different dimensions overlap (always within the partner-oriented category) because they are equally important in their definition of love: for two people (Alberto, 34 and Marzia, 25) love is both to care for the other’s wellbeing and to let them free; while for other three people (Elena, 28; Laura, 26 and Martina, 31) this dimension of freedom overlaps with the dimension of pragmatical care and for another one (Anna, 53) with the capacity to donate oneself to the other.

Then, other answers are placed in the intersection between the partner-centred and the relationship-centred categories: Marta (42) defined love as to take

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<sup>48</sup> This definition differs from the previous one because in this case the dimension of care has a more pragmatic meaning.

care and to be accomplices; Valerio (42) as a mix of things, that includes chemical attraction (that is independent both from physical and intellectual attractions), sexual compatibility, complicity (that can also be at first sight) and, finally, “the true knowledge, the moment you really get inside a person” that it is accompanied with a real concern with that person and the desire of their wellbeing; complicity was also mentioned by Gabriele (27), who added the dimension of freedom and a reference to the duration of the feeling of love, despite the transformations of the relationships; Roberta (27) mentioned the desire to take care of the other people but also the desire of sharing; finally, Greta (26) defined love as the “sensation (...) of strong emotional contact”, but also “to want the supreme wellbeing for the other person”.

Taking into consideration the people that gave me a definition that focuses just on the relationship, they concentrated on different dimensions, with some overlaps: Serena (28) gave priority to the desire of strong emotional, physical and mental connection and deep sharing; this dimension of the emotional connection (defined as “energetic strength”, precisely) is also present in Rachele’s (26) definition, but for her love is also “a political project”, particularly in the shared desire to overcome monogamy—and here come back the idea of complicity that we have already seen below; also Nubia (25) values the aspect of sharing, both ideas, values and interests, and experiences, as doing things together, spending the holidays together, and so on; also for Carlo (48) this dimension is important, but he also highlighted the importance to accept the transformations of the relationship (as for example the decline of the sexual desire); along these lines, Edoardo (25) defined love as “that partnership you build together over time” and Davide (33) as “a complex of feelings, situations, people (...) aimed at feeling good together”.

Regarding the symbol-centred category, three people (Emanuele, 34; Claudio, 28 and Attilio, 42), starting from the assumption that the definition of love is highly subjective and differs from person to person, explained that the

expression “I love you” has mainly a symbolic meaning, and that people use it to validate their relationships or to reassure the partner. For example, Claudio (28) said:

[T]he problem of the [expression] “I love you” is that you are never saying something (...) that is true or false, it is neither one or the other thing, that is an Austin-thing, “doing things with the words”, that is you are producing an effect of discourse through a declaration.

Coming to the blemish-centred category, Irene (32) concentrates on the discontinuity of the feeling:

[M]y concept of love is actually a concept of a thing that is not always there, as I do not feel constantly love for my partners, I feel more as a strong emotion that emerges in specific moments or something that binds me to the people that I love, but that is not a constant in every time.

Then, Alessio (33) emphasised the necessity to give a definition of love not too mawkish:

[T]here is also the idea that... the mess is also part of the love, there, is not... certainly is not the *Mulino Bianco*<sup>49</sup> family... rather... that is, it is blood and shit, even, the love. That is, in the sense... iiiiii... inside there are also things ... bad things, dramatic things, sometimes, they do not have to stay outside love, if unfortunately they happen to be inside it...

(...) [I]t is like sex [that is] dirty only if done right... love is dirty only if done right, I would say... it is disturbing – ok? – that is, it is a stuff I haven't made peace with yet, but love is not reassuring, love is deeply disturbing – ok?

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<sup>49</sup> The *Mulino Bianco* is a firm of bakery products, snacks and biscuits owned by Barilla. In Italy, the company's commercials are famous for using the stereotype of the happy nuclear family.

Regarding the two people who have monogamy as relationship ideal despite their actual practice, Luigi (40) defined love as a free gift, as we have already seen, adding that in his conception love is “two hearts and a hut”; the other person (Pietro, 30) defined love as care in a very ego-centred way: “For me [love] is going home and being... happy to find someone who has been waiting for you all day and has even prepared you dinner”, but he also added a strong reference to sharing: “And to share... pros and cons of every... every event, every situation, the... goodness of the relationship or not”.

In general, although their definition of love is mainly plural and blurred, many people continued to adhere to the narrative that differentiate between “to fall in love” and “to love”, also if some of them identified the phase of the “falling in love” with the term NRE (New Relationship Energy)<sup>50</sup> of the polyamorous jargon. Basically, many interviewees described them as chronologically and qualitative different phases, identifying the phase of the “falling in love” as the first and less rational part of the encounter with a person with whom one would like to start a romantic relationship with and the phase of “love” as a phase of greater stability, more peaceful and without emotional peaks. Nevertheless, five people (Valeria, 35; Rachele, 26; Paola, 51; Laura, 26; Adele, 29) questioned the perfect linearity of this path, seeing the distinction as much more blurred. Rachele (26) explained this well:

I have always had the impression, even before reading the relationship escalator theories (...), that it was... an exaggerated typing, this of distinguishing phases, one in which one is more... eeh... one in which one is more separated, (...) more individual, and then one, instead, in which one is more an amalgam... [with the partner] but the fire is already down, and then one just collaborates, one becomes ally... I do not like it at all. I recognise that there are moments of fire and... of exaggerated involvement... but I liked to notice over time that moments of enthusiasm are not just... confined to the initial moment in which one is—as

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<sup>50</sup> See Glossary in Appendix 1 for a definition.

they say—”in love”. That is, that enthusiasm, that urgency to love each other, in my opinion can be established in a lot of... in many different moments, even after 3 years, 8 years, 100 years, it is not as if there was that... that is, I do not see, I do not find in my life that moment when it burns you, and then that moment when you settle on paces more...

In Rachele’s perception the two phases are not at all linear, but they can alternate endlessly and unpredictably.

In addition to the two people who call themselves ideally monogamous —which gave me not surprisingly a definition of love that remains within the monogamous frame—two other people emphasised the dichotomy true love/not love, aimed to point out the risk that polyamory is used as an excuse by people who do not intend to have committed relationships. In these discourses we can glimpse signs of that polynormativity of which I spoke in Chapter 2. Interestingly, these two people form part of the same polyamorous family and do not have a strong connection with the wider polyamorous community.

Finally, just one person (Fabio, 37) told me that he thought he had never fallen in love, but he differentiated falling in love from loving, for what in fact he gave me a definition, as we saw above.

To summarise, I can notice that the ego-centred definitions are much often accompanied by partner-centred definitions, where love it is seen as equal, a giving compensated by receiving. Then, the exclusively partner-centred definitions are much more large in number, followed by the relationship-centred ones and by definitions that combine partner-centred and relationship-centred elements. I can also add that even where elements emerge that can be traced back to individualistic drives (such as the focus on personal autonomy and freedom from constraints) these are often either directed to the partner (“to love is to leave free”), or they are accompanied by a desire for reciprocity (to allow each other freedom in the relationship) or, more often, the respondent emphasise at the same time also other elements such as the desire to grow together, care, or complicity.



There are also numerous responses that highlight the importance of intimacy, a strong emotional connection, care and complicity. All these elements seem to approach the conception of relationship that Giddens (1992) called pure relationship; only one answer, on the other hand, highlights the elements of suffering in the feeling of love, a definition that seems to be closer to the definition of romantic love that emerged in Chapter 1 (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Herrera Gómez 2010). Then, most interviewees differentiate “to love” from “to fall in love”, but for some people the distinction is not so linear. Finally, four people showed a definition of love that rigidly differentiates love/not love, but two of them have monogamy as relational ideal.

#### *4.2 (Re?)defining intimate relationships*

The definitions around intimate relationship present many overlays with the definition of the concept of love that I have describe above. Nevertheless, there are some aspects that deserve to be mentioned. As well as for the definition of love, the reflections below emerged from the conceptual map mentioned at the end of Chapter 3.

First of all, just one person (Roberta, 27) seems to give importance to the aspect of making life projects together to define a relationship as intimate/affective; though at least another person (Edoardo, 25), as we have seen in the section above, highlighted the dimension of commitment in defining love. Besides, other four people explained that the dimension of continuity is important to defining a relationship. For example, Silvia (36) said: “With the term ‘relationship’ I mean the person to whom you give the ‘Good morning!’ and the ‘Good night!’ every day”, and Irene (32) mentioned aspects as sleeping together or spending the weekend together. Then, Roberto (35) recognised that the dimension of continuity/stability has a role to label relationships, but as well he recognised that sometimes the evolution or not of a relationship depends on exogenous elements:

When I talk about Silvia and T. there is a very strong continuity, and somehow a decision to put these relationships... eeh... more in the picture? To be more... a little more attentive to these relationships. Eeeeh... so, more or less this. Well... and then there's the big problem – in my opinion it's a problem – that you find yourself, at a certain point, in a relationship, not... it's not bad, it's that at a certain point there are a series of... of external situations that have defined the fact that that relationship is a little more “relationship” than other relationships. I'll give you an example: a person who lives in another city, with a life very different from mine. We love each other so much, we are very different in many things, the situation is that she is always traveling, basically however, she is beyond the sea... aaaand... and I don't. Or... and I have little time in another sense. Ehmmmm... it happens that we are not in a relationship, in some way, in that sense, because not, not... it is not... the external situation does not allow us to do it.

The interviewee seems to reflect on the concept of “choice”, concluding that the “choice” to prioritise some relationships compared to others often depends also from external limits and not purely from his feelings.

Another aspect that I think is important for the aims of the research, is the fact that two people (Marzia, 25; Davide, 33) made a clear distinction between the definition of love and the definition of intimate/affective relationship, clarifying that not always the two things coincide:

[M]ore often than not, love – that is, the feeling in itself – is not necessarily sufficient to create a good situation because love can develop, there can also be very strong feelings of mutual affection and so on, but people may be incompatible (Davide, 33).

Similarly to Roberto, Davide explained that the choice to give continuity to a relationship do not depends only from mutual feelings but as well, in this case, from compatibility. Other people mentioned crucial aspects of the polyamorous theory. For example, Alessandra (43) highlighted the importance

of compersion, emphasising how knowing that their partner is spending happy time with other people is a source of true happiness for them.

Again Alessandra, but also Morena (37), gave importance to transparency in relationships. In general, many people seem to evaluate the dimension of sharing: intellectual (Manuel, 32), of the everyday life (Alessandra, 43; Attilio, 42), material (Enzo, 60; Davide, 33), of experiences (Roberta, 27), and also sharing and support for the other relationships (Emilia, 30; Attilio, 42). Regarding this last aspect, Attilio said:

[W]e often happened to tell each other the experiences up to the minute details... surely, up to the minute details we tell ourselves how we feel about other people, that is, it is one thing... that we feel we owe to the other, but, apart from owing, that is... I don't... I don't feel obligated to do it, I simply... spontaneously do it, as I share other thoughts that concern my life, it's a thing... of mine, they are [part of] my deep thoughts, they are [part of] my deep feelings, and I normally share them with people I think are close to me. I mean, it's not a rule, let's say it's a... a very spontaneous thing.

In Attilio's words, sharing details about feelings for other people is a spontaneous things that happen just because of the emotional closeness to the partner. Other people specified that sharing should not become a device to control the other person. This delicate balance between the need to share and the need to avoid control, as well as the mediation between different needs in this regard, is a recurrent theme within the polyamorous communities, both in online groups and during live events dedicating to discussion and support. For example, this is an exchange that took place during one of the events:

M.: the question of time is very serious for me. It must be accepted that for some people dedicating themselves to the other person is the top priority; for the other person it is difficult because you find yourself having to justify yourself. For me it is more stimulating if the other person also has other interests, even when I am with the other person, if she does something else I like to watch her while

she does it, it fascinates me. Socially, however, it is much more accepted the person who expects time from the other person rather than the one who wants spaces only for themselves (...).

E.: the theme of preserving one's own space is a strong theme with my partner: he does not feel the need to go out much like I do, so it is more important for him to have his spaces at home, for now we do not live together and we're fine; in the past I risked emotional dependency, so I see positive stimulation to cultivate one's own spaces.

These narratives highlight the risk of emerging conflicts around the negotiation of the different needs of autonomy and open a potential infinite debate on the concepts of “emotional dependency” and “personal space”.

To synthesise the results obtained around the definition of intimate relationship, I can say that the dimension of long-term planning is not a priority in defining intimate relationships for my interviewees. Though, some people recognised the dimension of continuity/stability as important to label relationships. Some people added that the choice to prioritise some relationships rather than others does not depend exclusively from the mutual feelings, but also from external factors (such as the geographical distance and the lifestyles) and the compatibility (sometimes love does not coincide with the beginning of an intimate relationship). Other peculiarities of polyamorous relationships emerged from the fieldwork: the mention of compersion (the feeling of happiness that come from knowing that the partner is spending time with other people) and the emphasis on the concept of transparency and sharing in general. In this regard, however, other people warn against the risk that the urgency of sharing could become a control tool. Certainly, the issue of the balance between personal space and the sharing of physical and emotional spaces, as well as the issue of negotiation between different needs in this area, are recurrent within the community.

### 4.3 Before and after CANM

Some of the respondents emphasised the narrative before/after, taking the discover of polyamory/CANM as biographic turning point in their way to think love and/or to live affects.

Among the people who insist on this distinction before/after, I can differentiate between two groups: the first includes people who do not thought to have changed their way to conceive love and relationship but after the discovery of polyamory/CANM lived them with more serenity; the second group, instead, includes people for whom the discovery of CANM represented also a change in the way of conceiving love and relationships.

The first group of people insisted particularly on how *before* they felt wrong, “inadequate” to the feeling of love (Federica, 27), “strange” (Greta, 26). For some respondent this feeling of inadequacy led to the rejection of the concept of love in its entirety, which in some cases led to isolation. For example, Adele (29) told me:

I have always said: “No, that stuff is not for me!”, however, whereas when I was a teenager or anyway younger, I thought of myself alone, now I understand that I can be myself and have my solid core, be a single individual who relates to the world, while being linked to other people and having other relationships. (...) While instead before (...) it was as if there was such a rupture between me and the surrounding world that I was saying: “Dunno, I prefer solitude, I prefer not to expose myself, I prefer...”.

For others, the inadequacy came from implementing behaviours stigmatised by society, such as concrete infidelity or even just the idea of being able to love more people at the same time. Some people remembered that the social sanction was make clear through expressions such as: “You are not really in love” (Ettore, 29) or “You do not know what love is” (Alberto, 34), which led

them to try to conform to a model that they felt they did not fit in. Federica's (27) words are an example of this struggle and of the overcome of it:

I have always had difficulty with the... narrative —we say — canonical, of love forever, basically because it clashed so much with my experience, that is the fact of... of... falling in love and even falling out of love so often, or at least that was how I conceived it in the mom... because, one of the things they always tell you is: “Ok, if you fell in love with another it was because you were no longer in love”, right? (...) and this is a refrain that I repeated to myself throughout all my life. Without questioning it, of course, because... because you do not do it, because it is given to you as a mantra that falls from above and it is true, and therefore I never questioned this stuff here, maybe heard by friends, heard from the parents... (...) and therefore I have always felt in some way... inadequate to love—understood in its classic formulation—as if... that stuff there of... I saw people around me who might fall in love and were... 8-9-10-11 years with the same person, I said: “Well, is this love true? (...) And, if it is true, why I cannot feel it, why to me... the impatience takes over... or... why do I fall in love with other people?” (...)

[T]he first step was: “Love exists, love exists in that canonical form of... a fairy tale that is told to us and... I am not suited to that stuff there”, and this was a thought that I had up until... [when I was] 18-19 years old, more or less, later... also developing a political awareness, in short, social, also with the studies of anthropology, and all... I began to think: “Ok, love does not exist, to the extent that it is a social construction, aaand... at least, that kind of love there, so... I don't care”. So, let's say, there was a... a... almost... a boomerang reaction, to go completely to the other side, and: “I will never marry, I don't want to make my mother's life,...” (...) [N]ow what I think about it? Now I think... I definitely changed my point of view, I think love is... so many things, I think love is so many different things and that, more than a discourse of intensity or quantity, it's a qualitative discourse, in the meaning that loves can really take on many forms, and this is a thought that I do not know if it is real or not, but I know that it is freeing me so much, because it helps me to legitimise even the feelings of of... also those unclear, right?

This quote is important because shows very well the interviewee's path regarding her conceptualisation of love. In some ways, the discovery of polyamory allowed her to accept her way to love as valid and legitimate.

Coming to the people in the second group, some of them strongly differentiated the two phases, highlighting that in their monogamous phase their idea of love was more "desperate" and correlate to power dynamics (Manuel, 32), obsessive (Alessandra, 43; Marta, 42), "something that burns you" (Alessandra, 43), "Sturm und Drang" (Sonia, 55), suffering (Attilio, 42), painful (Amedeo, 35), conflictive (Rachele, 26) and/or characterised by the unstoppable research of "the true love" (Carlo, 48). On the other side, the passage to the polyamorous paradigm is characterised by an idea of love more multifaceted, as we have already seen in Federica's words, but that is present in many other narratives (Amedeo, 35; Roberto, 35; Silvia, 36; Paola, 51; Enzo, 60; Paolo, 41; Cinzia, 32). They now recognised "many different types of love" and refused the dichotomous vision love/non-love and the vision of love as synonym of madness (Manuel, 32), or refuse (or try to refuse) romantic love in its entirety (Sam, 37; Elena, 28; Alberto, 34), precisely because of those emotional ups and downs, conflicts, suffering. In general, "love" seems now to be seen as an "umbrella term":

[A]t the beginning, I'm talking about a long time ago, for me love was a feeling very... that retraced a lot romantic love, made of suffering, of passion, of... (...) Then, I became more and more aware of the fact that the word love is a big umbrella term, it's a... we feel feelings that are very multifaceted, very different, mmh... what we normally encapsulate with the word [love] contains feelings, contains expectations, contains... mmmh... wishes, contains ties, contains habits, contains attractions, mmmh... very complex feelings, very... with many different shades, of many different colours. In my opinion the word love is... it's like a screen that prevents us from looking more deeply into ourselves, because I think of the people with whom I had romantic relationships, and I can't find two for which I felt feelings... not even similar, not even similar... because even

physical attraction, however, that is, people attract us in different ways, they are... Yes, so my definition of love is this: an umbrella term, which trivialises an ecosystem of feelings and emotions very complex, and very difficult to define (Attilio, 42).

The interviewee highlights how the discovery of polyamory led him to expand his definition of love: when before it was very close to that of romantic love that we saw in Chapter 1 (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Herrera Gómez 2010), now it is plural and varied.

However, this new relational “paradigm” produced in some of my respondents a sort of definitional impasse, this process of cutting things out of the definition of love took them to not know anymore how to define it, as Serena (28) explained:

I’ve found myself at the end of last year like: “Oh, shit!”, I don’t... I don’t know any more what it is, I don’t know what it is. And, at the eeeend, in effect I don’t know... I don’t know well what it is (...). I’ve say, at some point: “But what is love?”, that is, we identify it because it is made of a range of behaviours, usually, a range of... of commitments (“You have to do this, you have to do this other [thing]”, if before the holidays I have to agree with her or with him, I don’t do sex with that or that other) or with feelings – I would like to say... butterflies in the stomach and things like that – but, if one cuts out all these things, what the fuck remains? What remains? I don’t know!

The interviewee pointed out the disorientation that the loss of fixed references can cause: the definition of love had been for her one of this fixed reference that now is questioning. On the other hand, for some interviewees this passage was helpful to begin to use the term love, that before they refused because too much full of expectations, with less performance anxiety. Below we see some examples of these re-appropriation of the word.



[F]or many years I refused to use the term, precisely because people tend to use this label with extremely partial and personal meanings, but assuming that in reality those meanings are absolute, and this creates a lot of confusion, so I have always preferred to avoid it (Davide, 33).

For Davide, the problem with the word love was the risk of attributing to the word an extremely subjective meaning that made it difficult to understand to each other.

[W]hen [I said “I love you”] I never really felt it; and when I said it, more than anything else, I felt that I was homologating to what was required from me... and so I kept looking at the examples around me: they didn't convince me, that is, I didn't feel I wanted that, so I thought that I had to avoid loving and... and then, instead, when I felt free to do it, felt of... to make this feeling take any form that it could... I started using it, rarely [laugh] (Irene, 32).

In Irene's story there are three passages: first she had tried to align herself to the use of the word, using it even when she didn't feel it; subsequently, she tried to avoid love; and finally she returned to using the word when she felt free to use it with a wider meaning.

I... before the concept of love was... (...) saying love I thought it was a bit... bland, ok? I didn't know the meaning well, neither of love nor of — put it this way — not even to love. Just because I didn't feel fully... completed, fully satisfied in relationships. But now... now I like... the word love, I also like to use it (Gabriele, 27).

Unlike other respondents, Gabriele previously had an idea of the concept of love confused and vague, while now the meaning of love is clearer for him.

I also had a period in which... eeh... I absolutely didn't want to define — and still it is, but... I made a little peace with the term love —, I absolutely didn't want

to define my relationship with D. as loving, so... actually... that is, even... we coined a way that could... that we could use the two of us to define our relationship, so... instead of... “I love you”, “I stamp you” (...) at that moment, it had the strong meaning to... define our relationship, which was a relationship we wanted open, we wanted... eeh... of complicity, we wanted of respect, of transparency, consent, of... without judgment, without... oppressive jealousy... eeh... in short, what could to keep all these things, without having to keep us in the love category that... at that moment, we were questioning... (Cinzia, 32)

For Cinzia, previously the refusal of the word love was strong enough to look for a substitutive term to define the feeling for her partner. This act was supported by the desire to free oneself from a certain dominant relational model in which she did not recognise. At the moment of the interview, however, she claimed to have made peace with that term.

For all the people mentioned, the discovery of CANM seems to have played a role of reassurance regarding the legitimacy of their use of the word love: discovering that they could widen its meaning, they were able to return to using it. It is as if CANM had investing the old word with a new meaning for them.

But there are also people who continued to refuse to use the word “love”. In particular, Alessandra (43) told me:

[L]ove for me means nothing as a term. Love... love is... love for poetry, love for children, love for friends, love for a partner, love when you talk about a person you've seen three times... what does it mean? The word love means everything and means nothing, so for me it is not a suitable concept.

Evidently, the “magic” of attributing new meaning does not work for all people. Indeed, Alessandra continued to think that the word love is too unspecific.

In short, the discovery of CANM represented for many people a biographical turn as regards the way of understanding love and relationships. For

some people, the way in which they live affectivity did not change but CANM allowed them to accept themselves and to feel that their way of living was legitimate. For others the biographical turn changed also their way of living affectivity: they started from a definition of love very close to that of romantic love that we saw in Chapter 1 (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Herrera Gómez 2010), to a definition of love wider and multifaceted. However, for some people the questioning of the meaning of the concept of love can bring a sense of estrangement and loss of meaning; for others, instead, this passage meant a re-appropriation of the meaning of the word love; finally, for someone the word love continues to be too vague.

#### *4.4 Blurring boundaries...*

As we have already partially seen with the definition of love, many respondents emphasised, more or less consciously, a passage from definitions that were rigid and with solid boundaries to definitions that are more nuanced, pluralised, multifaceted. This distinction recalls the passage I highlighted in Chapter 1 from modern stories to late/post-modern stories and this is maybe the most evident element that characterises some polyamorous narratives as post-modern narratives. Anyway, as highlighted by Plummer (1995), “[t]hese stories do not replace the modern narratives but run alongside of them, providing a dispersal of critical commentary” (p. 133).

As I try to describe in the following sections, these blurred narratives concern above all—besides love—also the sexual and affective orientation, the definition of the intimate relationships and the acceptance of non-linear transformations within the intimate relationships.

#### *4.4.1 ...of romantic and/or sexual orientation and gender identity*

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, almost half of the people of my sample (27) define their sexual orientation as plurisexual<sup>51</sup> (24 bisexual and/or pansexual and three heteroflexible). This raises to 32 if people are counted in that define as “questioning” or do not use any label, or are asexual but have affective relationships with all genders.

Far from establishing a rigid relationship of causation in any sense, from their narratives emerge that, in some cases, it was the experience of CANM that affected the reconsideration of their sexual and/or affective orientation or, in other cases, the exploration of plurisexuality went hand in hand with the exploration of CANM.

In the case of Martina (31), for example, although she defined herself bisexual from the adolescence, the exploration of non-monogamous relationships coincided with the desire to explore emotional (other than sexual) relationships with people of her same gender:

I had... eeh... actually relationships with girls since I was very young, but they never became significant relationships, aaand... in hindsight I gave an explanation of this to myself, linked to the fact that probably I was actually very much influenced by the social and cultural context, so I told myself that anyway I would have chosen to have a real relationship with a man. In hindsight I realised that this was just a social pressure, so much that part of the awareness, of the achievements I got in the last two years, [included] also [the want] to build a... in my mind, and in my possibilities, also [to build] a space for a possible extremely significant relationship also with [a woman].

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<sup>51</sup> I use this term to refer to all the sexual orientations that include sexual attraction to more than one gender.

In Martina's narrative the openness to intimate relationships with women has been part of the awareness process undertaken over the past two years, which also includes the openness to CANM.

Guido (30) followed the narrative before/after that we saw in the previous section, but for them the change represented a more complete questioning:

I consider this thing a milestone in my life, that is... there is really a before and an after. If I saw my wardrobe as it was before and as it is after, that is... later, in a month, I questioned everything: gender identity, relationship, aaaand... sexual orient- better, sexual I had never formalised it but... it had never been a problem for me to think that I could like men sexually. Affectively I had never... evaluated, I had never reasoned about it.

In Guido's biography the discovery of polyamory clearly divided their life in two: they do not questioned just their relationship preferences, but also their gender identity (before they had never questioned their male identity, now they realised to be genderfluid), their gender performance (they changed their wardrobe), their sexual and – in particular – affective orientation (from heterosexual to pansexual).

The narrative of Pau (25) is very similar: she traced back to the encounter with a polyamorous and bisexual girl the beginning of a greater awareness about her sexual orientation, the exploration of new sexual practices and of experiments that later will bring her to a new awareness also regarding her gender identity<sup>52</sup>:

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<sup>52</sup> At the moment of the interview the respondent defined their gender identity just as "non-cis", but at the moment I am writing she present herself feminine and with a gender neutral name, and began a gender transition path. I choose a gender neutral name as a fictitious name in respect to these changes, even though at the time of the interview she was still presenting herself with the name assigned at birth (a male name).

[M]eanwhile I understand, in that period there, to be attracted also by men — not understanding, however, what blocks me in the relationships with men — but I experiment sexually with the women... with which I am, in a series of ways, helped a lot, precisely, by the bisexual and polyamorous girl, whoooo makes me experiment a whole series of sexual modalities, ranging from anal sex — which I had never experienced, for example, and which I find incredible, and which I find crazy... (...) toooo... a whole series of... cross-dressing, aaaand... ooof... role play, experimentation, which I had only sketched before.

For others, as Amedeo, the change was mainly around his affective orientation, because through polyamory he discovered he can love men too:

The wonderful thing is that there has never been anything [sexual] between me and that boy, in the sense that it has always been a heterosexual relationship, but... I have discovered that I love him. And it was very nice, it was a shock, no one had ever told me that you could love someone like that. I was not ready to accept that kind of love, even before... to establish whether it was homosexual or heterosexual, but something that transcended, in fact, transcended the sexual dimension, it was... a brotherhood, a very beautiful union. And it still moves me, if I think about him I... we shared the same woman, the same moments... it's a lot, it's really a lot. With him there was a very long story, in which he more or less... we shared from going to the theatre to... doing something else (Amedeo, 35).

Amedeo described feelings that it is not easy to label not even for him. Apparently, the relationship that he described is much more assimilable to a “bromance” (*cf.* Becker 2016), but the fact that he began to question his sexual and affective orientation demonstrates that he does not fear to label his feelings as not strictly heterosexual.

In addition to the people who explicitly defined their orientation as other than monosexual, blurred narratives are also present in people who continued to define themselves heterosexual or homosexual. For example, Alberto said:

I'll tell you, something similar I could even feel for men, if we leave the sexual component alone. You know, there are some men to which I told: "Look, I'm in love with you, I do not feel any sexual attraction, but fuck, you're a wonderful person. I can't wait to see you, you give me a lot!". That is, just wow, even more than friendship, you know... But... no sexual attraction, nothing. So, if I have to imagine love without sex... it could be that (Alberto, 34).

Also Filippo (48), who defined himself homosexual since almost 30 years, recognised a "queering" potential in his polyamorous experience:

[T]he emotional experience of polyamory has been so overwhelming that it has also pushed me to reconsider... the attitude concerning sexual orientation, erotic experiences in itself, right? This is why I said... for me it was very important as an experience, because... first... yes, maybe it happened to me to make out with a girl, but I wouldn't have thought of establishing a relationship with a girl... because I followed this prevailing stream, so my declared homosexuality meant that I... had a lot of male sexual partners.

These narratives confirmed a more general attitude of my respondents: it seems that on average people who approached CANM are more inclined to questioning also other aspects of their sexual identities, such as their sexual and/or affective orientation, their gender identity and/or gender expression. More generally, they seem more inclined to questioning rigid dichotomies, such as love/not love, homosexual/heterosexual, woman/man (*cf.* Ochs 1996).

#### *4.4.2 ...of affective relationships*

As we have already seen in Chapter 3, my respondents present quite heterogeneous affective situations. My choice to let themselves define what they meant by affective/intimate relationships and then to orientate their narratives on the basis of that allowed to bring out some interesting aspects. In fact, although

for most of them initially the narrative dwelt on the relationships that had the attributes to be socially recognised (romantic and sexual involvement, at least), then almost 1/3 of them (18) showed doubts and hesitations and concluded that they did not know or want to offer an exact number of the affective/intimate relationships in progress at that time.

This refusal to draw clear defining lines is coherent with other narratives emerging from the interviews. For example, besides what we have already seen above concerning the pluralisation of the definition of love (or maybe also as a consequence of that), many respondents (18) made explicit their difficulty in drawing a clear line between love and friendship. For example:

[I]t isn't a discrete set, it's a set without break in continuity, an... analogic, absolutely analogic, it's not possible to identify high leaps between a condition and the other. There are friendly situations that have an impressive sexual power, but maybe underlying, or practical, and totally romantic situations [that are] asexual. Personally, I don't live those romantic but asexual, there are some friends for whom I absolutely feel something and nothing has ever happened, and everything in between. I don't know, I can't identify steps, maybe I do it to simplify, I do it to... speak with not-so-deep friends and identify steps, but... they are shortcuts of the communication, not... actually, on an ontological level, I don't believe that it exists... not, really not, I don't believe in the possibility to identify... (Amedeo, 33).

Amedeo thinks to love and friendship more as a continuum than as a dichotomy, he admitted to use labels to identify relationships in the everyday life, but he did not think that this taxonomy can be true on an ontological level.

Similarly, Rachele said:

I think to have always been... involved in relationships that I call friendships but that look very much like those that I call loves, right? There are some points of contacts: there is jealousy, there is that beautiful impression of fusion, of intellectual correspondence, of... of empathy, right? That that you feel in...



when you feel in love (...). And this is one element. Another one is that... eeh... it happened to me to have friends that were lovers, and I absolutely did not know how to differentiate. Why to differentiate, above all? And, above all, I don't like to qualify my relationship with a lover as if the friendship were excluded from this relationship, right? Eeh... so, yes, actually to differentiate love and friendship is a bit hard, for me. (...)

So, I would say that the distinction between love and friendship is more of a thing that... that the context generates in me, of not doing sex with most of my friends. But there are some exes who I would define friends, there are... friends that, for the way we interact, we seem much more lovers, there are jealousies... In my opinion... they are fields that... they touch each other a lot (Rachele, 26).

As well as Amedeo, also Rachele uses labels because influenced by the social context, but if she stopped to think about the distinction it was very difficult for her to draw a clear line between love and friendship.

Almost the same number of people gave me a rather blurred definition of relationship. For example, Serena (28), said:

[T]hen I have a cloud of... of relationships that I don't know how to define, in the sense that they are... eeh... for example, there is the relationship with my friend, with whom we are very very friends, we also had sexual aspects, but for the moment we have decided to put on hold, and therefore... that is, it is a... we consider it a loving relationship, but I wouldn't call it a relationship, but I certainly can't even say that it isn't. It is... so... then there are... there is a girl with whom Aldo<sup>53</sup> has a stable relationship and I have a kind of mediated relationship, but I also have it. I mean, there's a whole... a kind of mist —let's say —of people... (...) with whom I can neither say I have a relationship, nor say I don't have it.

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<sup>53</sup> Aldo was one of her principal partner at the moment of the interview, with whom she was in relationship from 13 years and cohabiting from four years.

Similarly to what Serena said about the definition of love, as well the definition of some relationships became very difficult to her after the discovery of polyamory, and sometimes this brought her to a sort of impasse.

Greta (26), that is asexual and self-defined “queer-romantic”, explained to me that is almost impossible for her to draw a clear line between friendship and love:

Many of the people for whom I have strong feelings are friends. Aaand... the people I love... are my friends too. Eeeh... that is, this boundary between the two things, which for many is this thing that we need to put the stakes between friendship and everything else, I really don't have the ability to be able to put this wall between the two things, which I am realising lately, it is not like everyone is living it, and in fact there is a person with whom I am hanging out lately who suffers a little bit for this way that I have to see the relationships, because she would like to understand more definitively if it is something that between us could work or not. [...] For me... I feel good with my friends, sometimes I also have sexual relations with my friends, because it seems normal to me, it is a sharing of emotions, with friends there is a strong affection, with my friends there are also playful exchanges, in short, it is all a... I do not find the need to define things, if we are together, we like to say that we are together, if a person does not like being together, it means that it is not a... he doesn't want it to be a relationship, maybe it's something else.

In Greta's case the impossibility to differentiate love and friendship is part of her affective orientation (“queer-romantic”).

As we have already seen in Chapter 3, seven of my respondents define themselves relationship anarchists rather than polyamorous. In this regard, one of them explicitly refuses the label of polyamory because, in their vision, some polyamorous just multiply romantic relationships without deconstructing romantic love and couple-centrism. At the same time, they seems to see romantic love as a sort of inevitable “accident”, that they tries to stem:

I realise that all the romantic entanglements take away so much energy... so much energy that they take away energy for everything else—I mean the rest of the other non-romantic relationships—and so... mmh... I prefer not to stir them up [laughs], somehow, from that point of view. This does not mean not taking care of those relationships or not living moments of romance, but not... eeh... maybe not coding them in precise codes like: “Ok, I need to hear from you every day” / “Ok, I need of... eeh... tell you all these things” or... things like this, otherwise it becomes very heavy for me (Sam, 37).

Sam tries to avoid to romanticise other relationships beyond their romantic relationship already existing because they is conscious that it would require too high an expenditure of energy for them. At the same time, Sam refuses the relationship escalator, for example not giving priority to their romantic relationship for the co-habitation, in fact at the moment of the interview they lived together with two friends, one of whom is also an ex-partner. This tendency to transform relationships once the romantic phase is over rather than interrupting them, is a tendency that also other respondents highlighted:

Maybe I believe in relationships that last forever more than a monogamous who get married. That is, not... eeh... I believe that the relationship can change constantly, but that relationship when it is based on listening to each other, respect and all the things that come from listening to each other, from communication, from loving each other, when starting from feelings and from... from what I've said before, the relationship takes on different forms, but... it can't end. Unless you betray loyalty, sincerity, or... those things the relationship is based on: I don't listen to you anymore, I don't give a shit about you anymore. But, as long as there is that, for me the relationship continues (Manuel, 32).

Manuel highlighted how important it is for him to think that relationships last forever, transforming themselves. Unless trust is lost for serious reasons, he normally continues to have feelings for the people he has had a relationship with.

Alessandra gave us another example:

For example, with the person I don't live with anymore, even if reluctantly — because it was an endless tragedy for me to close that thing there —, on the other hand I'm sure our relationship travels much better now. But yes, maybe I would like to... expand a little more, but in short, one must also respect... aaand... and yes, it can even be fun, at a certain point when you also recognise... (...) when you are also familiar with an aspect of another person that emerges, or you discover in time that maybe it goes... it rows against my desires, but it is so that... ok, I know something more, I can also share this aspect, perhaps farther away, but it has its meaning, it has its beauty. Maybe with the passion of adolescents does not combine well. Today, perhaps I can allow myself to live like this (Alessandra, 43).

The interviewee recognised that this attitude changed with the time, but that at the moment of the interview they can accept that relationships take other forms from that imagined at the beginning.

Rachele spoke, as well, of the relationship with her “ex”:

[W]e have tried, as we value ourselves and we have just seen that in this moment we cannot be together, for personal differences, and for... also very different levels of processing relationships, eeh... we have start to really experiment the “queer art of failure”<sup>54</sup>, that is to manage this relational failure, that we both see as a personal failure, in a very cooperative way (...). We have tried to transform this closeness in a way... in something... different, in a different relationship, that I don't want to call “to be exes”, I don't want to call “friendship”, I think that... eeh... it hasn't a specific direction, so what we have done is to understand what wasn't gone, in our relationship, and to not try to change it and to forge it, [but just] to keep it as awareness, eeeh... to try to understand if we were attracted to each other or what, if we wanted to include the variable sex or if we didn't give a shit [of that], if it wasn't important, if it wasn't a further complication. At the end the solution that we chose was to not include any sex

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<sup>54</sup> The reference is to Halberstam's (2011) book *The Queer Art of Failure*.

variable, even because sex wasn't determinant in our relationship (...). It is a kind of bond that sincerely make me proud of the work that I've done about my relationships (...). I know that that person is not... she's not lost, she's not lost, it isn't that she doesn't exist anymore all of a sudden, after years of very close sharing she doesn't exist anymore. I know that now she has different times and spaces, different ways of being there, but I know that, for example, if we like to do a thing together, (...) we can still do it together (Rachele, 26).

Rachele's story highlights that the negotiation of relationships often does not end with the end of the romantic phase: for her and her partner it was necessary to agree on the form of their relationship even after.

Besides, many interviewees questioned the idea that if a relationships to not follows the steps envisaged by the relationship escalator (*cf.* Gahrn 2017) it is not valid, there is something wrong. They said that after the discovery of CANM they are, in general, more open to non-linear transformations of relationships. Carlo (48), for example, explained how the theory of polyamory helped him to overcome the idea of the centrality of sexuality in their intimate relationships:

At least for my personal experience, I saw that, at least the physical side, after a while, decades, in my opinion, it decades almost for everyone, but the way you deal with this it's important, in my opinion. Polyamory can be an answer to this, in the sense that when there is a primary relationship so strong, in the sense that, in fact, you are in love, you love, and so on... to leave [the partner] because you want to do sex or because you want to start relationships with others, I find it absurd. (...) [B]ecause of a cheating everything collapses, 30 years of life together collapses, children, and so on and so forth, simply for... a cheating, because you don't want to accept the fact that after a while the sexual arouse becomes... it decreases. (...) [I]t changes, also with G.<sup>55</sup>, also if we don't have sex anymore, we kiss each other, we caress each other, sometimes it is much more beautiful (...) than have sex with a stranger.

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<sup>55</sup> G. is Carlo's primary partner.

In Carlo's hypothesis, his personal experience could be generalised: according to him, polyamory can help to accept that passion falls within a relationship without this being a sufficient reason to abandon it.

At the same time, as already highlighted by Gusmano (2018c, 2018d), the fact that the respondents are questioning the hierarchies of intimacies (Budgeon 2006), helps them to develop and value also non-romantic relationships. In this regard, Cinzia (32), that is a transfeminist queer activist, emphasised the importance of that extended network of relationships that she calls “sfamily<sup>56</sup>”:

[T]his mutualistic aspect is very present — sorry if I always come back to motherhood, but... (...) For example, just compared to the moment ... at the time of the pregnancy, in which... eeh... for example, we have made a move... eeh... I was in the ninth month, that is, just... over, an incredible belly... and I was almost unable to do anything. (...) [J]ust these people<sup>57</sup> were among the people (...) that we define as part of our family, they completely replaced me in what were all the inherent activities to moving, to make boxes, to clean the old house, to clean the new one, to move, to... paint walls, to... all for free. (...) ... just like... I don't know, in many other situations... Now... I have a very complicated work situation, eeh... I was very bad for a couple of months for a mobbing situation, eehm... and these are always the people who helped me more, that have been here, that maybe sometimes they have prepared dinner (...), even in the first months of life of the child: shopping done, “I think to everything, you stay on the couch!”. In this sense... mmh... a very important continuous exchange. When we announced... eeh... that we were pregnant [laughs], I remember telling my

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<sup>56</sup> In Italian the prefix *s-* is used to place before some words to express the opposite meaning. The term *s-family* is a neologism used for the first time by the Kespazio collective which in 2013 organised a “Sfamily Day” in Rome in response to the neoconservative wave unleashed by the panic around the “family crisis”. The term indicates all those relationships of affection, intimacy and care that deviate from the model of the couple and the family and intends to propose another perspective, that is to see the crisis of the family as an occasion to build awareness and visibility for these “other” relationships.

<sup>57</sup> She refers to the people that she considers part of her “sfamily”.

closest friends: “Now eeh... we talk about ‘other intimacies’... let's test them!” Eeeh, I have to say that... they have... there are bonds... there is a habit of being there for the other that... has been very present, although... in short, sometimes it is not enough, sometimes we would like more... but I think this is... eeh... a condition of the existence [laughs].

Cinzia highlighted the importance of the material help of the extended non-bloody relationships network in a moment that usually in our society is seen as intimate and reserved to the nuclear family. But she reflected, also, on the difficulty to build and maintain this type of network of non-bloody bonds in adult age in our society:

[T]here have been changes... eeh... important... but, in short, they are linked to a life cycle, relationships that close, in short, like... I believe that right now the people I feel closer to us are not many, but... eeh... we have very strong ties. (...) [T]he living conditions of our peers... it is strongly dictated both by, well, by precariousness, and so on... but also by a form of continuous diaspora, so many loves are... around the world, and this is... iiiis... this is meaningful, in the sense that... on one hand, it is nice to know the world through their eyes, to be told, to maintain close relationships, on the other the possibility of have a continuous, assiduous closeness is lacking.

The interviewee pointed out how this type of bonds are usually complicated by the structural life conditions, in particular job insecurity that forces a continuous diaspora.

Other respondents highlighted the fact that the polyamorous perspective has also been an occasion to value some relationships that before were marginalised just because they did not respond to all the requirements of a monogamous relationship or those of romantic love:

Let's say that, from a certain point of view, eeh... before, I had to bet on the winning horse, [but] I had [already] bet on the winning horse, so, somehow, I

could only have that kind of love, and be very careful not to have any others. Eeeh... after, it becomes instead that you can have many relationships with many feelings, different sensations, not necessarily 100% of that feeling but something less, but that has a different taste... eeeeh... and then you discover that there are the loveS. Then, in this context of love, some move some things, others move others [...]. I like being able to... have relationships that have, all of them, a contact a little more... interesting, deep (...), always with that possibility, in power, and that are just of different flavours (Roberto, 35).

Roberto highlighted how the discovery of CANM led him to an opening towards different types of love. This allowed him to cultivate relationships that before would have had no chance because there was no room for types of relationships that did not adhere to the dominant model.

All the narratives reported in this sub-section show that for many people the opening to CANM coincided with an opening towards a less stringent definition of love. In some cases, this new definition facilitated the acceptance of non-linear transformations in their relationships (even after the end of the romantic phase) and the development and enhancement of non-romantic bonds or of different types of love. At the same time, some of them recognised the social structural limits to develop these type of relationships.

#### *4.5 Doubts, contradictions, critical issues*

Perhaps it is precisely this aspect of questioning the pre-existing models, which ensures that the respondents are always ready to also questioning their theories and practices and questioning themselves. In fact, doubts and contradictions between theories and practices often emerge from their narratives, highlighted by the interviewees themselves. The first doubts are in relation with the role of sexuality in the hierarchisation of the relationships. Often my respondents had contradictory ideas about this issue, for example if theoretically they thought that the sexual component is not fundamental to define a relationship, then they



admitted that in relationships that they considered important it was in fact present:

N: The sexual aspect is an important aspect for you in a relationship, that is, if there is no sexual aspect, would you still consider it an important relationship for yourself?

E: Yes, yes, absolutely. Yes, yes. Absolutely. No, sex doesn't...

N: It's not essential...

E: No, it's not fundamental... (...) I mean, not... I mean, it's not going to define that relationship... also because I don't have a hierarchy in my mind of relationships right now, so... yes, it's true that the two [people] with whom I'm building more are two relationships in which there is also sex, and it is also a very pleasant sex... (...) But not... maybe... that is, I still have to think about this [laughs]. I mean, (...) in my mind yes, we say that sex is still so bound to... to a concept of relationship and... maybe more serious than a relationship in which there is no sex. And, therefore, perhaps it comes naturally to me to build with people with whom I have a more... satisfying sexuality, respect that with people with whom I do not have this type of relationship, whom I tend to see more as friends, and therefore perhaps not to develop with them projects... life projects more solid, more important, the journey together, I don't know... I mean, I'm a bit... I don't know... because in reality theeeen... this summer my most beautiful journey was with... exactly, the poly group, we went there to this beautiful festival, where we all got on well together, among other things, between us. So, I shared some important moments with them anyway, and then I was on vacation at the home of this friend of mine (...), I was at his parents' house, we did all the naturist beaches of the Riviera (...), and with him there is no sex, there's absolutely... also because he is gay, so... we don't... we don't have this kind of relationship, but, that is, we have fun like idiots together, so ... (Elena, 28).

At the beginning Elena recognised that the two relationships that she considered most important at the moment of the interview were also sexual relationships, but then she thought also in other relationships and got a bit confused about her ideas. My idea is that the prioritisation of sexual relationships above non-sexual ones is a conviction so introjected that it is difficult to

deconstruct it just approaching theories on the de-hierarchisation of relationships. Similarly, also in Davide's narrative it seems to emerge a gap between theory and practice:

I like sex a lot, I like to explore it, to practice it and I do it as much as possible, soooo... in practice, I would not be so sure, actually. I think it can have a great importance. I say no at theoretical level because in human relations I don't see a so clear split between what it's a romantic relationship, friendship or whatever else, so... it is an endless... it is an endless variety of nuances, of... since I can assume – indeed, we do not need to assume – very strong friendships, very very long and lasting, intense, I don't know whether to define them friendships or relationships without sex. (...) Here, maybe what is missing in the friendship label is the... the will to plan towards the future, but not necessarily... not ever there, in fact... [laughs] if one... one... pulls up a project of co-housing usually... (Davide, 33).

Davide at the beginning recognised the importance that sex has for them in relationships, but then he expanded their gaze to end with a certain impasse in defining the difference between romantic and not-romantic relationships.

Other contradictions between theories and practices or, better, between ideals and reality, regard the issue of the overcoming of romantic love. For example, Sam (37), speaking about romantic love, answered:

N: When you say "I hate romantic relationships", what do you mean exactly?

S: Eh... I mean... eh, what do I mean? I mean that kind of relationship that makes you fall in love more or less sentimental, more or less hormonal, that makes you take a whole series of very childish dynamics [laughs], and that then... triggers dynamics that... other relationships do not trigger. And therefore, also, probably, a very heavy work on yourself that you have to face. All your limits are put in front of you, which – for heaven's sake – can also be triggered in other relationships, but... it's always much more rationalisable, I don't know how much is really due to the fact of the construction that has been done regarding romantic

love, or how much are actually that kind of sensations that trigger those things there... Maybe it's a combination of the two.

Sam tries to avoid romantic codes but, at the same time, they sees the development of romantic feelings as unavoidable in some circumstances. They seemed to struggle in some ways to not concentrate most of their energies in their romantic relationship.

Finally, some respondents recognised that the desire to deconstruct hierarchies and romantic love is not enough to suddenly deconstruct them within the relationships. For example, Rachele (26) admitted:

I do not define myself as a relationship anarchist due to limits... eeh... currently, due to structural limitations... mental structure, world view. Eh, because... personally, I grew up very very very embedded, perhaps more than others — because I grew up in [a Southern Italian region], I don't want to be culturalist, but... eeh — I feel particularly embedded in the culture of monogamy, and this — I noticed, experimenting with others forms — influenced me very much and still influences me in a subtle way, in the sense that I need to... define, to give a place to all the people of my life, right? (...) Then, in reality, what I do is a lot more relationship anarchy than anything else... (...) but I can't... put it as a definition because I feel a bit... that is, I feel a little sense of inadequacy with respect to this definition, in the sense that I cannot not categorise people, this is a limit that I still... And instead, I really like relationship anarchy because I find it much more libertarian than other forms, but unfortunately I have not yet managed to completely eliminate that hierarchy of affects from my life.

Rachele felt akin to relationship anarchy from a theoretical point of view but at the same time she felt that it was not cognitively ready for the de-hierarchisation of relationships.

In this section I presented some doubts and contradictions emerged from the interviews that mainly concern some inconsistencies between theory and practice. First of all, some people agreed in theory that the sexual component is not fundamental in defining a relationship, but then they were used to counting

as “relationships” those in which there was also a sexual component. Others wanted to avoid romantic relationships but in the practice sometimes it seemed they could not avoid it. Others felt theoretically akin to a relational theory but in the practice they felt inadequate.

### *Conclusions*

Starting to discuss the findings taking into account the first theoretical nucleus of reference highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, I can try to answer to the question: how do the respondents manage the conflict between individual autonomy and emotional needs (*cf.* Beck and Beck-Gernsheim)?

At least taking into consideration the synthetic definitions of love of my respondents, I noticed that just one person gave a totally ego-centred answer and that most answers focus on the partner. The ego-centred definitions are much often accompanied by partner-centred definitions, where giving and receiving seem to equally weigh. Besides, even answers that could be categorised as individualistic (such as the focus on personal autonomy and freedom from constraints) are often either directed to the partner (when they defined love as “to let the other free”), or they are accompanied by a desire for reciprocity (to allow each other freedom in the relationship) or, more often, the respondent emphasised at the same time also other elements such as the desire to grow together, care, or complicity. The insistence on freedom seems here to make explicit a distance from totalising and oppressive relational models more than to establish an emotional distance from the partner.

More than anything else, from the narratives of the interviewees and from my field notes taken during the participant observation, it seems to emerge the importance of an explicit and negotiated reflection within the various relationships on the balance between these two poles. This observation brings out another important and recurrent element in the narratives of the interviewees, which is that of the marked tendency to rationalisation and self-reflexivity,

already detected by several authors (e.g. Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse 2006; Petrella 2007; Cascais and Cardoso 2012). This tendency is also evident in the answers defined as “symbol-centred”, that focused on the symbolic meaning of saying “I love you” rather than on the personal emotional feeling that corresponds to it; but also, more generically, in the continuous questioning of the social constructions behind the dominant relational models (but also, in some cases, of the non-dominant ones).

On the other hand, however, many respondents focused on the importance of sharing, intimacy and care. In this case, the framing of reference differs from the monogamous one because this dimension in many cases is extended to non-romantic relationships. Indeed, we have seen how many respondents began to question relational hierarchies through the discovery of the CANM. These openings, however, are not free from doubts and contradictions between what is theory and what is the concrete affective practice.

Referring to Sternberg (1988) triangle<sup>58</sup>, the dimension of intimacy is perhaps the most strongly highlighted by the respondents. In fact, several responses highlight the importance of a strong emotional connection, care and complicity. All these elements seem to approach the conception of relationship that Giddens (1992) called pure relationship. The commitment takes on a more nuanced outline, as many have questioned the so-called “relationship escalator”, but relational continuity was emphasised by many respondents, albeit under the connotation of the acceptance of non-linearity and of the transformations of relationships. This acceptance also includes a de-centralisation of sexuality and passion as a central element of intimate relationships.

These last considerations lead to answer the second and third question that I had asked myself at the beginning of the chapter, namely: is there a critical

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<sup>58</sup> The psychologist recognised three main components in love, namely: passion (understood as sexual or romantic desire of great intensity); intimacy (defined as closeness and concern for the wellbeing of the partner) and commitment (i.e. dedication to maintaining the bond and planning).

approach to romantic love in the respondents' narratives? And, if so, how is this criticism presented and managed in the affective practice?

The critical aspects in respect to romantic love that emerge with more intensity are this de-centralisation of sexuality and passion and the distancing from suffering and totalising love (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Herrera Gómez 2010) to embrace a broader and more inclusive vision of this feeling. This deconstruction, however, as we have seen, is not always easily transposed into practice. This aspect will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter. Just one answer, on the contrary, emphasised the dramatic and disturbing components of love, saying that “[love] is blood and shit”.

To conclude, I can point out that the discovery of CANM was important for many interviewees to accept diversity in the way of experiencing relationships, especially to self-acceptance. In this sense polyamorous and/or relationship anarchy theory offered a fundamental basis for a more nuanced view of sexual and affective orientations, of affective relationships and also of gender identity, and for many they represented a fundamental biographical turning point from which to start a radical questioning of one's life.

## Chapter 5

### **Practices of CANM: between emotions and rationality**

*[We are (...) in a particular historical moment regarding polyamory – or whatever you want to call it – (...) in which those of us who are activists, in fact, soon we will lose the reins of this thing, because it is becoming more mainstream, people are starting to do it. And it is clear that this does not mean don't work on it, don't keep up with it, don't take things into your own hands, but we're in a time when people are starting to do it, the whole theory is... it's beautiful but it should be contextualised, and contextualising it may mean many things, from my point of view that way of doing there is not by the book, there should not be a book, rather, things must move... move in a non-controlled manner, in which everyone then makes it their own.*

(Roberto, 35)

When the previous chapter began from an examination of the theories – albeit concluding with some considerations about the gap between theory and practice – in this chapter I seek to focus on (some) of my interviewees' relational practices. However, this excursus must take into account the fact that my description of such practices is based on the narrative provided by respondents, and as such is partial and filtered through their subjectivity. On the other hand, the methodologies used for this research did not allow for the direct observation of relational practices and dynamics.

In this chapter I thus mainly seek to answer the question: how do people who live CANM manage the potential conflict between rationality and emotions in their affective practice?

In the first section I describe some of the agreements and rules that my interview partners adopted in their relationships. The second section is dedicated to timing, and here I present some of my interviewees' organisational schedules to give an idea of their range and variety, including in terms of number of partners, degree of sharing and hierarchies. In the third section I address the issue of jealousy: on the part of my interviewees and their partners, with some references to the (*almost* opposite) feeling of compersion as well. The fourth section is dedicated to exploring relations among metapartners. Finally, in the

fifth section I try to bring to light some of the problems and difficulties that emerged from my respondents' narratives in relation to lies, omissions, imbalances of power and emotional overload.

### *5.1 Agreements and rules*

Self-help manuals on consensual non-monogamies have the tendency to encourage the “contractual” aspect, suggesting that partners establish agreements and/or rules for the most controversial aspects of relationships. For example, in *Opening Up* (2008), Taormino writes:

*Rules* outline behaviour, reflect each person limits and boundaries, and spell out the expectations that all parties have agreed to. *Rules* help guide people to know what's okay and what's not. *Rules* allow people to feel safe, reassured, and secure, and thus they are an important tool in creating successful open relationships. Many people are comfortable with the term *rules* and its associated meanings, while others don't like the word itself. They believe that *rules* are about confining, controlling, and limiting people's behaviour, and they don't wish to do this to their partners. Whether you embrace the concept of *rules* or not, it's important to come up with a set of terms and guidelines, agree to them, and honor your agreement (pp. 144-145; italics mine).

“Making agreements” also occupy a chapter in *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy 1997), where the authors highlight that the majority of our day-to-day interactions are based on implicit agreements in which we rely. On the contrary, when you approach something “complicated and unprecedented” (*ibid.*, p. 148) as consensual non-monogamies, in the two authors' opinion is better to “to take nothing for granted” (*ibid.*, p. 148). Easton and Hardy privilege agreements over rules, because rules, in their words, “implies a certain rigidity, that there is a right way and a wrong way to run your relationship and that there will be penalties if you do it wrong” (*ibid.*, p. 148-149), while agreements are more flexible.



As well, Veaux and Rickert (2014) dedicate a chapter to rules and agreements, specifying that “there are dangers in speaking about relationships in term of rules” (p. 130). They also provide definitions to differentiate agreements and rules as they used the words in the text: “*agreements* are negotiated codes of conduct established among people who are involved with each other” (*ibid.*, p. 130, italics in the original); rules are “something negotiated between one set of people – a couple for example – and then presented as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition to others” (*ibid.*, p. 130). So, in their definition, agreements are something negotiated between all the people involved, rules usually prioritise the primary relationship over others. Besides, an agreement is open to be re-negotiated, a rule is not.

Agreements and rules can cover a wide range of topics/behaviours/situations, as for example: safer sex, communication about new relationships (when and how to communicate), transparency (how much to communicate), priorities and hierarchies (or lack of), flirting in presence of the partner, management of jealousy and insecurity, and so on.

Among the people I interviewed, the general impression is that there is not a marked tendency towards contractualisation. Besides, usually my respondents do not make a clear distinction among rules and agreements. Some people did speak to me about some of their agreements, however. The most widespread agreements concern safer sex: five people (Alberto, 34; Elena, 28; Attilio, 42; Emanuele, 34; Alfredo, 36) reported that they had made an agreement to have unprotected sex (“fluid bonding”, in polyamorous jargon) with only one of their partners; while Rachele (26) instead told me about having an agreement to use complete protection (gloves, latex barriers) with all partners.

Other rather widespread agreements concern communication. Attilio (42) and Massimo (50) have the agreement – albeit rather implicit, according to their accounts – that they will talk with their partners almost immediately about having encountered potential new partners. Alberto (34) has a more general agreement to be honest – although he admitted that he was still working on this

goal. Alfredo (36) told me that he and his partner had changed their agreements regarding communication over time: they understood that sometimes it is better not to disclose something immediately and instead to wait for a more peaceful moment, however they have an agreement that they will communicate any intention to go out with other people in advance, so that the other person can organise themselves accordingly. Rachele (26) reported that she had made an agreement with her former partner not to speak explicitly about sex with other people, but rather to share some information gradually. Attilio (42) has more specific agreements, such as: calling each other to say goodnight, returning home within a certain timeframe, and other points negotiated from time to time. And finally, Mauro (40) has a “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” agreement with his partners (with whom he is in a non-hierarchical triad) according to which, if one of them happens to have sex with other people, they prefer to avoid reporting it if not explicitly asked. Paolo (41) and Emanuele (34) told me about an agreement that they had with their respective co-habiting partner to avoid using the common bed with other people.

It is also interesting to see how some of the agreements have been modified over time: for example, Gabriele (27) and Eleonora (32) told me that they had agreed on certain rules at the beginning (including the rule of not developing feelings for other people), but then they abandoned them over time. Elena (28) and Rachele (26) likewise both spoke to me about having at some point made an agreement with their partners to stick together and not flirt with other people if they went to parties together; in both cases, however, the agreement broke down at the first party in which both partners had opportunities to make new acquaintances and so they decided by mutual understanding to change the previous agreement. Clearly, the rigidity of the agreements often seems to depend on the emotional security that the partners feel in the relationship, as well as the risk they are willing to take. Agreements often reveal the intention to maintain a delicate balance between caring for the pre-existing

relationship and creating opportunities to meet new people. In this regard, Rachele (26) described her agreement as a “very cowardly” one:

[I]t was also an agreement that... an agreement a little... a little cowardly, let's say, a little basic... dictated also a little bit by fear, by not wanting to gamble, anyway, to take on too much, and because I was a bit ruined by previous experiences, because we were new to the issue, well... we decided to make these protected, very protected agreements, which is the kind of agreements that we developed in our relationship in general, quite cautious agreements, because we are two very cautious people. It's nice because then you see from the agreements that you develop a bit who... who you are, right? How you are and what energy there is in the relationship... this relationship here was mainly prudent, anyway: “Yes, we are doing a beautiful thing, to experiment and so on... but we don't want... neither of us wants to find herself dealing with too painful of situations, too complicated, too... messed up, etc. We prefer to go step by step”.

According to Rachele, the type of agreements established in a relationship reflect the nature of the people who form part of the relationship. In this case, she and her partner were two very cautious people and they produced very cautious agreements, directed more towards preserving the existing relationship than creating new opportunities. However, as we have seen above, one of their agreements (to not flirt with other people when going to parties together) was annulled during a party by mutual agreement. In many cases, therefore, the agreements act as reassurance, but they function more as guidelines than as dogmas. They are modifiable and negotiable; they are like lifebuoys that can be abandoned when the person feels safer.

In the vast majority of cases, the agreements were verbal. The only person who told me about creating an actual document with written rules is Paolo (41), who organised this document with a former partner with whom he lived. The two of them reviewed the rules every six months and the ones that they no longer considered necessary were removed. In addition to the agreement mentioned above about not using the shared bedroom, the document contained

agreements more oriented towards organising a peaceful co-habitation, such as: “Do not make sudden loud noises at home” (which was then removed), or a protocol to agree about the timing for going out, and other agreements aimed at understanding each other’s different ways of saying no.

Rachele (26), on the other hand, spoke to me of a set of guidelines that she wrote in the effort to orient herself toward her future relationships, for example: “Circumvent – or possibly avoid – the rule of the first referent”, which she explained as:

Try to create a relational situation in which there are not two people who emotionally lean on each other, [...] that when something good happens they are the first people to tell about it, try to differentiate the fields for a moment, which in my opinion means giving value to the relationship in its specificity, in the sense that if something interesting and beautiful happens to me that involves you, it may interest you, I will say it to you, [but] if it is a conquest that I want to share with a partner of mine, with a friend of mine, with my mother, with another person... [I will say it to them first].

Other guidelines that she remembered were: “Do not enter into intimacy with the [partner’s] parents”; “Do not be afraid that she may abandon you for another better person at any moment”; “Do not be afraid of competition with others”; “Try to spend quality time together, not necessarily all your free time”.

These attempts seem to recall that desire to control feelings that Cascais and Cardoso (2012) have detected as the hidden aim behind one of the most recurrent topics in the mailing list *alt.polyamory*: the hard work (emotional work, scheduling work) of achieving a greater level of empowerment in the management of polyamorous relationships. Agreements and rules in general can be seen as a tool in service to this will to control both one’s own feelings and the relationships, foreseeing and raising a preventive buffer against the obstacles that might emerge in polyamorous relationships. In general, however, the agreements

and rules developed by the people I interviewed seem to be flexible and negotiable depending on the direction that the relationship takes. On the one hand, this implies constant communication, constant attention to one's feelings and the ability to understand them; on the other hand, it can be a sign of openness to change, even if this is an openness that remains under control.

## *5.2 Timing*

My interviewees presented very heterogeneous situations in terms of the time spent with different partners. In this section I try to offer an overview of this variety and propose a possible interpretation of it.

Even among people who maintain hierarchical relationships and those who have non-hierarchical relationships, often the only substantial difference lies in the fact that those with hierarchical relationships (especially when the status of primary partner is normative and not merely descriptive) actively seek to limit the time spent with secondary partners. For example, Carlo (48) told me:

Right now I have a person I see every week, that is, she would like us to see each other more, she knows about the other person, but I too, frankly, do not feel like seeing her more. Even too much, compared to my canons. In general... the most important relationships, apart from the main one, I try to see them once every 15 days...

With his primary partner, instead, Carlo spends all his weekends from Friday to Sunday plus other time during the week, and they spend all the holidays together. In this situation there is clearly a hierarchy established among the different relationships. In Veaux and Rickert's (2014) definition "a hierarchy exists if a third party has the power to veto a relationship or limit the amount of time the people in it can spend together" (p. 145).

As for the organisation of other people's time, here are some of the situations addressed most thoroughly during the interviews<sup>59</sup>:

- Mauro (40) and Federico (55) are in a non-hierarchical triad with Gerardo. They live in three different cities in Northern Italy, so they normally meet all together for the weekend at Mauro's house in the countryside. Federico does not like going out too much, so sometimes Mauro and Gerardo go out while Federico stays at home. For the rest of the week Federico lives with his former partner;
- Morena (37) had been in a non-hierarchical triad with Andrea and Lorena for around six months. She had been co-habiting with Andrea for around ten years and in a relationship with him for several more years while Lorena lived in another village in the same region. For the time they were together, she joined them every weekend and at any time she was free from work. Nine months before the interview, Andrea and Lorena broke up and at that time Morena continued to live with Andrea and see Lorena outside of the house. At the time of the interview, Morena was not in a relationship with Andrea anymore, but she was still in a relationship with Lorena;
- Eleonora (32) and Gabriele (27) are married and have a child. For around six months they have also lived together with Carlo, Eleonora's other partner. Sometimes Eleonora goes out in the evening with one of the two while the other partner stays at home with the child. Carlo sometimes goes to meet her even for her lunch break, while with Gabriele they only see each other in the evening. The three also share the same bedroom;

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<sup>59</sup> For simplicity the times are in the present, but the situations refer to the moment of the interview.

- Elena (28) has a relationship with Loris and with Francesco. She lives in the same city as Loris, so they spend at least one evening a week together; Francesco instead lives in another city, so they make plans to see each other from time to time, on average once a month. Over the weekend, Elena prefers to spend her free time among her friends from her BDSM and poly circles, with Loris often participating as well;
- Emilia (30) is married to Marcello, with whom she co-habits. She has also a relationship with Marco, who lives in another city, and they meet on average three weekends a month. When Marco comes to see Emilia in her city, they normally spend their time together with Marcello as well;
- Roberto (35) and Silvia (36) are married and they used to co-habit, but now not anymore. Silvia lives with her other partner but they meet each other two-three times a week. Roberto has also a girlfriend and he meets her one-two times a week, but usually for a longer time respect to when he meets Silvia: normally, when they meet, they spend 24 hours together;
- Felice (69) and Giorgia (48) have been married for many years and have a child who has just become a young adult. Both have a special friend who they have known for more than twenty years and with whom they have also happened to engage in sexual exchanges on more than one occasion. At the moment of the interview they did not see these friends often: previously, Giorgia saw her friend (who was also a former partner) once every six months or so, while Felice sees her friend an average of once every two years (because she is very nomadic). When she comes to see them, they normally spend their time with Giorgia as well;

- Serena (28) co-habits with Aldo, who has been her partner for 14 years. She also meets up with Samuele almost every day, and maintains a small urban garden with him: they meet to take care of the garden and then, at least once a week, she sleeps with him. At other times Samuele goes to Serena's house and they spend some time together with Aldo, because the two men are also friends. In addition, Serena also has another partner who she meets on average twice a month and another one who she meets on average once a month. She also has a special relationship with a female friend, who she meets on average once every ten days. Serena also makes extensive use of the instant messaging service Telegram with all her partners and has shared group chats on it with some of them, chats which they use both for practical communications and emotional support, if necessary;
- Irene (32) lives with Fabrizio, but often passes nomadically among other homes: she usually spends the weekends with her other partner Ivan, while once a week she also meets two other partners. She is helping Ivan to design a "poly house" where he will live with a mutual friend and two other people. The house is designed to have modular spaces according to the inhabitants' life needs. Irene will have her own room for a few days a week where, if she wants, she could also be by herself or host other people; for the rest of the time she would like to continue to co-habit with Fabrizio;
- Marzia (26) has three partners. She usually sees Alessio, who is the one who lives closest and the only one she has introduced to her parents, on the weekends, while she sees Davide, who lives in another city, about once a month. Recently she also met Alf, who is originally from Northern Europe and chose a nomadic life a few years ago. For the period in which Alf remained in her city (a month and a half), they were together several times



for three-four consecutive days in the mountains; at the moment of the interview they were planning to meet again in a month;

- Sam (37) is a relationship anarchist. They chose to co-habit with two people who are very important to them, and with one of these people they also had a romantic relationship in the past. In addition to these two people, most of their energy is dedicated to Marta, with whom they have a romantic relationship and to whom they devote at least two nights a week. There is not much time left to see other people, but they managed to build a spread-out and peaceful relationship with Manuel (32), seeing each other to do activities or spend quiet evenings together about once a week, but without the anxiety of having to see each other on an obligatory basis.

The first variable found to influence time management is undoubtedly the cohesion of the network. In fact, for triads or Vs who cohabit (as in the case of Eleonora and Gabriele), it is clearly easier to organise their time because most of the moments are shared among all the partners (although in some of the situations, they sometimes try to carve out time to share with only one other person). Friendships between metapartners also facilitate time management, again for the same reason: more time can be shared among multiple partners, as in the case of Serena with Aldo and Samuele.

When one of the partners lives in the same city as the interviewee and another partner lives in a different city but the configuration is not hierarchical, often the interviewee (e.g. Elena) sees the partner who lives in the same city more often but for shorter periods of time (if they do not live together) while seeing the partner who lives further away less often but for longer periods (usually the entire weekend). Sometimes the same situation also arises if two partners live in the same city as the interviewee, as in the case of Roberto, for reasons that concern the different time management patterns of the two partners.

Sometimes there are also external limitations that make it easier to see one partner than other(s). This is the case for instance with Marzia's having introduced only one of her partners to her parents (with whom she lives), as we will see in Chapter 6.

In some situations, the distinction between primary and secondary partners clearly stems from time management, as in the case of Felice and Giorgia, but for most of the interviewees the line was more blurred. It can be said, however, that when there are more than two other partners it is easier to establish a hierarchy after the second partner, at least as regards time management (see the cases of Serena and Irene).

Telematic time may also have its own weight, as in the case of Serena and the multiple Telegram groups she maintained with different partners. For her, this was an important tool of sharing, including emotional sharing, with partners.

Irene already divided her living time between two houses with two different partners, and for the future she planned to continue dividing her time between the house she shares with the partner that was her co-habiting partner at the time of the interview and the "poly-house" she was planning with one of her other partners, where she will have a room of her own. This example raises the issue of the need to think about the organisation of spaces in a different way, preferring modular, flexible spaces that meet needs other than those of a monogamous nuclear family. Also in relation to the issue of living space, Sam instead chose to cohabit with friends who are important for them. The theme of sharing time with friends also appears in other narratives, such as Elena's, when she spoke about reserving most of her weekends for friends.

At any rate, time management is not static; it may change as relationships change, and people may begin by living with one partner and then move on to live with another partner, as in the case of Silvia.

### 5.3 Jealousy

Jealousy is a composite feeling (Guerrero, Trost and Yoshimura 2005) which, as some theorists argue, encompasses multiple different emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness, and betrayal (Turner and Stets 2005). Within the polyamorous perspective as well, one of the tips for dealing with jealousy is to understand first and foremost what lies behind it (*cf.* Cardoso 2018). Furthermore, jealousy is a spectrum and can occur with varying degrees of intensity (Deri 2011, 2015).

As pointed out by Deri (*ibid.*) in her doctoral dissertation on polyamorous women's experience of jealousy, contemporary Western societies have normalised the idea that jealousy is a sign of love. For this reason, one of the first questions that openly polyamorous people are often asked is: "But don't you get jealous?". Since in our "emotion world" (*cf.* Plummer 2001) sexual exclusivity is highly valued, "polyamorists attempt to create a lifestyle where jealousy is neither inevitable nor intolerable, and where the emotional experience of compersion is not only possible, but actually common" (Deri 2011, p. 4).

However, jealousy is undoubtedly one of the arguments that people practicing CANM feel the need to discuss, especially at the beginning of their non-monogamous experiences. In fact, it is one of the topics considered an "evergreen" in the local groups that periodically hold thematic/self-help circles, and it is a ubiquitous theme in self-help manuals.

Among my interviewees, many told me that they have felt jealousy and shared with me the memory of an episode in which they experienced this feeling in a particular intense way. In general, most people seem to find the practices of CANM compatible with the feeling of jealousy. For example, Massimo (50) told me:

I don't at all think that the fact that I have been – always, practically – non-monogamous, that is, my not believing in the value of sexual or affective exclusivity, which for me has always been the case, I don't think that this has

anything to do with the fact of not being jealous. I mean, they're two different things.

Regarding the factors that trigger jealousy, my respondents cited:

- insecurity in the relationship (Ettore, 29; Michele, 28; Martina, 31; Edoardo, 25; Patrizia, 23; Serena, 28; Laura, 26), which may be due to ambiguity or a lack of clarity in terms of defining the relationship, the sentiments the partner feels towards someone else, a relational hierarchy in which the person holds the role of secondary partner, a lack of trust on the part of the partner, or low self-esteem;
- lack of information (Stefano, 40; Barbara, 38; Manuel, 32; Roberto, 35; Marta, 42), because the partner omitted information about the new relationship, either deliberately or because they believed it was not important;
- feeling that the partner is sharing intimacy or something they had only shared with the interviewee until that moment (Guido, 30; Edoardo, 25; Paola, 51; Rebecca, 24; Silvia, 36; Irene, 32);
- feeling neglected (Sonia, 55; Guido, 30; Adele, 29; Luigi, 40; Alberto, 34; Amedeo, 35), or excluded (Mario, 42; Federica, 27; Nubia, 25; Claudio, 28; Roberta, 27), or no longer feeling at the centre of attention (Martina, 31; Alfredo, 36; Rebecca, 24; Elena, 28);
- a dislike for the new partner, or the feeling that they are toxic or dangerous for the interviewee's relationship with the partner (Massimo, 50; Manuel, 31; Morena, 37);
- a fear of losing the other person (Morena, 37; Attilio, 42);

- the mania to be in control (Valerio, 42);
- the fact that the other partner possesses some skills or characteristics that the interviewee does not have (Amedeo, 35).

For many of the people interviewed, communication with the partner is very important for managing jealousy as is the effort to rationalise jealousy, to try to understand its causes and components and engage in “mental training” (Alberto, 34) for managing it. In contrast to these strategies, Irene (32) told me that it is more effective for her to try to give attention to her body, understanding what bodily sensations the different feelings of jealousy produce in her and starting her communication with the partners on the basis of sharing these sensations.

Some people realised that they were capable of feeling jealous as a result of beginning consensual non-monogamy practices, as previously they had thought they were not inclined to jealousy. In monogamy, in fact, the feeling of jealousy usually stems from something imagined, while in consensual non-monogamy people find themselves concretely dealing with the fact that the partner is enacting sexual and/or emotional and/or intellectual intimacy with other people. In this sense, for some people practices of consensual non-monogamy have also represented an opportunity to discover something more about themselves.

Regarding the management of jealousy, while some people seek reassurance from the partner, others believe it is more appropriate to manage jealousy on their own, especially if jealousy is not caused by specific faults or incorrect behaviour by the partner. Often, jealousy is seen as an impulse that makes itself felt but can nonetheless be managed, up to a certain degree of intensity: Enzo (60), for example, reports that he can now hold his jealousy “just like pee”. In some cases, the people interviewed told me that they felt guilty about

jealousy, precisely because non-monogamy was a conscious choice and they saw jealousy as inconsistent with this choice.

Another – more or less conscious – coping strategy implemented by some interviewees is that of eroticizing jealousy, that is, of using the feeling of jealousy as a trigger for erotic fantasies (Laura, 26; Manuel, 32; Alberto, 34).

Of the interviewees, 17 people told me instead that they do not feel jealousy, even though some of them reported having experienced other feelings that are often associated with jealousy, such as envy (Alessio, 33; Angelica, 31; Alessandra, 42; Filippo, 48; Cinzia, 32), fear of losing the other person in particular circumstances (Emanuele, 34; Paolo, 41) and fear of abandonment (Greta, 26). Pau (25) told me that she had only felt jealousy in previous relationships that she now defined as toxic.

Only two people consider not experiencing jealousy to constitute an essential condition for being polyamorous. In particular, Eleonora (32) identifies the phase of her relationship in which she still felt jealousy as a period in which she was “not yet poly”, considering the management of jealousy to be an essential step along the path of “becoming poly”:

There was a crucial moment in my life when I realised I was not yet poly and that I had to walk a bit, and it was when Gabriele met... he met this girl and went out with her the first night. I tried... because that night out had already been scheduled for a few days, so... the week before that night I was a bit... tormented by anxiety, which I didn't expect, it was a reaction that I didn't expect in myself. And it made me think about... how much I really was actually poly. Aaaaand... and... I wasn't, I wasn't. I was thinking that I was... but no, I wasn't. Aaaaand... I took it badly, very badly.

Eleonora's narrative fits into that polyamorous narrative of polyamory as a process, a form of “hard work” (*cf.* Cascais and Cardoso 2012, p. 23) which includes controlling the feeling of jealousy: if this control is not perfect, in Eleonora's opinion, one is “not yet poly”.

During the interviews I also asked respondents if their partners had suffered from jealousy. Restricting the field to jealousy suffered in consensual non-monogamous relationships, one of the most often-named causes for the crisis of jealousy was misunderstandings or problems with communication. For example, Ettore (29) explained that the issue with one of his ex-partners was that they each had different standards as to how much to share with each other:

E: [W]hen I asked him: “Do you want to talk about it? Is there anything I can do?”, he said: “No, nothing, I mean, it will pass...”.

N: Would you have wanted him to talk about it?

E: Eeeehmmm... I didn't know how much it was a problem for him, but yes, if it had been a problem I would have liked to talk about it, yes. He thought he would solve it well by himself, that is, I mean, I didn't want to impose. Then, probably, referring again to this case here, I think in retrospect it would have been good for him to talk about it because... mmh... one of the things he told me when I asked him for explanations is: “You have too free a way of doing relationships, and so I can't understand who you are dating and who you are not dating”. Aaaaand... he wanted to have a clear idea of who I dated and with whom I had sex, aaand... that is, for him it was important to know that... Okay, then, to go back, in my opinion... eeeeh, let's say that... I had really misjudged, maybe we weren't so compatible, because... I have no problem telling [someone] who I am having sex with, but for me a person for whom it is very important [to know] who I have sex with and above all how many cocks I have taken... (...) is not for me, it is very phallogentric reasoning. Anyway, in fact, it's not that I suffered from it, more than anything, in hindsight, I said: “Okay, obviously there was more jealousy than I had imagined”.

Ettore highlighted not only the difficulties arising from the different standards in sharing but also the difficulties arising from having a different relational style, even within the context of CANM. In particular, in his case, the main problem was the different importance attributed to labelling relationships and the different importance attributed to sharing sexual experiences and the act of penetration.

Rebecca (24), on the other hand, blamed herself for not having been able to communicate well. However, during the interview she also recognised her tendency to blame herself both for her own feelings of jealousy and for the jealousy felt by her partner, the latter of which she attributed in part to her lack of communication:

[O]n some occasions unpleasant episodes have happened... and there it was perhaps my fault in the sense that I was... I had communicated [too] little. There may have been times when I couldn't say what I was doing at the right time and... so he felt betrayed or at least wanted things to be said to him right away and he felt bad. But even there, in my opinion, it was always a discourse that worked like this, in the sense that... if he felt jealousy it was probably because of his insecurities, always that reason there. And at that moment I also blamed myself too much, but it wasn't totally my fault. (...) [F]or the same reason that I think I am at "fault" – even if it is not a [matter of] fault – anyway, I tell myself that it is my fault that I am jealous; my fault in the sense that it comes from me and in the same way his jealousy in my opinion came from his insecurities, not from what I could have done.

As reflected in Rebecca's words, the balance between the legitimacy of the feeling of jealousy and the awareness of having a personal responsibility towards the partner is often precarious and difficult to maintain.

In some cases, jealousy can be used (or perceived) as a tool to control the other person, as in the case described by Valerio (42) in which one of his former partners asked him to agree to a maximum number of sexual relations he could have with other people outside of their triad in a month. In other cases, through jealousy (or following the impulse of it) one partner might try to influence the evolution of another partner's new relationships. For instance, Edoardo (25) spoke of his partner's attempt to manipulate so as to oppose the relationship that was in development:



[H]e initially tried to... mmh... use the power of our relationship, which was more longstanding, to crush the one with Michele... that was flourishing, so a sort of veto, a kind of *aut aut*, and I didn't... I put up a boundary, at that point, I told him that I wouldn't be there, mmh that is, with a person who put me in a position to choose either A or B. (...) At that point he started... he again tried to work on the rules, so... that again they [the rules] would have cut Michele off (...) and I said: "These... these rules that you are trying to establish cannot be there because I don't... because... I don't want the oldest relationship to exercise this kind of power over the new relationships (...), because it seems like this is like... a bully with some buds, I don't know how to say...", right? [makes explanatory gestures and noises]

Edoardo's account raises another important issue, that of power management between metapartners. In this case, one of the partner tried to leverage the power of their relationship, which began earlier, over the new one.

Edoardo also voiced an important consideration about the fact that you cannot ask a person to cancel a feeling, but you can ask them to work on the behaviours enacted on the basis of that feeling:

[W]hen I realised that I was asking S. not to feel jealous, I realised that my request was bullshit, I couldn't ask him to do that. I mean, what I could ask is: "Tell me about it and let's see how... like... (...) let's see how we can work on this stuff here, but this stuff exists, it's not that you have to not be jealous, you just need to not make a scene! [laughs] You have to not make a scene, shouting at me".

The quotation distinguishes between jealousy as a feeling (which is impossible to eliminate, according to the interviewee) and controlling one's reactions to jealousy (an area on which the interviewee believes it is possible to act). Likewise, other people did not take the manifestation of the feeling of jealousy well, especially if they themselves did not feel it under similar circumstances. For example, Emanuele (34) commented:

V., which is the relationship I already had... she found herself [being] very jealous. It turned out to be quite jealous, with also – let's say – psychosomatic reactions, eeehm... and it came, kind of... out of the blue, even a little... I had... that is (...) I was pissed off, because with the roles reversed (...) we had said things, we had agreed, the opposite situation had happened and it had failed, [but] surely not because of me (...), and instead in this case she had reactions that obviously complicated things, because the moment you are, that is the person with whom you – at the time we were not yet living together, but almost anyway, because we slept together practically every night – ...when you know that she has these reactions and you know it is particularly sad, it is obvious that you are not carefree in your way of conducting this new relationship. And so this thing (...) has caused many problems in the relationship between all three of us.

In this case Emanuele seems to blame his partner for feeling jealousy and not only for her reactions to this feeling, even if it seems evident enough that a feeling powerful enough to produce psychosomatic reactions would not be easy to control.

Finally, in some cases it is interference by other people that provokes jealousy. Silvia (36), for example, told me that her husband did not feel jealousy over her other partner until someone else went to talk to him about the two of them having sex, and then he had a crisis of jealousy.

Some of the respondents also told me about the feeling of compersion. For example, Amedeo (35) told me of an episode in which he felt this feeling very strongly when observing one of his partners while she was reassured by another partner:

It was... a moment when I knew she would be in trouble, I couldn't get close [to her] for a variety of reasons, he was close to her, he took her in his arms, he cuddled her, and I... felt his cuddles, it was a very beautiful moment of exchange. I felt safe because he was there. It wasn't him who made me feel safe, it was... I felt safe through him. [It was] [v]ery beautiful.

Amedeo's feelings as conveyed in his narrative go even further than the feeling of compersion: he not only felt happy because his partner was happy with another person, he felt reassured that his partner felt safe with another partner, security that at that moment he was not able to transmit to her.

Again with regards to compersion, Serena (28) and Laura (26) told me that they felt very happy when their partners finally began to be interested in another person after that the two women had already been pursuing other relationships for some time. Serena also explained that she was afraid her partner was not polyamorous, which for her would have been “decidedly worse”. Similarly, Marta (42) and Marzia (26) confessed to me that they would be happy if their partners met a new partner.

Concluding this section, we can say that, in keeping with the more general trend (*cf.* Cardoso 2018), the people in my sample are also accustomed to questioning and analysing their feeling of jealousy to discover what is behind it.

Deri (2011) detected a contradiction in her interviewees' narratives: “[o]n the one hand, jealousy is seen as something to which polyamorists need to give particular attention – they need to be proactive and upfront in managing jealousy, and therefore good at its mitigation. On the other hand, several polyamorists in my study reported a certain pressure to be ‘over it already’” (pp. 141-142). In my sample, most people seemed to accept the feeling of jealousy, but they also seemed to be aware of the necessity to work on it. This represents yet another reference to the hard work that the management of polyamorous relationships requires. Attempts to manage jealousy take place mainly through the rationalisation of feelings and communication with partners, with rare exceptions. Polyamorous relationships are also read as an opportunity for individuals to do this work on themselves. On the contrary, only two people I interviewed see jealousy as a feeling that must be completely overcome to be “truly poly”.

Nonetheless, in some cases the failure to manage jealousy can lead to guilt. The importance given to this work of controlling jealousy explains the urgent drive to talk about it in polyamorous meetings focused on self-help.

The theme of compersion was not mentioned much in the narratives of my interviewees, certainly to a lesser extent than that found in other contexts (e.g. Deri 2011, 2015).

Rather than converting jealousy into compersion, some of the people interviewed try to use the erotic energy triggered by jealousy for the benefit of their sexual relationship with the partner in question. This is a phenomenon that Deri (*ibid.*) also found in the narratives of her interviewees and that she relates to a certain form of “emotional masochism” which consists in using the imbalance of power in the relationship (an imbalance which can also be temporary) to fuel sexual desire. The same mechanism was also detected by De Visser and McDonald (2007) among swingers.

We have also seen that, in some cases, jealousy can become a tool for controlling the other person or the relationship, an instrument to manipulate the partner or the relationship.

#### *5.4 Relations with metapartners*

As we have already seen in Chapter 2, the term metamour or metapartner is a neologism created by the polyamorous community to identify the partner of one’s partner. This figure is probably the one that most characterises polyamorous relationships because it does not appear in the monogamous model. Hence the need to invent a new term, one which had not been created before because it was not a culturally “thinkable” figure in our society: indeed, creating a new term emphasises the concept of doing something new in relationships (*cf.* Ritchie and Barker 2006).

In this case as well, my interviewees’ situations are highly heterogeneous: from the very tribal situations in which metapartners co-habit (as

in the case of Eleonora, Gabriele and Eleonora's other partner) or in which, although not living together, they often spend time together (the so-called "kitchen-table polyamory"), up to situations in which the metapartners do not know each other at all. Regardless, the most frequent situations are those in which the metapartners know each other and may sometimes meet up, but often see the common partner separately.

As we have already seen above, Irene (32) loves "tribal" situations in which she can be with multiple partners and metapartners at the same time. She commented on this:

[T]his tribal dimension... Yes, for example me and my metamour we organise a surprise party for our... and we buy him a gift together, and so it becomes, yes, a sort of extended family, so for example E. recently left his girlfriend, his other girlfriend, and for me it was terrible, that is, I felt very bad. Very bad, because it seemed to me that I too had lost her a little, because in any case he was the element that united us the most, also because we are very different... like a little bit as if, I don't know, my brother had left his girl, and therefore, that is, I am sorry, because I got attached to her and I will see her less at lunch, dinner... and I don't know... and I am sorry, [it is] like losing her a bit, too.

For Irene, metapartners are like acquired relatives and she sees polyamory as an opportunity to connect with people she would otherwise probably never connect with, through a shared partner. It is also interesting how also Irene experienced the end of the relationship between her partner and his previous metamour as a painful change.

Metapartners developed a relationship of friendship and complicity in other cases as well. Federica (27), for example, who is in a V configuration with Valentino and Giovanni, told me:

[A]t the beginning they weren't... very convinced about... the situation, then... the magic is that there is a balance between us, so... so now things work like this, and at the moment, if for whatever reason one of the two moves away or... or

this balance falls apart, the castle seems to collapse. I mean, I'll give you a very trivial example: in the last month Valentino was in [another city], aaand... for a month-long internship, and Giovanni and I had a fight every single day, that is, Giovanni sent Valentino messages like: "Come back, please, because here we are making a mess!".

Despite the lack of conviction at the beginning, in the case of Federica and her partners a balance has been created between the metapartners which now seems essential for the continuation of the individual relationships as well.

Similarly, Emilia (30) described the situation with her two partners at the moment of the interview as "the ideal situation" for the relationship between the two of them:

[B]etween them there is a very good relationship and (...) for me it is very important, in the case of other partners, the fact to be all... to get to know each other, to all get along together, to have an excellent relationship between the metapartners, and because I like this idea of big family... as in Ozpetek, and also because of pure selfishness: if we all get along, it is easier for me to manage the situation, and I don't have to argue with one person or the other. (...) Marco continually asks me about Marcello when we are together: how is he, what is he up to, when will we see him, why don't you take him to [his city], aaand... this is really beautiful!

Emilia's narrative likewise emphasises the importance of a good relationship between her partners, allowing them to all feel part of a "big family".

In some cases, the relationships between metapartners continue even after the romantic relationship with the partner who was at the top of the V comes to an end. In Filippo's (48) case, it was the relationship between meta-metapartners that persisted:

[S]ometimes the fact that a relationship is dissolved jeopardises any type of continuation, instead in this case... the existing relationships, and also those that have developed, have then continued over time. Then, the only trait that is not...

has not developed in any way, has failed to develop, was the one between [my two partners], while the meta-metapartners (...) have maintained a cordial relationship, including exchanging emails, messages, phone calls, and... having become acquainted in the context of this polyamorous experience, because they did not know each other before.

Filippo's testimony is important because it reveals how polyamorous relationships open up a series of connections that last over time – not only with metapartners, but also with the partners of the partners of the partners – thereby helping to form an emotional network.

Obviously, the case of the triad is very specific and the dynamics between partners are also different. Morena (37) reported having a very nice memory of the periods she lived in a triad, even if it did not last long:

Some time ago, telling a non-expert what a polyamorous relationship is from my point of view, I told her that, when things are going well, you discover... heaven on earth [laughs], because it's true. Also because I believe that some things that are not fair in a two-person dynamic, in three, or four, or five-person dynamics, they [these unfair things] are distributed in a more... quiet way, more serene, more... more natural, even, sometimes. That is, there is a... there is precisely a more equitable distribution of the parts and also of the resolution of the parts, more often than not. I don't know, sometimes if Andrea and I had a disagreement, Lorena's external point of view was very important to... understand some things that were not obvious to us from within. And vice versa, when the two of them had serious disagreements, I could see Andrea from another perspective, Lorena from a completely new point of view, myself in a completely new perspective [laughs]. Also because it is true that... a kind of third entity is always generated, that is: there were the three of us, the fourth [entity] that was generated by the entity of the three of us, me and her, the third one that was generated by the entity of me and her, me and Andrea, the third one that was generated by our entity... and the two of them, with the other entity that was generated by their relationship, all summed up in an *unicum*.

Similar to Federica (but amplified by the fact of being in a triad), for Morena the balance that is created among three people also helps the harmony of one-on-one relationships because an external standpoint helps participants to see things from another perspective. Although this relationship ended, life in a triad represented a unique experience for her, something she likened to “heaven on earth”.

In summary, we can say that, despite the differences among the experiences of the interviewees, there are some elements that multiple respondents highlighted from various sides. In particular, relationships with metapartners are often seen as an opportunity to forge new connections, and in some cases the extended network is perceived as a “big family”. In addition, some of the people interviewed highlighted the positive repercussions in terms of strengthening balance and harmony which a good relationship between metapartners also has on one-to-one relationships.

### *5.5 The “blemish”: lies, omissions, asymmetries, and emotional overloading*

This section is dedicated to all of the difficulties entailed in managing polyamorous relationships that emerged from the interviews, in addition to those arising from jealousy. While taking into account the fact that interviewed people tend to adapt to the narratives considered “good” within the reference community, highlighting potential difficulties can be useful both to avoid an overly rose-coloured view of polyamory, and as a tool for internal reflection and self-critique.

I begin this section by dealing with lies and omissions. The most macroscopic omission to have emerged in the interviews is that of the person who – at the moment of the interview – was transparent with only one of the people he was dating. This led him to maintain a castle of lies, including using his son as an “excuse” to enable him to see the other two people:



N: And how do you handle it with the two who are less aware, that is, what do you say?

E: [They are] not aware at all.

N: Eh. I mean, you say you only have that free day there?

E: Exactly, exactly. Among other things, having a child is also an excellent excuse for not... [laughs] (...) so yes, I say I have problems with my son, I can't go out.

Beyond this extreme, other lies and omissions were also “confessed” to me. Carlo (48) told me that sometimes he lies to his partner “because she is controlling”. For example, his partner would prefer he did not spend the night with his other lovers, but Carlo often does not feel like sending them away at night. He thus has them sleep the night but does not tell his primary partner he has done so.

Other lies and omissions reported by interviewees regard their partners' behaviours: for example, for a long time Attilio's (42) former partner hid the fact that she was dating and developing feelings for another person. Attilio commented on that episode:

[T]his thing was a very very... devastating thing for me, it completely undermined that relationship of... trust that should be very very high among people who share that kind of relationship. In short, I felt betrayed.

In this case, part of the problem involved breaking an agreement that the partner wanted to establish, albeit partly opposed by Attilio. Specifically, she had wanted to avoid the possibility of their developing feelings of love for other partners, but in the end she was the first one to break the agreement.

Agreement-breaking was also a problem in one of Cinzia's (32) accounts. A few years ago, she and her (primary) partner started dating another couple with the agreement that they would have sexual relations always and exclusively with all four of them present. In this case it was Cinzia who broke

the agreement, having sex with the other man at a party. The interviewee described the incident as “catastrophic” because their violation of the agreement was followed by several very tense days, although ultimately the conflict deflated and they maintain a very close friendship with this couple even today.

Another problem reported in the interviews is that of relational asymmetry, which may involve a different intensity of feelings or different emotional security. In the case of Sam (37), they would like to avoid developing romantic feelings with other people, but the people they was dating often had difficulty maintaining the boundaries Sam had established:

I often find myself in recurrent situations: “I need to see you, I miss you”, and everything. Also because, in fact, I believe that we enter into that situation I was talking about before, that is: even if I put up walls and tell you: “Look, my life is already messed up enough, I need you to have your spaces distinct and separated from me (...) I can't devote more than X amount [of energy] to you, I need to... to not get too involved”, in fact it creates that dynamic in which the romantic impulse destroys everything, and therefore they arrive and begin to ask more and more, to ask more and more, even in a very short time, and to even find themselves in situations that are sometimes unpleasant, in the sense of finding people with whom I have newly-created relationships (...) know I'm someplace and come just to talk to me.

In the case of Sam, the asymmetry is due to the fact that the interviewee tries to avoid romantic involvement with new partners, while on their side the new partners often begin to develop romantic feelings and act accordingly. This asymmetry gives rise to unpleasant dynamics in which Sam's expressed limits are often overlooked or pushed.

Another case of asymmetry can occur when a third person dates an already-established couple. It was once again Cinzia who highlighted this imbalance, problematising it in terms of power as well:

[I]t is also true that, since we were already a couple and she joined us, this created a very strong disparity in power, which I believe I underestimated for a long time... in the sense that, if things went wrong, I always had someone with whom to talk about it, I had a chance to take refuge in the fact that... anyway, I will continue my relationship with him, that is... it is as if there was a relationship with priority with respect to the insertion of a third person who... we hadn't all met each other at the same time, even from the sexual point of view...

This dynamic is quite frequent and has already been identified by activists and polyamory theorists as “couple privilege”. Veaux and Rickert (2014) defined it as “[e]xternal social structures or internal assumptions that consciously or unconsciously place a couple at the center of a relationship hierarchy or grant special advantage to a couple” (p. 314). It is important to highlight that social structures contribute to strengthening this particular form of power asymmetry through mechanisms such as mononormativity and amatonormativity, as outlined in Chapter 2.

However, the asymmetry of feeling or emotional security does not always develop along this axis. In the case of Morena (37), after about six months her partner Lorena, who had entered into a relationship with her and Andrea when they were already a couple, understood that she had developed much stronger feelings towards Morena and decided to break off her relationship with Andrea and continue only her relationship with the interviewee. This indirectly caused feelings of guilt in the interviewee because Andrea took this development in the relationship very badly.

In other cases the problem may be what I identify as an overload of emotional work being performed by one of the people involved in the relationship, more often a person socialised as woman. Hochschild (1983) has highlighted that, on average, the amount of emotional work women take on is greater than that of men, both in affective relationships and in the workplace. The scholar traces the reasons for this inequality to the fact that women have “far less independent access to money, power, authority, or status in society” (p. 163).

Among my respondents, Serena (28) and Rachele (26) both told me about situations in which they felt that the management of communication and polyamorous dynamics feel wholly on their shoulders. For both women, this overloading was also the effect of taking responsibility for the fact that they were the ones who had multiple partners at that time, unlike their respective partners. In fact, Rachele also admitted that she felt the need to manage everything on her own, without asking for help. With her former partner, the main problem was that they had very different communicational needs; specifically, she needed to verbalise a lot while he did not. This dysfunctionality in communication, exacerbated by some serious omissions by her partner, led to her facing several situations of very difficult emotional management, as in this episode she described for me:

I was offered [by my partner] a weekend in Rome with this person, and it was not clear a weekend of what nature: a weekend... in which to have sex all three together in a situation where no one had ever had sex with this person, a weekend in which to chat in a desexualised context? I did not know anything. When we were able to talk about it in clear terms, because on one hand I was tempted by the idea of doing this weekend with another person and I didn't imagine at all that there was already a relationship going on [between my partner and this girl], on the other hand... so, I didn't want to move away because I was tempted, but on the other hand I didn't want to... I was a little afraid of not knowing how to manoeuvre, especially in this context that wasn't... a place where I wasn't at home, [not] in my city, I didn't have a network... for any... problems. So, I decided not to talk about it, to not make agreements, nothing, nothing. (...) I left, I went, I'm in Rome... a new context, I didn't know anything, among other things – a decisive element – I didn't have any money, at that time, so I also had a moment of... that is... economic dependence on this person. Aaaand... when we arrive in the evening at this beautiful house, with two beds in fact [laughs], I realise that I don't want to stay there, I don't want to do this, I'm terrified, I don't want to do it anymore, I'm terrified. I say to him: “I don't want to do it anymore”, he says to me: “Ok, okay, perfect, we won't do it, don't worry”. Aaaand... but, in the meantime, my workaholic part turns around and I say to myself: “But is

it possible?! That you don't want to do this, that you were so scared? But that is not right, but that is not true, but you are not this way, you are a feminist, proud, able to face all the experiences that happen to you, you want to destroy the monogamy that is in you!". Aaaaand... in short, they began to present all these... expectations that I had about myself. So what did I do? I proposed sex. I proposed sex... that... it was a bit strange, point number 1 because this person... was not very familiar with women, so (...) I became angry with the person who chose her, saying: "Excuse me... that is, but sorry... she has never done it, she has no... she has no familiarity [with women], what the fuck... I dunno, why propose a situation that is so... complicated?". Point number 2, there was a... terrible dynamic, in which both... of competition between the two of us, terrible, atrocious. Point 3, seeing them having sex without a condom, I got pissed off like a hyena, I was really angry, and so what prevailed was a sense of inadequacy as much as anger towards this person, who put me in such an unsafe situation without explaining a minimum of what... was happening – right? That is, in this way, in front of my face this sex, like this, with a person with whom you are obviously amalgamated, because when you see sex you realise it, don't you? I had never seen a person I was dating having sex with another. Never. Live. I had never seen anything, I didn't know how it was. To see it, to see this familiarity... so, to see it immediately, to discover that the relationship was more consolidated [that I had expected], that they are having sex without protection, it really destroyed me. I was terrible, we spent the weekend trying to... to... to solve this disgusting situation, which is really... that is, it escaped my control, and in which among other things there was a third who wasn't inside our relationship, she was not familiar with the situation, she did not expect... that is, probably she was not very well informed either... about the context.

In this case, Rachele also suffered an emotional impact as a result of having to deal with this situation she found complex without being completely convinced she even wanted to go through with it and without having thorough information before tackling it. It is interesting to note that, even in these conditions, the interviewee felt the weight of having to perform the role of the “feminist, proud, able to face all the experiences” and who “want[s] to destroy monogamy”.

Partly related to this last reflection, I would like to close this section with the story of the emotional impact a group sex experience had on Amedeo's (35) partner:

[T]here was a moment when, yes, we had a sexual experience – let's call it an orgasmic situation, it was not really that, but... there were more than two, more than three, X people... – aaand... for me it was very nice, because they were all people I knew, all people I trusted, there was an enormous sweetness. For her, instead, I discovered after a year, it was the beginning of... an abandonment of sexual energy, as if it had been too much, as if it had broken a barrier, and... currently, we are still in crisis from that point of view.

Although we do not know the details of the sensations and motivations of the person in question, it seems that, similarly to the previous account, in this case as well there was an underestimation of the emotional impact that a specific sexual experience might have.

To conclude this section, we can say that, excluding the more macroscopic omission of non-transparency with all the people involved in the relationships (which, in fact, does not fall under the definition of polyamory), the other lies and omissions mainly concern instances in which the agreements made within relationships were violated.

Other problems emerging in the management of CANM relationships have to do with asymmetries in the relationships between partners, mainly stemming from a difference in degree of emotional involvement or hierarchisation. When it is a couple who interacts with a single person, this asymmetry is present at both micro and macro level and takes the name of “couple privilege” (*cf.* Veaux and Rickert 2014). We have also seen, however, that this type of asymmetry is not always the rule; in some cases, the asymmetry develops along other lines.

Another problem expressed in the narratives of some interviewees is the emotional overload stemming from managing polyamorous relationships,

which in some cases weighs on some people more than others, not surprisingly often people socialised as women.

Finally, even among my interviews there were accounts of management difficulties due to what one of Deri's (2011) interviewees called "the posturing of poly cool", that is, reactions to the pressure to be "a good polyamorous" person capable of managing their emotions. This posturing can lead to underestimating one's emotions and engaging in actions (for example, sharing sexual experiences) that end up giving rise to emotional turmoil.

### *Conclusions*

I would like to summarise this chapter by returning to the theme of the dichotomy between emotions and rationality that I introduced in Chapter 1 and which I took back at the beginning of this chapter with the question: how do people who live CANM manage the potential conflict between rationality and emotions in their affective practice?

As some theorists have pointed out (see e.g. Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse 2006; Gusmano 2018b; Vassallo 2018), a part of polyamorous theory is based on individualistic and rationalistic principles which, on the emotional security/personal autonomy continuum, favour personal autonomy and the previous negotiation of relationships to avoid – among other things – emotional swings and the manipulation of consent. The rationalisation process is also strengthened by the idea that the management of polyamorous relationships requires hard work (*cf.* Cascais and Cardoso 2012) both individually, directed at the self, and together with the partner(s): to understand what we feel, to manage these feelings, to discover what is behind feelings of jealousy, to communicate with the partners and eventually make agreements based on the needs and desires of the people in the relationship.

I also found this trend in some of the practices collected or in some of the explanations of these practices by the people interviewed, for example the

need to make agreements or to put into writing reminders to be followed in future relationships; the use of rationalisation as a coping strategy to keep jealousy at bay; a – sometimes excessive – accountability for one's emotions that sometimes results in guilt; and the urge to have sexual experiences that sometimes disregards feelings of vulnerability.

However, it seems to me that this drive towards the contractualisation of relationships is not overly marked and, in some cases, the respondents have also tried to bring emotions and the body back to the centre, as in the case of Irene's coping strategy for dealing with jealousy.

Furthermore, we have also seen how agreements and rules, but also jealousy, can sometimes be used as a tool to manipulate the partner for their own advantage (for example, trying to make the weight of a previously-existing relationship prevail over another nascent relationship). We have also seen that there is sometimes a power asymmetry as a result of differences in the participants' emotional involvement in the relationship or the hierarchisation of one relationship over another (for example, when a couple is relating to a single person). Furthermore, in some cases it is not easy for the interviewees to identify privileged positions and asymmetries of power in their relationships, especially when they are hidden by an apparently consensual and non-problematic adherence to the relationship. Sometimes it is also the (self-applied) pressure to be “a good polyamorous” person that leads one's emotions and vulnerabilities to be neglected.

On the other hand, some interviewees highlighted how having a good relationship with metapartners (or being in a triad) can also benefit one-to-one relationships, because it helps them to see conflicts from different perspectives.

Finally, despite the limitations already highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, I believe that the narratives of some of these practices can offer preliminary material for reflecting on the concept of emotional vulnerability, on the basis of questions such as: how much am I able to identify and take care of my vulnerabilities? Have I ever overlooked my emotional limits because I felt I



was not “polyamorous enough”? And on the other hand: how much am I responsible for taking care of my partners’ vulnerabilities? How much can this care be shared with other people? This reflection can then be accompanied by a critical rethinking of the concept of consent which recognises that an apparently consensual adhesion does not protect against forms of manipulation and asymmetry.

## Chapter 6

### CANM and Identity

*All my life, I have always loved multiple people at the same time, always, it wasn't a strange thing for me, none of the love relationships affected the other. (...) In my head there was always a little... an ideal, it didn't come to me from external influences, it was something really deeply connected to... to my being, to the heart (Morena, 37).*

*I remain polyamorous even in the absence of relationships. (...) I could not work in a different environment than the polyamorous one, right now. At this moment I feel strongly about having this identity, and this also means that the possibility of relationships that impose the need to close the couple, for example, I absolutely could not manage that (Pau, 25).*

*I don't... I don't feel polyamorous. I mean, I feel that my relationships are not defined by that. So, I experience relationships regardless of the definitions (Marzia, 25).*

In this chapter I try to bring together different micro-themes under the umbrella theme of identity. The wider focal point here is the way in which the respondents (and the polyamorous community more generally) interpret the relationship between structure and agency according to many different perspectives: what is the individual strategy/theoretical approach of the social actors? They are closer to an essentialist approach or a constructivist one? Can the community be considered a collective subject? And if so, what is the role of this subject? Is the possibility of changing the social structure a shared goal? And, if so, are there shared strategies for acting on the social structure?

First of all, in the first section I try to investigate my interviewees' narratives around their discovery of polyamory, making a distinction between essentialist narratives, constructionist narratives and narratives that seek to overcome this dichotomy. The second section instead focuses on the community of reference and the different ways people are positioned with respect to this community. In the third section I then explore the theme of relations with society, talking about coming out and public and private spaces. Finally, the last section

is dedicated to political conflicts and positioning, from apoliticisation to radicalism going through more assimilationist positions.

### *6.1 Between orientation and choice*

The nature/nurture debate influenced interpretations of “sexual orientation” throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and seems to continue doing so. As we have seen in Chapter 1, at the beginning sexology privileged an essentialist and modernist interpretation of sexual behaviour, locating the causes of human behaviour in the biological substrate (*cf.* Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003). Starting with Gagnon and Simon (1973) and then the great influence of post-structural theorists, the prevailing interpretation progressively moved towards an ever more stringent constructivism that instead highlighted the influence of social and cultural elements (*cf.* Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003). However, constructivist interpretations have not completely suppressed biologicist ones: as Klesse (2007, 2014) also points out, sexual orientation research published in the 1990s in the USA was aimed at investigating the biological causes of homosexuality, for example in the brain structure or genetic sequences. These lines of thought were partially acknowledged and adopted by the gay and lesbian movement because they were functional to a social justification of their sexual behaviour. In fact, these interpretations helped to move from a paradigm that frames sexual orientation as a choice to one that frames it as a natural and therefore inevitable biological drive. Although these interpretations and identity politics in general have been important in protecting and strengthening the resistance of sexual minorities groups against stigmatisation (Oosterhuis 2000; Weeks, Holland and Waites 2003), this argument is not sufficient to provide effective protection from persecution, as was evident from the extermination politics under the Third Reich (Stein 1999; Klesse 2014). Furthermore, this strategy saps strength from other movements based on defending the freedom of choice and on the concept of self-determination, such as abortion rights movements. While on one side social

constructionist, post-structuralist, life-course research and queer scholars began to question the sexual orientation model (Plummer 1981; Waites 2009), more recently (as already highlighted in Chapter 1), theorists have critiqued both rigid essentialism and rigid constructivism in an effort to overcome the nature/nurture dichotomy (Williams and Bendelov 1996; Williams 2001; Petersen 2004; *cf.* Deri 2011, 2015).

Similar discourses can be seen to apply to polyamory. The prevailing debate can be summarised in the question: is polyamory an identity or a choice? As Klesse (2007, 2014) has noted in his valuable overview, those who support the former position include the discourse on polyamory within an orientation frame, a strategy favoured by some theorists (Emans 2004, Tweedy 2011) on the grounds that such framing would facilitate activism for polyamorous rights. On the contrary, Emans (*ibid.*) has lamented the fact that universalistic arguments prevail over minority ones in poly activism, i.e. narratives that emphasise affinities with characteristics found in the rest of the population as well (for example, the high general propensity to cheat) rather than casting polyamorous people as a minority population with distinct characteristics due to inclination/nature<sup>60</sup>.

Klesse (2014), in contrast to the above-mentioned authors, highlights the potential drawbacks of including the polyamorous narrative under the orientation frame: above all, it can undermine the radical potential of the polyamorous discourse, thereby reducing opportunities for alliances and facilitating a process of assimilation to the dominant social framework rather than a process of transforming it. Moreover, some authors such as Aviram (2010) underline the incompatibility between a polyamorous discourse and rigid categorisations or typologies, instead highlighting how polyamory contributes to

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<sup>60</sup> The differentiation between universalistic and minoritising arguments goes back to Sedgwick (1990), who theorised it in reference to gay and lesbian activism.

a more fluid view of sexual and emotional behaviours. This point also emerged in the narratives of my respondents, as I have extensively shown in Chapter 4.

### *6.1.1 Theory and practice: which comes first?*

The first distinction to be made among my respondents' narratives is between those who discovered polyamorous terminology and theory after having already begun practicing CANM and those who encountered the theory first, and subsequently began to transform the practice of their relationships. In my sample, more than half (33) of the people interviewed described adhering more closely to the first trajectory, while the other 20 position themselves closer to the second type. Seven people have followed a more blurry path.

To begin with the narratives that more closely adhere to the first path, for example, Marta (42) remembered:

Let's say that from the age of 20 I have had relationships – apart from a few – which are quite anomalous and free... Precisely because I didn't... partly because I felt bisexual<sup>61</sup> and... and I was saying that... right away, and so that already opened up ...the couple... a bit. Aaand... and partly because I don't believe in exclusivity, I don't really believe in exclusivity. In fact, when I was in monogamous couples, I more or less always cheated. A couple of times I have been in more traditional couples, but it was precisely those times that I cheated the most, because maybe it's not... it should be, because I don't consider it cheating in a possibilist couple, or rather the fact that you want to reveal it, it does something to let off the... let's say, thee... the tension, that is.

By reviewing the relationships she has had in her life, Marta came to the conclusion that she had always had a non-monogamous orientation. In fact,

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of the intersection between bisexual and polyamorous identity, see Gusmano (2018a) and Braida (forthcoming). This latter publication also offers a discussion on the resistance of some of my interviewees to what Eisner (2013) calls “binormativity”.

the obligation to exclusivity involved in monogamous relationships has always been oppressive for her and, paradoxically, has been an inducement to cheat.

Angelica (31) was likewise already in a cohabiting triad with her ex-husband and her ex-boyfriend in 2012 when she discovered the term polyamory and the existence of an Italian community (which was in its infancy at that time):

N: I want to ask you if you remember the first time you heard of polyamory...

A: Yes, I remember it very well. I was sitting in my kitchen while E. [ex-boyfriend] was preparing dinner, aaand... and I was reasoning with G. [ex-husband], because for a little while we had been thinking about enlarging the family, of having children – we were already married – and I... I had been talking to a lawyer to understand if there could be problems in the case of three people parenting, in the sense... if I had decided to... have a child with G. and... and live under the same roof with E. as well, we had the concern that social workers, or... [giggle] stuff like that, could... raise the issue. In reality I had received very reassuring news, but anyway I was not all that calm [about it], above all I was wondering how other people had, maybe in my same situations, been able to manage the figure of a third parent, to give him recognition... social at least, if not legal, and so I started searching on the Internet, searching for “menage à trois”, I didn't even know that... what a triad was, I was looking for “menage à trois”, I ended up on Wikipedia, “Jules and Jim”, right? [laughing]

N: [laughs]

A: ...looking at everything this word suggested to me on the web... and on Wikipedia I also found... “It refers to the concept of polyamory” – Let's go see this polyamory! and... I also found that there was a polyamory group in Italy, which was on Facebook, and so, very quietly, I wrote introducing myself, explaining my situation, asking: “Oh, you, older, wiser [people], more experienced and more enlightened than me, how have you handled the other partner in case of ... family enlargement, and so on?”. And... and there... I was brought down to earth because actually I discovered that it was a very large community, but with little practical experience. There was a lot of theory, but little practice. And... and that's it, that's how I encountered polyamory.

This story introduces an important, albeit incidental, argument, namely the risk that polyamorous families will be problematised by institutions (*cf.* Sheff 2010; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010) which are usually shaped by normative understanding of family (Riggs 2010). However, as the interviewee herself had the opportunity to discover, for now there are not many cases in Italy of families raising children in a polyamorous context.

Moving on to the narratives of those in the second group, it is much more evident how important it was for them to encounter a community of reference or an already-formalised model for social recognition and how they subsequently changed their own ways of practicing relationships. In this regard, Michele (28) explained:

[D]espite having always been able to, actuallyyy... to comprehend [this idea], these are the things that have a definition, when they have a definition you conceive them in a certain way, but in reality then you realise that... in short, be it good or bad, you have always had them in your head, so... it's ok.

As highlighted by Ritchie and Barker (2006), the interviewee explained how the construction and learning of a polyamorous language had allowed him to grant definition to ideas of relationships that he had been able to conceptualise before, but in a less concrete way. As the two authors note, “alternative languages seem to enable new ways of experiencing as well as expressing sexual stories” (*ibid.*, p. 585).

In some cases, it is not the polyamorous community that played this role of an empowering tool for transformation but rather other encounters, for example political activism and (trans)feminist and queer activism in particular:

P: [W]hen I started to do activism at University, I became involved with a group of activists... a group of University students of which I was part [...] and that, in fact, [this group] also worked a lot on gender issues [...]

N: Ok. And at that time you had already had experiences of non-monogamy in your relationships?

P: No, never. And... I can safely say that my polyamorous life was formed in the political sphere, that is, it starts a lot from the political, aaand... and then goes into the personal. [...] A deconstruction that is mainly political. It is probably given by the reference context of activist groups (Pau, 25).

Similarly, Valeria told me that frequenting feminist circles was fundamental to sowing the cultural “seeds” on which polyamorous theories are based:

N: (...) [W]hen you talk about the experiences that led you to this journey, do you also mean feminist circles?

V: Yes, also those... also, because in the assembly, during moments of discussion, obviously, the whole trajectory about... about the body, respecting the other and about ... about possession has always been however... that is, it has always been part of the discussion, but in the sense that we were talking about it. Aaaand... so... yes, in any case it is from there that the seed planted itself ideologically. In the sense that, in any case, no one has the right to say anything about others, about the body, about their choices, their gender identity, their sexual orientation, and... just the freedom to decide about their own bodies and themselves as... as they like. And nothing... so, yes, certainly the political and cultural training has had a big role (Valeria, 35).

For both Pau and Valeria, frequenting certain political circles was fundamental in their embarking down a path of awareness which then led them to also change their way of conceptualising affective relationships.

Although for the people in the first group the practice of polyamory came before the theory, some of them also referenced cultural influences that had affected their path. Cinzia (32), for example, highlighted her trajectory of transfeminist activism and the discussion of “other intimacies” carried out by the SomMovimento NazioAnale as an important element in her process, while others



mentioned more unexpected influences. Felice's reference was to Greek philosophy:

I am passionate... one of my passions is Greek philosophy, including Plato and Socrates, and in the *Symposium*, Socrates says: "Loving means wanting the good for a loved one, not one's own". Otherwise it is selfishness, it is not love towards the other. And therefore I always start from this assumption (Felice, 69).

Sergio's reference is surely more unexpected in that he cited his Christian background as the basis for developing a discourse on love:

I repeat, for me it derives precisely from the fact that since I was a child I have frequented Church environments a lot, my mother being a philosopher, a theologian, very involved in the parish, with, however, people, precisely, theologians, not with the priest... let's say, poor suburban, but always people who are nonetheless structured from an intellectual point of view. Anyway, surely all the... my existential questions on fundamental things, then on the concept of love, the concept of justice, the concept of truth, I have always engaged with them from a Christian perspective, but then... I don't... I have always felt very free to... open them up to new meanings (Sergio, 30).

As for the interviewees who described a more nuanced path, their narratives were diverse: some of them said they had always felt "natural" opening up to more than one person but then they only began to actually structure relationships as polyamorous after having encountered the community, while previously they had often cheated instead (Attilio, 42; Alberto, 34; Manuel, 32). Another pathway described was that of having had in mind an open relationship but not always being able to transpose it into practice because the partners they were with were not open to the idea (Sonia, 55). In the case of Alfredo (36), knowledge of the term came almost at the same moment as the decision to organise the relationship as open from the emotional point of view as well. Similarly, Edoardo (25) had already begun questioning monogamy when he

discovered the term polyamory in the context of LGBT+ volunteering, and at that point he began to construct his relationships according to that model. Finally, Claudio's (28) path was much more blurred, oscillating between exploring different relationship types and theory absorbed mainly by queer activism after coming out as homosexual.

The people who remembered the first time they heard or read the term "polyamory" cited several sources: the most numerous were the Internet (13 people), including Facebook, Wikipedia or more niche environments such as Discord<sup>62</sup>; environments of political or LGBT+ activism (11 people) or through a friend (ten people). Six people were informed directly by a partner; five heard of it for the first time on television (they referred to a report by the Italian entertainment program *Le Iene*<sup>63</sup>, an episode of the Italian talk show *La Mala Educaxxion*<sup>64</sup> and the USA series *Private Practice*<sup>65</sup> in which a triad appeared in one of the episodes). Finally, four people became aware of it through a person they met through a dating app (the app OkCupid was mentioned in particular and is currently considered the most "poly-friendly"); three people through magazines (two mentioned Dan Savage's column in the weekly information magazine *Internazionale* and one the USA version of the magazine *Vice*) and three others through the BDSM community.

Although polyamorous practice preceded theory for a majority of my respondents, it seems that for most of the interviewees their encounter with the polyamorous community served to confirm and validate their experiences. The use of social networks seems to have played an important role for the interviewees in finding other people who practiced or thought of relationships in a similar way (*cf.* Paccagnella 2020), but involvement with political groups (in particular feminist, transfeminist and queer) is also mentioned by most

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<sup>62</sup> A VoIP application designed for gamer communities.

<sup>63</sup> Episode aired 10 February 2013.

<sup>64</sup> 4 July 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Spin-off from *Grey's Anatomy*.

interviewees as fertile grounds for questioning the heterosexual, monogamous model.

### *6.1.2 Born this way?*

My respondents' accounts included both narratives that endorse an essentialist view of the polyamorous inclination and narratives that privilege the impact of the cultural dimension, with a slight prevalence of the former.

Regarding the more essentialist narratives, one recurrent theme is the idea that children/adolescents are non-monogamous by nature but their instincts to love multiple people are then suffocated by a society that imposes monogamy by stigmatising their desires. Morena's (37) account is particularly significant in this regard:

[I]n total naturalness and that path that is totally devoid of societal conditionings, therefore... naturally, what the child-child relationship indicates is very different compared to what you then experience subsequently, as you acquire what I call (...) the imposed conscience, because it seems to me that I have observed in the course of my life that authenticity gets lost precisely in order to adapt to what... often comes a little down from above, like what is right, what must be.

This narrative is influenced by the Freudo-marxist tradition developed by Reich (1936), Marcuse (1955), and Mieli (2002) in Italy. These authors posit that power acts on sexuality only in the form of repression and see sexuality as a natural force that is repressed by society (and capitalist systems in particular).

Alfredo's (36) narrative also seems to follow this line by virtue of the contrast it makes between non-monogamous instincts and failed attempts of rationalisation to bring these in line with societal expectations:

N: Do you think thaaaat... that somehow it was... mmmh... it is natural for you to be non-monogamous, or that, in fact, is also a path ooof... rationalisation?

A: I think it's absolutely natural, because the rationalisation has been... towards something else, I tried to rationalise monogamous relationships for a long time, but... something never worked, and I come from a family... [that is] monogamous, effectively, aaaand... it's like, somehow, really, I think I've always had this... Indeed, when it came out I felt... I was able to breathe.

The people who do not believe they were born non-monogamous instead tend to interpret the arrival of polyamory in their life as a choice or option. For example, Angelica said:

It is that I realise thaaat... for many people the word polyamory means having their own relational orientation, like a sexual orientation, so something that is not that you choose, it is your nature and you have to follow it to be happy. And I've never had this very clear [idea] about myself, that is, in any case, in the four years – when I was 16 years old – in my first four years of monogamous relationship, I was happy, and then I decided to make it an open couple... why not? Because for us it was not a problem, if it had been a problem I think I would have continued to stay in a closed relationship, with my partner, and I would not have felt anything was lacking, to be honest. Now, after many years in which I have been with... multiple people at the same time and I've been with people in an exclusive way, actually I realise that... I will always have the ability to identify people who I find interesting, in addition to... my partner [giggle]. And therefore it would always be... a conscious renunciation on my part, choosing not to investigate more to not find out what could develop with that person. That is, it would be a deliberate choice to maintain certain relationships within the boundaries of knowing each other, friendship... (...) [S]o... actually yes, I can say that I have chosen to have polyamorous relationships (Angelica, 31).

Guido (30) was even clearer in their refusal of the essentialist narrative and carried out a precise deconstruction of it:

I will tell you the truth: this discourse of “I've always been this way” annoys me, I've heard it many times (...): “In the end I had not given it a name, but I have always been like this, I have always practised my relationships like this”.

Obviously, if others tell that about their lives it's fine. I honestly don't see it that way. In my opinion – I'll give you a little comment that, well, it's not really politically correct – I believe that people explain things to themselves a little, even in retrospect, not – right? – that is, there is always the need to... to make sense of everything, a little like I used to do before, when I told you: “Actually it is not that I decided to be pansexual at any moment, but actually I was in love with a friend of mine” – right? – maybe it was not true, but it was, that is, for me it is, in my thinking, it was a bit like explaining the world before. So, to say: “It has always been like this but I didn't give it a name” sometimes seems to me a bit like explaining the world before, then, sometimes even, who cares about the objectivity of the world – ok? – I don't consider it that way, I feel a lot about being changed, about being... evolved – for me, it's not a universal judgment, it evolved for me because I'm very calm, relaxed about things, despite... there being really very difficult moments.

Another interesting aspect that emerged, in this case in Martina's (31) narrative, is the insistence on recounting the efforts involved in the polyamorous path in terms of storytelling:

I believe it was a journey, in the sense that, surely, in fact, my stories of the past could be read as: “But maybe I always have been and I didn't know it”, [but] actually I'm working every single day, constantly, I constantly have to be aware of what I am implementing and to dismantle piece by piece all the social constructions that are above it, so I define a path and I believe, indeed, that I am only at the beginning. Absolutely. Even though, in fact, I have devoted a lot of energy to the relational issue in the last year, with discussions until 4 AM I don't know how many nights, anyway, in my opinion, I have just scratched the surface of reaching a point where I consider myself totally serene, in so many dynamics of polyamory. So, [it's] definitely a process.

This discourse echoes the recurrent idea found in self-help literature about polyamory lifestyle (e.g. Anapol 1997; Easton and Hardy 1997) as well as among polyamorous communities (*cf.* Cascais and Cardoso 2012) that managing polyamorous relationships requires a great deal of work. Some authors, such as

Kipnis (2003) and Petrella (2007), criticise this attitude because it reproduces an ascetic-protestant conception which ennobles sacrifice as essential to achieving happiness.

Some respondents try to overcome the nature/nurture dichotomy by refusing to give a unilateral answer to the dilemma. For example, Davide (33) affirmed that both the element of personal inclination and the process of constructing polyamorous relationships are essential, highlighting the importance of this process (together with others) for the construction of the self:

If you talk about non-monogamy as an act, it is certainly a process, if you talk about inclination, it was probably already inside me, in the sense that I have always had a lot of self-acceptance and therefore I have always explored what I felt a lot... However, I realise that they would have... that is, being born in other situations I could have never engaged with this situation. However, in short, how I could not have faced my bisexuality and other issues... – not necessarily positive things. I still consider these processes very important for the construction of my person, in this... right now.

Alessandra (43) highlighted the parallelism between discourses of relational orientation and those of sexual orientation, regarding both rigidly essentialist perspectives and rigidly constructivist ones with suspicion:

N: So, you do not identify as polyamorous?

A: I prefer not to. In general... I don't define myself in general. Let's say that I prefer to see things as practices that are implemented. Because defining oneself often has a sense of identity that does not fit me. Naturalis... things are naturalised, it's not like that for me, so...

N: Can you tell me a little more... what do you think are the risks of identity drift?

A: "I was born polyamorous"... mmh... "I was born lesbian"... mmh... "I was born... bisexual"... I dunno! According to me... then, my life experience is that:

1) there are political issues, of proper practices, aaand... and...

2) people, that is... we are not animals... we are cultural animals, and that makes so much difference. There is no... you cannot trace a clear definition between what is natural and biological, and what is cultural, so it is... They are – how to say it? – dimensions that maybe we want to define in this way for descriptive convenience, but actually... they compenetrates each other, they form each other.

The interviewee refuses identity-based positions in particular, arguing that our relational choices, as well as our sexual and affective orientations, are the result of a complex and indistinguishable mix of factors, both biological and cultural.

To summarise this sub-section we can say that, although narratives viewing polyamory as an inclination or orientation seem to slightly prevail, there are also narratives that interpret polyamory as a choice or a – rather rough – path. In addition, some interviewees try to overcome the orientation/choice and nature/nurture dichotomies. At any rate, from various sides the interviewees' narratives raise themes that are reflected in polyamorous literature and activism: for example, the idea that polyamorous ethics helps people to achieve a more authentic self (*cf.* Petrella 2007) or, on the other hand, the idea that managing polyamorous relationships requires a lot of work (*cf.* Petrella 2007; Cascais and Cardoso 2012). Although the different narratives are presented as opposite in my analysis, they clearly achieve a synthesis in the polyamorous theory. It can be hypothesised that people draw from such theory the interpretations that they consider most suited to their feelings or to their cultural backgrounds.

## *6.2 The community*

It has been widely noted (e.g. Goffman 1963) that people who suffer stigma in the society in which they live (in this case, for instance, people who do not fit the relationship model considered “normal” in Italian society) benefit from having a reference group, and this has also been found for the stigma around deviant

sexuality and affectivity (e.g. Plummer 1975). Regarding male homosexuality, for example, Plummer (*ibid.*) speaks of “homosexual subculture”; albeit with an awareness of the problems involved in using this concept, he defines a “subculture” as “[a]ny life style involving shared norms and values that differ in significant ways from a dominant culture” (p. 154). The author highlights that access to such a subculture can help to increase people’s chances of having sexual and social partners, enjoying more legitimisation and strengthening their sense of identity.

In relation to the group of people who identify as “polyamorous”, I prefer to use the term “community”. I employ this term with a more blurred meaning than the original conceptualisation, to also include “virtual” communities formed on the Internet which, by their very nature, have more flexible boundaries. My preference for this term is due to the fact that it seems more effective than others in capturing the importance of shared values (which partially diverge from those of the wider society) and a single – albeit blurred – common identity. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the polyamorous community in Italy comprises above all two main national Facebook groups and, in addition, local groups that meet regularly and maintain their own Facebook pages. However, the term “community” is sometimes contested by the very members of these groups. For example, Ettore (29), who is also an organiser of the local group, said during our interview:

I think... it's just... calling it a community, let's say... there is [a community] but it is very young, especially on the local [level], isn't it? That is, there is not a strong one, maybe... nor do we say awareness at the level of wanting to share... what are we doing... that is, it is much more oriented towards finding ourselves and recounting our own experiences, which anyway is fine...

Before delving more deeply into interviewees’ opinions and stories about the two “souls” of the community (the face-to-face one and the one



mediated by technology), I would like begin with a distinction between community insiders and outsiders. Indeed, not all of my respondents can be considered (or identify as) insiders. To be more precise, 20 of them are insiders, of which 13 are also local organisers or administrators of one of the two main Facebook groups (or have been in the recent past), although one of them is very active online but not active in the closest local community, and two others are very active in the local community but not very engaged at the national level (mostly mediated by online groups); 12, despite their occasional participation, do not display a strong sense of belonging in neither online groups or local groups, for example in that they are members of one of the Facebook groups but do not participate much in discussions and/or have only participated in a few meetings of the local groups; finally, 12 are outsiders in relation to the community. In the following sub-sections I explore in more detail the reasons for these positions of insider or outsider and the strengths and critical points raised by my research participants of both online groups and local ones.

### *6.2.1 The online national groups*

At the moment of the fieldwork, the two Facebook groups had<sup>66</sup> very similar rules that were clearly and succinctly expressed in the section “FAQ (Frequently asked and anticipated questions)” of the group *Polyamory and other ethical non-monogamies: discussion, exchange of ideas and support* in three sentences: “No dating, no trolling, no spamming”. The group *Polyhow: group of exchange of ideas and support about polyamory* has a more extended set of regulations, in particular with a session on “Listening for understanding and relevance” and a more explicit rule regarding the prohibition on “dating”:

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<sup>66</sup> I use the past because at the moment I conclude the dissertation the group *Polyamory and other ethical non-monogamies* has been archived. For the other group, what is reported remains true.

It is forbidden to contact other users in private or ask for friendship without having received PUBLIC AUTHORISATION by the interested user. Any report of violations of this rule will result in a verbal warning. In case of repeated behaviour, the user will be subject to a five-day suspension and ultimately banned from the group.

In addition, in both groups any form of discrimination/disrespect of minorities was not tolerated.

The administrators of the groups conducted intense gatekeeping aimed at maintaining a safer environment for members. Both groups required potential members to answer questions before being granted access to the group. *Polyhow* simply asks why the access is requested, while *Polyamory and other non-monogamies* had set three questions for gaining access: the first was the same as *Polyhow*, the second one required potential users to explain the difference between a dating group and a support group, and the third investigated their familiarity with the so-called “culture of consent” and asked them to give an example of such culture. In addition to these questions, the administrators also analysed the profiles of the people requesting access before granting or denying their requests. In this regard, two administrators (of the two different groups) told me:

I “spy” on profiles, and there we set ourselves a... a fairly tight policy... so where I find profiles of distinctly racist, distinctly homophobic, and so on, they weren’t... weren’t... given access to the group. But enough... I just need a little, in the sense that I am not even investigating (...), however we all agree... mmh, on this line, therefore – I don’t know – the user who likes the Casa Pound<sup>67</sup> page of their city, certainly is not going to enter the group, the user who shares – I do not know – even if it is only the fruit of a... (...) failure to really break down concepts, but if the user shares an image of African children with bloated stomachs and a boat of migrants and says: “No, these are – referring to African

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<sup>67</sup> Casa Pound is an Italian extreme right neo-fascist and populist political movement.

children with their stomachs – these are the children we must save, not those of the boat”, are not let into the group. In short, there are a few of these selection parameters... [which are] very tight, to tell you the truth (B.).

[W]e try so much to... to sift at the [point of] entrance, because anyway... unfortunately there are also many... characters looking for... trawling, so there have been more or less unpleasant episodes, and... we try to filter on entry, we go to look at the profiles. We check if... those of Casa Pound we refuse them, those of Catholic organisations we refuse them, in short, people... where we see intolerance, articulated in any form, we tend to reject them, to others we give... more or less everyone a chance (M.).

The two national groups, therefore, seemed to have similar policies for access: both groups carried out a rigid process of selection at the point of entry based on the answers provided to the questions and checks of potential users' profiles. People whose profiles suggests racist, sexist or homophobic ideas or people who are sympathisers of conservative and reactionary groups were rejected. M. added that these measures had also become necessary to prevent “trawling”, that is, the phenomenon whereby women in the group were incessantly contacted by men looking for sexual partners.

As for the comments of the people participating in the groups, some highlighted how important it is to have the opportunity to exchange ideas with other people who share similar experiences and values. For example, Attilio (42) told me:

[I]n the group I found great insights from the beginning, great support, if I have a problem, today, the first... the first entity I address is the group, it's the community. There are things... I mean, it's not really the first one because the first person with whom I talk is the person involved, usually the second person... the second entity are my current partners, the third entity is... the community. Especially... if the problems are complex, also affecting other spheres... as long as they are relevant to polyamory, usually... mmh... the community offers me... it always offers me a useful perspective, a perspective that gives me something.

Lately I had a problem, with L., aaand... I talked about it... in fact, I talked about it first with the community rather than... with my partners. Aaand... and I found answers that still made me re-define what my... initial idea was, re-define the evolution... Yes, the community... that is, it is very important for it to be there because not only... not only for moments, thus, of immediate need, but also because inside the community... models are formed, ideas are formed, ideas of what ethical non-monogamy is are discussed that contribute to its evolution.

Attilio underlines the importance of the online community not only for emotional support but also because it serves as a space in which new ideas about “what ethical non-monogamy is” are created, thereby contributing to the evolution of polyamorous theory and practice.

Other people mentioned the recognition-granting function that encountering the community (in this case in particular, with online groups) performed for them:

[V]irtually I became familiar with, that is, I entered the group *Polyhow*, and there I read a lot of interesting [accounts of] experiences, also in the site *Rifacciamo l'Amore*, actually there are also different articles, things that people were posting, I was very interested, I said: “How nice, finally a name for what I feel!” that is, I was really enthusiastic (Adele, 29).

[I]n general [the group] is populated by people who are very... smart from a rational point of view, and veryyyy... with a lot of good will to dissect the problems, the issues, and with... with a good ethical sense. So, basically, they present a lot of discourses, even [ones that are] very refined on an intellectual level, and a lot of reflections that are the result of introspective work, even of a... of the labour of being ... to be able to communicate it to others, and then yes you can learn so many things, even just as regards the use of language, vocabulary, then there are all these words that are used in the lexicon of polyamory, that are... they are useful because... they allow you to see more clearly certain dynamics or certain situations, that is, naming allows you to be able to recognise them more clearly, both in yourself and in others (Massimo, 50).

Adele and Massimo once again pointed out the importance of giving a name to relational experiences in order to legitimise and share them (*cf.* Ritchie and Barker 2006). Massimo also underlined the high level of intellectual exchange that he found within the group.

On the negative side, some people mentioned the typical dynamics of group interactions which in this case led to the risk of producing a new normativity (in particular, what I described in Chapter 2 as polynormativity). For instance, Silvia (36) said:

I am an extremely individualistic person, so the... the idea of a community in which everyone shares the same thing, and this... this... this element of sharing then expands to engulf all the other areas of life, it is something that scares me. And it is something that unfortunately happens in communities, it happens in collectives, it happens... in religious communities, and so on. So, even in the polyamory groups you can feel a lot... it is as if there were a tendency to consider polyamory a single thing, the only way to experience relationships, when polyamory is simply non-monogamy. For me the most important aspect of polyamory is self-determination, not the fact that there are multiple people, nor how I live with those people. In the 725 definitions of... non-monogamy, polyamory, relational anarchy, and so on... I really think the definition is just a favour we do to someone else to help them understand what we're talking about. And, unfortunately, in groups I feel this strong critical drive, that is I feel a tendency to define what is and what is not polyamory, what is and what is not jealousy, and what is and what is not appropriate or right, and so on. When, in my opinion, functionality of the groups lies in the exchange of information and in the sharing of reflections, not in the... in the creation of a doctrine. This, however, is something I hear on Facebook in general, not just in polyamory groups.

Silvia highlighted the tendency of the community to more and more stringently define what polyamory is, who is a good polyamorous practitioner and who is not, and to marginalise those who do not conform.

Other people concentrated their criticism above all on the excessive rationalisation and verbosity of online exchanges. According to Filippo (48), for example, such discussion forums lack the non-verbal and emotional components that are necessary, in his opinion, for this type of community:

I found the same problems that I encountered at the time with the online groups of the GLBT environment. I actually don't find virtual communities all that constructive, anywhere... (...) for me, the social relationship and bodily experience are inseparably welded, united, jointly, I cannot imagine a real human and social relationship outside the... of the interbody relationship. (...) [The] computer-mediated communication (...) facilitates the whole verbose side of those who are hyper-mental, cerebral, rational, and so on and so forth... and then creates so much confusion in those who instead need a more emotionally dense [form of] engagement. And then, verbally it is easier... to misunderstand... So, there are diatribes, incredible debates between people who, in reality, are convinced of the same things but express them in different words, sometimes then there is a whole useless factional philology [going] on.

Filippo highlighted two important aspects: first of all, the tendency towards a “hyper-mental, cerebral, rational” exchange is not suitable for everyone and the resulting tendency for those who are not used to that type of communication to feel cut out or to leave quickly; moreover, this extreme verbosity often gives rise to infinite online disputes which, according to the interviewee, could be solved very easily with an in-person meeting.

Other people criticised the administration's gatekeeping in terms of curbing “trawling” and attempts to approach girls in these groups, or of the use of language. Some interviewees have defined this commitment to gatekeeping as “politically correct excess” (Laura, 26; Alessio, 33) or, as in the case of Serena (28), perceived it as paternalistic:

I don't like it very much... even recently I had something to say about the posts against [a certain] approach, against all these things... that is, it seems to me that

there is an attitude... I see it... on one hand, very sex-negative and on the other hand... however, I consider it patriarchal. And, in the relationship with this approach, even with a harassing approach, that is, I expect that a person who has nevertheless carried out a journey within themselves regarding sexuality and everything else, if someone approaches me, shit, I belong to all these things, so it's not like I'm talking about bullshit – I have experienced them, haven't I? – if someone approaches me, I kindly reply that I don't care. And the question ends there. Instead [there] they always make a big fuss, and in my opinion they make a big fuss on one hand because the females like to say: “Oh, they contacted me just to tell me I'm pretty, wow!”, and instead the males like to play the great knights who protect damsels. These things make me exhausted. I hate them. And, therefore, in reality I see so much... hypocrisy with oneself, that is, pursuing an ideological reason, when instead these are needs that we all have, to please, and so on, but there is no need to take sides to carry them forward. And these attitudes annoy me. But as soon as I express these opinions I am accused of being practically an asshole [laughs], and therefore... in my opinion, always for the same reasons. That is, this great need to maintain the status quo.

Serena underlined an important conflict within poly groups: on the one hand, the administrators' choice to set up rigid rules (for example, the ban on contacting people in private without having first asked for their permission publicly) and frequent calls to try to stem the “trawling” phenomenon; on the other hand, the perception that some users have of excessive intervention by the administration. Serena perceived these interventions as paternalistic and “sex-negative”. As we have seen, the “sex-positive” movement champions a positive attitude towards sex and sexuality in general, with an emphasis on safer sex and consent. The polyamorous movement can generally be considered sex-positive, but the interviewee considers the administrators' attitude to be out of synch with the sex-positive movement because, in her perception, rigidity around this issue stems from the fact that it involves sexuality. I think that the administrators' decisions are also based on considerations relating to the power disparities between men and women in society and relating to the fact that the culture of

consent should also be extended to online communication. The term culture of consent in this case therefore means not engaging in invasive behaviour in order to obtain something from another person. Certainly it would be better if the culture of consent were to spread without imposing rules, but the balance between keeping the online space safer and not implementing paternalistic attitudes is often delicate and depends on the sensitivity of the people involved.

Finally, some people said they have stopped engaging with groups due to internal conflicts between different factions in 2016, while others stepped out due to the fact that the group ends up repeating its discussion of certain topics because of the constant entry of new members. Therefore, those who have been in the group or have been having CANM relationships for a long time without specific problems do not find that participating in discussions offers them new stimuli.

Summarising this sub-section, therefore, it can be said that at the time of data collection the two Facebook groups maintained a strong gatekeeping policy aimed at maintaining the safety of the environment and enforcing the principles of anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-LGBT+phobia. In addition, the group administrators established other rules to strengthen and hopefully spread the culture of consent, trying to prevent these groups from being used as hunting grounds by those looking for sexual partners.

Regarding the opinion of those who participate in the groups, some of the people interviewed underlined their importance in several respects: emotional support from the virtual community when needed, the creation and evolution of polyamorous theory and practice, and the act of naming and granting meaning and legitimacy to their feelings and/or relational practices. On the other hand, the negative aspects mentioned included the risk of creating a new normativity (polynormativity) and an excessive verbosity which excludes those who are not accustomed to this type of language and generates misunderstandings. Others judge the measures implemented by the administrators as “excessive” or “paternalistic”.



Finally, people who had left the group or did not participate very much cited internal conflicts and the repetition of the same topics over and over as for their reasons for ceasing to actively engage.

### *6.2.2 The local groups*

Local groups, like online groups, also represented an opportunity for many people to experience recognition, acceptance, and exchange, but also the beginning of new friendships. Below are three testimonials from people I interviewed:

[T]his friend tells me: “Ah, you must come with me”, and she takes me to the polyamory meeting, in which I discovered all... the existence of other people, who were like me... and after half an hour inside that group I was in ecstasy, that is... for the first time it seemed to me I was hearing healthy people speaking, for the first time it seemed to me... that I was... I was the normal one, and then finally that I had found someone with whom you could simply also just talk, not that they told you: “Ok, you're not okay; ok, you still have to find her [the right woman for you]... you don't know what love is...”. No, that's it, I was feeling really bad, I was... terrible, in multiple relationships, therefore it multiplies the suffering that there is for a person by... N people, that is, [I was] really devastated, I could not take it anymore... and therefore... there, this world opened up to me, I said: “Fuck, finally! You can talk about it”. And that to me is very important (Alberto, 34).

Alberto gained a lot of well-being from meeting with the polyamorous group. It was his first opportunity to meet people who thought like him, people with whom he could talk without feeling judged, a place to feel “normal”.

Paolo, returning to Italy after many years abroad, heard about the existence of a polyamorous group from a person he had met through the dating app OkCupid:

I joined OkCupid at one point, because... with this girl it ended up that we saw each other very little and I was just... in 2011 I had come back from England, where I had that seven-year relationship, so when... I was not with this girl, I was basically alone. Then I had a few historical friends, who still... were not enough... to make a network of relationships, so... I ended up... someone told me that there was OkCupid, I signed up, and in OkCupid, answering a few questions, to calculate the matches, automatically I found myself intertwined with... all the polyamorous people... and it was precisely the moment of great expansion of the Italian polyamorous community. So then... in short, as soon as I entered OkCupid and appeared in the profiles of some people, they started writing to me saying: “Oh, you too! Come on, you know, we meet together in [name of the city], come... happy hours, things, in [name of the person who organised the meetings]'s house...”. From there, then, I started [to think]...: “Look, even here there are people... not only... it's not just the two of us, how nice!” (Paolo, 41).

Paolo's story once again confirms the importance of the dating app OkCupid as a catalyst for the rising polyamorous community in Italy: for him, it was a useful tool for locating a new network with which to engage and therefore feeling less isolated.

For Guido, encountering the community was, if possible, even more intense:

[B]ecause then in the community I found... I found very interesting... I found some friends, some real friends, I found a community, really... very cool because... because... it's not a false thing to say that it was just part of my process of... of... the people I found were part of the process of feeling that I had the possibility of being... who I want, therefore also the possibility of being in a space (...) in which to prove that I am a different person: the first time I wore a dress was here<sup>68</sup>, the first time I said openly [that I am polyamorous] to a person who was not in the group was here, I feel safer here too, because they know me,

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<sup>68</sup> The interviewee said “here” because the interview was conducted in the same place where the group’s happy hours are usually held.

because they have always seen me... (...) I mean, it's a safe space for me (Guido, 30).

For Guido the poly community (but also the place where the community meets) represented a place in which they could experience a new version of themselves: in that place and among those people, they came out and started wearing women's clothing. It is a place where they generally feel safe. These findings confirm the importance of people's involvement in non-normative communities when the larger social context is mononormative and heteronormative (*cf.* Gusmano 2018a).

On the other hand, some people also complained about this context, in the same way as with online groups, on the grounds that it suffers from an excess of rationalisation or offers few people with whom to exchange opinions based on the effective practice of CANM relationships. For example, Alfredo (36) told me:

[A]t the meetings we didn't find that many experiences, also because we found more people who wanted to understand what it was, and who were intrigued by it, rather than people who were already doing it, [so] somehow we were always the ones who had experienced it more than others and who wanted to experiment a little more than the others.

In short, Alfredo expected that he would find more people with polyamorous experiences and fewer newbies at polyamorous meetings, he was disappointed when the reality was the opposite.

Eleonora (32) and Gabriele (27) (who are part of a V triad of which Eleonora is the vertex) complained that they had found almost no "truly poly" in the small polyamorous group organised in the city closest to where they live. In their perception, in fact, all the other people present at the happy hour in which they participated (except for a triad) would be more accurately labelled as "libertines" or "cheaters". These considerations display glimpses of

polynormativity, as mentioned several times so far, that manifests in the need to set a stringent definition of who is polyamorous and who is not.

Among interviewees who are outsiders in relation to the community, some of the people I interviewed do not feel the need to participate in the local group because they already have a network of relationships with whom to discuss this issue. For some of these people (in particular those closer to transfeminist and queer activism), the poly group has an excessively apolitical approach and they do not think that having a consensual non-monogamous relational style is a sufficient reason to feel part of a community. Let us look at some of the comments they made in this regard:

[T]he poly community I would say that no, I would say that I don't frequent it. I can say that I don't frequent it because – this is a good question – yes, basically because I don't... so, I have been very categorical lately, so I am... what I am looking for is a queer approach to polyamory, isn't it? So, basically, being very categorical in this period, the narratives that I am more inclined to listen to are those that start from a feminist point of view of the thing. Aaaaand... I don't know the [local] polyamorous community right now, so I don't know if maybe that point of view is there... I have no idea... surely it would be a useful and beautiful thing to bring this point of view if it is not [already] there... but I must say that... so far I have not happened to find people... [who are] so similar, if not those comrades that I have known for a long time, that I know they have a compatible vision, or at least... [an] interesting, stimulating [one] on this thing. And, just like I told you the other night<sup>69</sup>, I don't know if the fact of practicing polyamory is... can be seen as a form of affinity, that is I don't know if I'm ready to be in a group of affinities from whom... whose element of affinity is having non-monogamous relationships (Rachele, 26).

[I]n all struggles over gender and sexual orientation it is very important to start from Consciousness-Raising, with [the queer collective I was part of] we did it for a lot of years, and we were perhaps the only queer collective for a lot of time

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<sup>69</sup> I had met the interviewee for the first time a few nights earlier because we had some acquaintances in common.

doing Consciousness-Raising and having recovered that practice from the feminism of difference, aaand... I don't want to do Consciousness-Raising with strangers<sup>70</sup>, thanks! Not if we don't have that minimal level of political sharing that makes it very clear to me that... we share political objectives (Claudio, 28).

I may have gone to two meetings (...) it was very confusing, because... I come from a certain path... so I'm used to doing assemblies of a certain type, for example, if there is a political assembly there is an agenda, we speak about certain things, decisions are made, we discuss... in short... if it is a more fluid assembly, in which we are even allowed to engage in paths of Consciousness-Raising, so to speak... that in any case... it is not so simple to build, in the sense that it was not easy for us to start from... an environment in which we did – let's say – militant politics, a mixed environment, reaching the point of building moments of Consciousness-Raising – let's call them that to understand each other – it wasn't easy, but... and I still think they are fundamental moments, in fact, I look for them, I reconstruct them, (...) but there is always a theme... that is, as I understand it, there is a theme, aaand... there is a way of conducting the discussion, starting from oneself, even starting from: “Girls, this happened, this happened to me, I need to talk with others [about it]”. Aaand... and instead [in the polyamorous meetings] I found myself in moments of sociality, of... we drink stuff together, and we share the fact that... we have a... we call ourselves polyamorous. And honestly, I really struggled a bit... (Cinzia, 32).

I find it very forced... the formula of the polyamorous happy hour – very frankly -- of the: “We are polyamorous we meet to do the happy hour with unknown people”. It brings me back to the swingers' image, honestly... mmh... that is another image, that absolutely doesn't... correspond to my identity (Pau, 25).

All the interviewees above feel the need to share a feminist and/or queer point of view that is in line with their political trajectory and in their view the polyamorous community seems to have an excessively apolitical approach. For

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<sup>70</sup> The interviewee refers to the practices implemented during some of the meetings of the polyamorous community (those in modality self-help group), which are very similar to the practices of Consciousness-Raising.

Claudio, this is important in particular for meetings that have a self-help focus, similar to feminist Consciousness-Raising groups. Cinzia and Pau, on the other hand, do not even see any significance in poly happy hours. Pau added that this way of meeting reminded her of a swingers approach, something she does not feel any affinity with. These positions point to a conflict among different political positions that is also arising within polyamorous communities and which I will discuss in more detail in the last section.

Other people have chosen not to become involved with the local group due to the fear that it would be too normative, ghettoising or “heterosexual” (Edoardo, 25); others have previous involvement with other communities (BDSM and LGBT+ in particular) the time commitments of which prevent them from participating in the polyamorous community, while still others just do not feel the need to belong to a community. Representing this view, Marzia (25) expressed herself very clearly:

N: Why don't you care to do community? For the reason you said before...? You prefer...

M: Weeeeell... first because I don't like being around people, secondly because I don't need to discuss my relationships with someone else (...) and then because the problems I have in relationships are not of a nature... that is, [they do not] come from being... polyamorous, non-monogamous, and in any case I am used to solving them by myself.

In this sub-section have I tried to give an account of my findings regarding interviewees' experiences with live meetings of the Italian polyamorous community. First of all, for some people the meeting with the community was very important because it allowed them to find people who thought in a similar way; they felt empowered and their relational attitude was granted legitimacy, at least within the community. For some, the local community has also represented a safe space to experiment with new forms of self-expression. As for the negative aspects, some people

complain of an excess of rationalisation and of finding lots of people with little experience; according to others, very few people in these circles were “truly poly”. The reasons people give for not participating in the local community are: having other circles in which they find people with similar values; the lack of politicisation of the poly community, in a feminist or queer sense; normativity or ghettoization or the fact that there are too many heterosexual people; a lack of time and the absence of a need to feel part of a group.

### *6.3 The outside world*

While in the section above I tried to describe the research participants’ relations with other people who have similar relational practices and/or identification, in this section I analyse their relations with the rest of society. I begin with some considerations of various experiences (or lack thereof) of coming out and then focus on experiencing and inhabiting public space or participating in public events.

Regarding the experience of coming out, the literature on LGBT coming out has overcome the dichotomy between being in the closet/being out (Seidman 2002), highlighting the fact that being out is context-specific and depends on several factors: an individual can be out with some people but not with others (Mosher 2001), or in the closet in some specific situations (such as work) but not in others (Seidman 2002).

From the analysis of my interviewees’ coming-out narratives, I have identified three macro-contexts to which they refer: friendships, the family of origin and the work environment. The environment in which respondents are more out about their relational orientation and/or their relational practices is that of friendships: in fact, only two people had never raised the issue with most of their friends and one person had never talked about it with the childhood friends still living in their small hometown. Not surprisingly, one of these is the oldest

participant in my sample (Felice, 69). He described the incompatibility between his views and those of one of his closest friends:

I have a very dear friend who is a well-known Neapolitan lawyer, therefore a lawyer, his mental pattern: “The wife must stay at home and I go screwing around a little wherever I like”, there, that is his mindset. (...) Aaaaand so I am cautious about talking about it because... either it would break our 30-year-long friendship [giggle], or... or he would be upset, because he... the man can go out and the woman [stays] at home with the children. [This is] [i]n stark contrast with my views.

Similarly, Elena (28) is worried about disturbing the quiet provincial life of her childhood friends, especially after having already upset them with her gender transition:

My friends, then, are very prudish, so let's see... even to them I had more or less mentioned it, but they have all been engaged for centuries, all about to get married, all talking about children, and... I sincerely do not feel very prepared to destroy this idyllic life... that is... [laughs]. I mean, I wouldn't want to upset their life [laughing], they're all getting ready for the wedding... So, yes... I'm... even with my transition they struggled, I can't imagine... because [name of the town] is a provincial town, anyway... where these things do not exist. That is, neither the transition nor the polyamory, that is, it is a bit of a... fairy world... not even poverty, because then... I have never seen situations of poverty, like there are in [bigger city in which she lives today], or anyway in a bigger city, where you also see people in serious difficulty, or... that is, there (...) the most serious thing that can happen to you is that your parents get divorced... that is, that... for the rest, they have always painted me this wonderful world... but as a child I was totally fine in this wonderful world, then hell, all the certainties that could collapse, have collapsed: from my identity, to my relationships, to my...

Elena introduced the topic of the differences between large and small cities, and how coming out in small cities is more difficult.



For the rest of the people I interviewed, coming out among friends generally received a fairly positive response, probably because the people were already involved in a friendly environment. Nubia (25), however, told me about some unpleasant episodes:

[W]hen I was still in a relationship with B., when I met G. I was very happy and I wanted to tell my friends about it, and when... I told them, one of them in particular with whom I was very close replied: "But why did you need it?". And there... despite the fact that they knew that my relationship with B. was of that type, they knew me, they knew him, they knew everything, I was really very hurt because I thought: "But then they just didn't understand anything about that!", of what I have been talking about up to now, because it is not a need, but simply to... express what you feel, right? Aaaaand... mmmh... then, later, when I was single, and I found myself with friends in the evening to explain... what, why and how... the... the... unfortunately the answers are always a... sad enough, in the sense that it is almost automatic [for male friends] to say: "Ok, so you go to bed with everyone, then you can also come to bed with me!"

Nubia expressed disappointment in her friends' reaction; indeed, when she enthusiastically communicated to them that she had started a new relationship they responded with judgment. Furthermore, she highlighted one of the most common problems that polyamorous women face: the stereotype according to which the mere fact of being polyamorous means they are considered universally sexually available.

As for the family environment, a little less than half of the respondents (25) are completely out with their families of origin. However, only 16 of these explicitly came out (that is, saying "I'm polyamorous") to all of their family members. Another eight people had talked with only some family members or had never talked to them directly but believe their family suspects something. Among the most negative experiences is that of Serena (28), whose coming out to her mother caused a quarrel after which the two women did not speak for a month. Silvia's (36) mother likewise did not welcome this coming out and kept

telling her that, sooner or later, one of her two partners would end up killing her. Martina's (31) parents, after a lunch with her second partner who they met for the first time, suggested that she make a decision and leave the first partner if she was in love with the second, despite her explanations of the philosophy of polyamory. Finally, Barbara (38) told me that she has a “non-aggression pact” with her parents, with whom she cohabits: “They know but pretend not to know”.

For those with a triad configuration, and even more so if cohabiting, the need to come out is clearly greater and more urgent. For instance, Gabriele (27) told me that, although his parents had displayed some resistance, he had posed acceptance of the triad as a fundamental condition for his parents to continue to come over for lunch: “This is my family, that is the door, either you enter or you stay outside”.

Communication is more difficult for those sharing housing with parents who have a conservative mentality about relationships and gender roles, as in the case of Marzia (25). Given her circumstances and lack of economic autonomy at the time of the interview, her coping strategy was to introduce only one of her partners. In this case, the “visible” partner is of great help because he acts as her accomplice in managing this “cover-up” with her family:

Alessio is also sympathetic about this thing, (...) with him we see each other on the weekends, so I can tell my parents that I sleep at Alessio's home and go to [the city of the other partner] quietly... but anyway I feel a bit guilty, because... I don't like to lie... (...) I mean, if they would not ask me... if they didn't keep checking on me so much, I wouldn't have to tell lies to have a decent life. (...) I only introduced Alessio to them, and he covers for me when I go out, I say that I am going out with him and then I'm actually going to... mind my own fucking business.

Coming out is also difficult when one of the parents has been cheated on, as in the case Pau recounted (25):

With my mother, I never said this thing. With my mother I... while with my father I have a very cold relationship, honestly, with my mother I have a very good relationship – my parents have been divorced for... many years – I lived with my mother, alone, for... seven years, therefore, a very close relationship, but I know very well that for this kind of thing... as much as she is an absolutely progressive person, and... ahead on a lot of things (...), but also in reasoning about things, in concepts... but I know very well that in this area of relationships, precisely because of her personal history linked to her relationship with my father, who has always cheated on her without any problem at all, this damages her a lot, so I avoid...

Then there are people for whom non-monogamous coming out was just one more in addition to a previous coming out about sexual orientation and/or gender identity. In this case, the act of coming out usually has had almost no impact on the family:

[S]ince I had this whole process of coming out, with regards to my sexual orientation, by now I had it more than consolidated, when I came to say: “Ah, I am engaging in a relationship... of polyamory, I have two partners, and one of them also has another partner...” people stared at me because they didn't think it was possible, or practicable, but they were not surprised that I said such a thing, because they were already used to... to other previous shocks. Aaaand... so, neither with relatives nor with friends did I have problems declaring this thing, it was absolutely... ok (Filippo, 48).

I did a whole series of coming out with my family of every kind... of every kind... so, they just don't know what I'm talking about anymore. So, I could say to him: “Actually I am... I am an alien”, and they would answer: “Ah, yes, we had suspected it”. That is the weight that coming outs have on my family (Alessandra, 43).

It was not so peaceful for everybody, however. Greta (26), transgender, queer-romantic and asexual, told me that her polyamorous coming out was the one received worse by her family. Fabio (37) likewise reported that his

polyamorous coming out was more complicated to manage than his coming out as a BDSMer:

I realised, at least personally, two strange aspects: while in BDSM anyway then you are pointed out as: “Oh, I dunno, that person who does strange dirty things, similar stuff, I dunno... fuck, cool, ok, in the end... I dunno, I'd like to try it...” or: “Not, it's not for me, but... it's ok”, in polyamory instead I always found a lot of walls in front of me, on the part of the people I talked to. Aaand... a wall where, let's say, all the stereotypes come out: “But then it means that you don't care anymore about the other person; but you'll see that it's a temporary phase of your life, but you'll see that...”, that... that stuff there.

Fabio highlighted how coming out as polyamorous is often more problematic, probably because it calls into question a definition of love that people believe to be shared.

Precisely in order to make this particular coming out progressively less socially difficult, some people feel that the coming out process represents almost a moral duty or, at least, they consider it an important form of activism:

I believe it is also a form of activism, in the sense that... giving visibility normalises situations, therefore being an example for other people of a normal situation to which they are not accustomed (Davide, 33).

No, absolute visibility, also because for me it is an important point, in the sense that I always say that we are martyrs, new representative of the new era. And so... if we don't make an example in some way, there will not be an evolution of the *societas*, it is really... fundamental for me (Morena, 37).

Attilio (42) added an analysis of his social privileges to his comment in this regard:

[I]t is very important for me to be visible, in part because I realise that I have... I have a privileged position in society and if I am not out myself, since I am a male, I have a high level of education, I have... a professional resume... in short, that can influence society... I mean, if I'm not out myself I don't know who...

According to Edoardo (25), coming out can also perform a function of contamination in the sense of spreading ideas and practices:

It is interesting because there is also contamination – right? – because I have a point of view that is interesting, because it is different from mine, and I also see that on the other hand, in reality they are learning something from my way of doing relationships. Like, for example, [my roommate] is now dating a married man who knew that... who immediately told her he was married, and his wife knows about her, she knows about his wife, but, in fact, it's not like she imagines a future with this person but she is fine with it, and so she started... that is, now she also started seeing another guy and told him that she is seeing this married man – I was like: “[expression of amazement] What happened?” [laughing]. And so I really like the contamination of... of different worlds, and the fact that with... with the way of being, simply with your way of being in the world, people change and take pieces that interest them and... and this is also a bit political, actually.

Talking about contamination, none of the people interviewed who have children had come out to them, but Massimo (50) and Paola (51) told me they preferred indirect communication with their children, trying to implicitly convey values more in line with polyamorous perspectives. For example, Massimo told me:

[W]hat I have always said is that, in any case, with the values that I try to convey, even on an implicit level, there is also this dimension of non-exclusivity, of which we have spoken relatively little, but... when we also discuss in commentary on current events, news, things of this kind, my children – let's say

– they know very clearly, according to their age<sup>71</sup>, how I understand relationships, family, and so on and so forth. So, I don't think – let's say – that if, in a few years, they find themselves facing situations in which they clearly understand this thing, I don't think they will be amazed that much, that is, probably, I imagine that to them it will seem the natural consequence of how they had always seen their dad.

The working environment is the one where there is the most fear of negative repercussions for coming out. For this reason, only 16 people are out about CANM with their colleagues. There are also reports of adverse experiences in this regard, for example Roberta (27) who was previously publicly out about this issue later deleted all her colleagues from Facebook in order to protect her privacy after a negative experience: rumours about her sexual life had been circulated within the working environment with the precise intention of slut-shaming her<sup>72</sup>. Also Filippo (48), who is instead a freelancer, lost a client after that she heard some of his comments about polyamory during a polyamorous meeting where she was present, but with reluctance.

In terms of inhabiting public space, people in polyamorous triads are often the object of dirty looks if they display public affection. In this regard, Morena (37), who is pansexual and had lived in a triad, shared with me her reflections about conflict and the delicate balance between personal freedom and the possibility of disturbing the public sense of decency:

Society makes you experience an even worse stigma than... what you experience for, for example, for sexual orientation, or a non-heteronormative gender identity. Because... even when the three of us kissed at the bus stop, we caused... And you can say: "Ok, but how far is my freedom of expression compared to

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<sup>71</sup> They are 13 and 15 years old.

<sup>72</sup> Slut-shaming is a neologism born in the feminist movements to define the act of making a woman feel guilty or inferior for certain sexual behaviours or sexual desires that deviate from traditional gender expectations.

what I am going to harm in [terms of] public opinion?”, am I not free to display affection in public with my partners? Why?

Another problem, especially for the people who live in a triad or have multiple partners who they consider “primary”, can be managing invitations to public ceremonies. The discomfort is limited when the protagonists of the ceremony are friends, who often, as we have seen above, are aware of the relational arrangement and invite all the partners or leave the choice to the guest. The situation is more complicated when, as in the case of Guido (30), it is one of the parents who is marrying. In fact, although Guido initially wanted to bring both their partners, they were obliged to choose one of the two because of their father's reticence. Others adopt other solutions. For example Sam (37), who defines themselves a relationship anarchist, told me that they usually attend weddings accompanied by a friend and not a partner.

Even managing the Christmas holidays can be difficult in these cases, as for example in the case of Irene (32). At the time of the interview (mid-November), she had received an invitation from both of her “mothers-in-law” for Christmas and had not yet made a decision about which to accept.

The process of finding a new home can become a problem – or a source of discrimination – when people are in a triad as well. For example, Rebecca (24) told me about their exhausting experience:

R: [N]o one wanted to give us a house because there were three of us, really! We didn't want to spend a shitload, and so wanted to take a one-bedroom house, because that was enough for us. A huge mess, the offices of... for the rentals asked us: “But... you want one room but there are three of you?”. So you had to... explain to them your life, your kind of relationship, because these assholes didn't want to give you the house with one room, understand? So I... I once invented that... she was a University friend of mine and we wanted to live together and she wanted to sleep on the couch [laughs]. I couldn't find a way... (...) we had to move, otherwise we had to go back to our parents. (...) And so problems on top of problems, because we wanted... because if you go to get a

two-room apartment with two bedrooms, you have to spend, I'm not saying twice as much, but a lot!

And so we didn't want to... a room was enough for us but people didn't want to give us... then even the landlords, the owners didn't want to give us the house because there were three of us. (...) [I]n the end we told the truth because we started to lose our shit keeping saying bullshit, we said: "Look, there are three of us, because the three of us are together!"

N: And how did they react?

R: Some don't [laughs]... some didn't answer, others said: "Ah, but in our opinion private owners won't give you the house and..."

N: The rental agencies [said] this?

R: Agencies, yes, yes, yes, rental agencies. The last person, from whom we finally found a home, did not ask questions, saw that the two of them [the applicants] had open-ended [employment] contracts (...) not how many of us there were... in fact there were three of us that had... that we had the money, we had jobs, we were three people with jobs and you don't like it? I mean, you're safer [this way in the sense that] we would give you the money.

This latter example makes it clear how amatonormativity (Brake 2012a, 2012b) and compulsory coupledness (Acquistapace 2011, Ziga 2011, Schippers 2016) make it difficult for polyamorous people to access basic services, especially for those who cannot rely on extensive economic resources.

In this section I have tried to account for the different positions of my respondents in the different contexts of coming out. Beginning with friendships, only very few people are not out with (most of) friends: one of these is the oldest person among my interviewees and another person grew up in a small town. However, even those who have come out sometimes had to face misunderstandings or the results of the reproduction of stereotypes, such as the cliché according to which polyamorous women are seen as widely sexually available.

Regarding the family environment, just under half of the interviewees are out, and only 16 of them have directly come out to all family members. Some



people have had negative reactions, especially related to misunderstandings of polyamorous dynamics or the erasure of their emotions. For those whose live-in relationship involve more than two partners, coming out is clearly more pressing with the family as well. In case of economic dependence on the family, coming out is more difficult because the person is more vulnerable to potential negative reactions. Finally, no one is directly out with their children but the two people who have older children (teenagers) try to implicitly convey their views on relationships. Some people experience coming out as a social duty or a form of activism.

The workplace is where people feel the most pressure to conceal their relational practices or orientations. Only 16 people are out at their jobs and two said they had experienced negative repercussions in the professional sphere.

People who try to openly inhabit and use public spaces as non-monogamous partners clearly face the weight of amatonormativity and compulsory coupledness, making it difficult to engage in actions that for heterosexual couples are perceived as normal, such as public displays of affection, attending public ceremonies (weddings, baptisms, etc.), managing Christmas holidays, or even looking for a home.

#### *6.4 Polyamory and politics*

In Chapter 2, following the analysis by Barker and Langdrige (2010b), I addressed the contrast between theorists who view consensual non-monogamy as necessarily feminist, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist (Jackson and Scott 2004) and authors that, instead, point out that the radical potential of polyamory is all but null because the people who practice it have mostly apolitical motivations and the groups dedicated to polyamory are mostly depoliticised awhile also endorsing an elitist and ethnocentric point of view (Jamieson 2004; Noël 2006; Haritaworn, Lin and Klesse 2006; Petrella 2007; Ritchie 2010; Willey 2010; Wilkinson 2010; Vassallo 2018).

In line with what other authors have found (e.g. Barker 2005; Klesse 2007), according to my analysis both politicised and depoliticised views are present in the Italian polyamorous community and, inevitably, the encounter between these two stances gives rise to more and more evident conflict. By studying interactions on national Facebook groups as well as conducting interviews and participant observation, I identified two main conflicts that arise from divergent political values and, quite often, are also the underlying cause of disagreements on the two national Facebook groups dedicated to polyamory: the first conflict is that between depoliticised and politicised views of polyamory and the second between liberal and radical views.

#### *6.4.1 Is love apolitical?*

In summer 2019, two posts appeared on national groups that made manifest the conflict between politicised and depoliticised views of polyamory. The first of these posts shared a document from an anarchist assembly that harshly criticised the government's latest security measures. In particular, the post was also accompanied by two strongly radical elements: a photo depicting a tattoo (on the person who published it) of the acronym ACAB<sup>73</sup> and the phrase "There are no good cops". The post received 40 reactions (including likes, heart reactions and a smile of amazement) and 188 comments, both critical and supportive. Above all, the two slogans in opposition to the police triggered a series of critical comments, and some people asked the administrators to remove the post on the grounds that it was "OT" (off topic with respect to the topics covered in the group). The group administrators opted not to remove the post and some people left the group after this decision.

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<sup>73</sup> The acronym ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) has been widespread in the UK especially since the '70s in skinhead subculture, which then spread it to other parts of Europe and the USA. Today it is used in prison settings, by some hardline football fan groups and by both anti-authoritarian and neo-fascist political groups.

Another much-discussed post denounced that one of the registered members of the group was an exponent of the Lega (an Italian party with Catholic-Sovereignist and anti-immigration positions) who had recently made headlines for its attacks on the work of NGOs engaged in rescuing immigrants at sea, suggesting that their activities were criminal in nature. In this case as well the post received many interactions (344 comments) and in this case the indignation expressed at this instance of politicisation of the groups dedicated to polyamory was even more explicit, especially after one of the administrators reported that the user to which the post referred was banned from the group. These are some of the sentiments expressed by members who wish polyamory to be politically cross-cutting at the expense of radicalisation:

Being polyamorous simply means believing that contemporary love is possible for more than one person and living out this belief in an ethical and transparent manner by informing partners about one's belief / lifestyle.

Point (Commentator A).

It does not mean being leftist and so having other types of values. Even someone with the [name of the party] can be polyamorous. Indeed, hoping for an opening to polyamory in our society, we should get used to the idea that it becomes a transversal phenomenon and not a niche one, suitable only for the socio-cultural elite more similar to us (Commentator B).

But guys, let's leave politics out of it (Commentator C).

As a result of these debates, one of the two groups has set as its “cover” an image displaying the following text:

This space is: feminist, intersectional, anti-authoritarian, anti-fascist, anti-racist, sex worker inclusive, lgbt inclusive, fabulously queer, body positive, sex positive, kink positive, affected by ggender. We do not tolerate intolerant people. Get over it!

After this cover was published, some people left the group and others made comments similar to those reported above:

I thought it was just a space to talk about love, not a space of political belonging (Commentator D).

I experienced and practiced polyamory for years in New York. No one ever said “no Trump supporters here”. Of course, I guess there weren't many in the group. But these arguments and each person’s political opinions have never even been touched on (Commentator E).

To me these vigorous statements of position sound a bit like the antechamber of fascism.

And they evoke images of rows of boots marching in formation, flags waving, speeches full of strong words that set fire to the crowd...

MILITAnts attitudes that remind me of certain MILITARism. :(

I do not know; perhaps it is me who takes certain teachings of the 20th century too seriously.

But I wonder, “What has love got to do with it?” (Commentator F).

These episodes brought attention to bear on the importance of the interplay between personal and political and involved an explicit political (re?)positioning of the groups dedicated to polyamory that highlights the centrality of the intersection between the above-mentioned struggles.

To conclude, recent political development brought out the conflict between “apolitical” and political positions within the Italian Facebook groups dedicated to polyamory. On closer inspection, the position passing as “apolitical” entails a falsely neutral position: by not taking any position, it actually supports the maintenance of the status quo by not questioning social structures in any way. This point has been highlighted by the feminist movement since the 1960s with the slogan “The personal is political” and its project of critiquing the liberal

vision of a neat division between the “public” sphere of politics and the state and the “private” sphere of the family (perceived as apolitical) (Oliver 2008).

#### 6.4.2 *Family or sfamily*<sup>74</sup>?

Another potential conflict, as I mentioned at the beginning, is the one between liberal and radical positionings. Nevertheless, it seems to me that for the moment this particular conflict is not explicit in community interactions. The reasons why this conflict remains implicit might stem from the fact that no precise political strategy has been formulated within the polyamorous community. This conflict, however, becomes more evident if we put the polyamorous community into relationship with the queer movement (in particular the SomMovimento NazioneAnale and other transfeminist and/or queer collectives/assemblies/groups such as *Facciamo Breccia*, *Laboratorio Smaschieramenti*, *Favolosa Coalizione*, *Cagne Sciolte*, *Ah sQueerTO! – Assemblea Queer Torino*, *Assemblea TFQ Urania*, *Nessun Norma Network/Free(K) Pride*, ...) which, in contrast, expresses clearly anti-assimilationist and radical positions, as thoroughly summarised by Bernini (2017) in the book *Le teorie queer* (The queer theories):

[T]he groups that appointed themselves as ‘queer’ are radical political groups and collectives that do not content themselves with asking for state protection against discrimination and integration in the family-based heterosexual social order (the right to marriage, adoption, access to assisted reproduction techniques) and in the capitalist economy (through the creation of LGBT market niches, the organisation of an LGBT entertainment industry, the exploitation of sexual diversity in company management), but which instead promote antagonistic politics and ways of life based on the rejection of homonormativity, transnormativity, homonationalism, and neoliberalism (p. 136, my translation).

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<sup>74</sup> For an explanation of the origin and meaning of this term see note 56 in Chapter 4.

Even the interviews I conducted do not express any strong positioning in terms of making claims for rights in a polyamorous perspective. Some interviewees – especially those who already have or wish to have a polyamorous family with children – hope that the institution of marriage might be extended to encompass more than two people and other co-parents might be recognised for children born in a polyamorous family. A slightly greater number of people, instead, express the hope that some form of legal recognition could be developed that extends beyond the couple, possibly more flexible than both marriage contracts and civil unions. One person also raised the possibility of adoptions for single people.

Other respondents' positions are more similar to those of queer radical movements. For example Mauro (40), a transsexual gay man in a polyamorous triad, told me about same-sex marriage:

I think that perhaps homosexual people, rather than building alternative families, should have destroyed those that were there before... that is, to really question the concept of family itself, then maybe even they are doing it, I don't know, the perception is that it is more like conforming to a model, which is that, so you say: "If I want... rights, if I want to recognise things, I have to adhere to that, it's not that I have alternatives". Well, maybe we haven't built alternatives to that. If you think that a conservative like Cameron, in the UK, really said: "But I can't not... grant marriage, that is, I am a conservative, I am the first to say: 'Get married!'", for which that is, intellectual honesty...

Mauro thinks that people who were or are considered sexual dissidents should build alternatives to the dominant model of social organisation rather than spending all their energy on being allowed to take on that model themselves.

Another two people, both transfeminist/queer activists, formulated a specific political demand, namely the reform of family law. In particular, Claudio (28) provided me with an extensive explanation of his political reasoning: he (as

well as radical queer movements in general) opposes marriage because he recognises it as a tool of capitalism that “needed, at some point in its history, to set the question of the reproductive heterosexual monogamous couple”. Despite this point, he thinks that it has become politically unfeasible to fight for the abolition of marriage in the present moment, whereas in the past 40 years the LGBT movement has been mainly engaged in fighting for the right to engage in same-sex marriages and have children. Starting from this point, he continued thinking about what can be proposed as an alternative:

[S]ince there has been a deregulation of work, since some, at least some, of us lead precarious lives, since even those who do not lead precarious lives end up finding themselves still sharing a house with other people, since in fact also throughout history (...) families have almost never been families made up of mom, dad and son or daughter, or children, there is probably something that does not work in family law, which is the fact of its being centred on marriage.

Claudio proposes setting off from a reflection on the ties of care that already exist in our lives (such as that between roommates or friends) and that have an effective weight in the material management of our precarious lives (*cf.* Acquistapace 2011) but which do not find any legal recognition. His idea is basically “to start thinking about the family in terms of community, and of the community that you choose (...), of emotional and economic sharing” and to struggle for “a more extensive, inclusive family law in which, above all, marriage is not the central institution which determines all the juridically provided forms of relationship”. The only way to do this, in his opinion, is to raze existing family law and rewrite it in a way that removes the couple from the centre and replaces it with the concept of “communities of affective and economic sharing”.

To summarise this sub-section, we can say that the clash between liberal and radical positions (more similar to those of the radical queer movement) cannot be identified as an explicit point of conflict in the polyamorous movement for the time being. In general, at the moment the

polyamorous movement does not seem homogeneous in advancing specific political demands. This element did not appear strongly in the interviews, either, although some people make proposals closer to the assimilationist axis (polyamorous marriage, recognition of more than two parents) while others believe that alternatives to the dominant model of marriage should be found. Two people put forward the proposal of reformulating family law so that the couple is no longer considered as the centre. It seems to me that, in general, this formulation would also meet the needs of many other people interviewed; I was not able to directly discuss this proposal, however, because Claudio's interview was one of the last ones I carried out. Therefore, I leave this question and this possibility open for further discussion and investigation.

#### *6.4.3 Against polynormativity*

In Chapter 2 I devoted a section to the concept of polynormativity and the criticisms scholars and activists from the polyamorous community have raised in relation to this form of normativity.

Some of the people I interviewed also posed criticisms or reflections which resemble those expressed by the concept of polynormativity. Some critiqued, for example, the persistence of couple-centrism (Marta, 42; Sam, 37) while others noted the reiteration of representations of polyamory as “good”, “superior”, “ethical”. Along these lines, Roberto (35) commented that:

The other word that I fucking hate is “ethical”, when with ethics... ethics is a discourse... and instead becomes an adjective, right? Therefore it becomes the adjective you use to say: “We are good”. Here it is. (...) So, there is a whole series of... aspects, which then do not correspond to real life, not because we are not good, individually, as people, or we do not avoid cheating people individually as people, but because those discourses do not match real life.



Sam (37) instead shared with me their perception of the creation of a counter-norm within the community:

S: Lately, what happens among people who claim to be poly is... they take everything, hide behind ideology, in some way, any behaviour that might require further analysis or self-analysis, in some way they hide instead behind the fact: "However, we chose – or the other chose – to have such relationships", somehow [it is] an excuse for not working on themselves. Probably precisely because a sort of counter-norm has been created, and this made me take a step back because it is not what interests me. In the sense that I think I constantly want to keep my ears and eyes open, both in terms of myself and my relationships, and I don't want ideology to somehow put me... in a cage with respect to my behaviour.

N: Ok. But, therefore, do you mean putting ideology in front of... what you feel? Or...

S: Yes, too. In certain cases.

N: Or even to justify?

S: Both things. This fact can take on thousands of connotations. It may be precisely the fact of: "I have shitty behaviour, but in some way I justify myself by carrying forward the ideology"; or it can be simply: "I fixate on this thing as if it were an identity issue and I don't move from here". I did it too, among other things, thousands of times, so it's a behaviour that I know very well, so... really without any criticism or judgment, because it's something that can happen, though, anyway, it seems to me that... it is becoming quite a constant within... this modality... and this community.

It seems to me that Sam also made reference to what can be called emotional responsibility, an issue which is often hidden behind ideology. At the same time, they criticised the tendency to place ideology before everything else. The interviewee also told me about what they perceived as a process of de-politicisation of the community:

S: Since it started... in Italy, at least, I remember that there was a very strong presence of queer people, aaaand... of feminist groups, to see that everything

had been reduced, in fact, to what [I] feared, for me it was necessary to problematise it, and also strongly. The fact that it has not been problematised... (...) it was not a good departure from the scene, in my opinion, the fact of leaving everything... as usual, all the dissonant voices were framed as simple disagreements, so... (...) That is, without too much drama. (...)

N: In your opinion this process, in which initially the queer part was prevalent, or in any case the presence of queer people, and then instead the target has expanded, has changed... is... also the responsibility of those who managed the groups, or it is more... physiological?

S: So... both. I think that certainly when you look for visibility, visibility and inclusion, you necessarily get to a point where you really get everything. You really get everything. And, then, there was also the problem of some interviews... released on television broadcasts... that were... very superficial... even this, however, makes the mass arrival possible. However, I don't think that those people have stayed up to today, so I don't think it was just that. Very probably, it is the fact of... it is the natural process... I also remember with veganism, the same thing happened: everything that comes out of a niche dimension and somehow reaches the mass [dimension] is completely capitalised, reduced to a series of other practices, and... normalised, [to put it] very simply. Aaaand... on one hand this can also be good, because at least people are well aware that there are alternatives to cheating, but in the meantime it creates this problem: the fact that from a niche dimension, and all in all protected, even in terms of certain subjectivities, we have reached the exact opposite. And this.

N: And, in your opinion, could there be ways to stem this thing, or at some point it's inevitable, and then... anyone who doesn't want to stay anymore simply leaves?

S: In my opinion, the way to avoid it would be... to work on communication, but without seeking forced visibility. This obviously leads to a niche dimension, anyway. Forcefully. So... however, if you look for visibility, the process is automatic... that is, just... I can't think of ways to avoid this... that is, I've thought about it thousands of times, but it doesn't really come to my mind.

In short, Sam believes that the fact that the radical queer components have partially moved away from the polyamorous movement

is attributable to the fact that, in an attempt to broaden its base and become more popular, the polyamorous movement has taken the path of normalisation.

Claudio (28) instead critiqued the contractual conception of relations which he saw in online group exchanges and self-help manuals:

[E]ntering into a contract at the beginning of every relationship you have, that you then have to renegotiate continuously, that is objectively a tiring thing, and which leads to a hyper private production of legislation, which does not seem to me to create any kind of political advancement, and enormously complicates the way we conduct our relationships. (...) I have a (...) less contractualistic and more an emotional sharing approach, I don't know how... to define it... also because it seems to me that there seems to be an explosion of the production of definitions within these groups, and this thing sincerely worried me, because then it seems to me that there is more concern with defining the type of relationship in which one is included, with a very precise classification and taxonomic term, rather than reflecting on the dynamics of this relationship.

(...) From this point of view I have a very bad view of a book like *The Ethical Slut*, which feeds this type of... this kind of reflection, this kind of approach, and it does so with a writing and expressive method that, not by chance, is borrowed from self-help manuals, that is, there is a very close intertwining of the component of self-regulation and therefore of self-discipline, and the question of... the putting value on relationships, and performance. That is, it is a manual that teaches you how to be the perfect polyamorous person, but the perfect polyamorous person does not exist. Aaand... and it does not even exist because, precisely, the point as far as I am concerned cannot be giving us rules that we have to respect.

Claudio referred to another important point that I have already touched on several times: the excessive contractualisation of relationships and emotions suggested by some self-help manuals and, consequently, at least part of the polyamorous community.

The criticisms reported in this sub-section, brought under the umbrella of polynormativity, are varied and have been addressed by the critical literature as well. First of all, some interviewee spoke about couple-centrism, already highlighted by Finn and Malson (2008) in their observation that dyadic dynamics tend to be reproduced within non-monogamous relationships. Another of the issues raised is the reiteration of the idea that polyamory is ethical. This strategy may reflect the need to make polyamory more acceptable to mainstream society. Another strategy that develops along these lines is the tendency to prioritise love discourses over sex discourses (Wilkinson 2010). The topic of normalisation – also highlighted by my respondents – is closely connected to this propensity, and both are aligned in excluding the most “unpresentable” actors. This tendency, which is also present in other sexual minority communities, can be seen as connected to the operation of what Rubin (1993) has called “sexual hierarchy”. According to the dominant sexual hierarchy in Western societies, the sexualities considered “good', 'normal' and natural” are the “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial” ones (*ibid.*, p. 152). All other sexualities are considered “bad', 'abnormal', or 'unnatural’” (*ibid.*). This hierarchy generates struggles between different groups based on “how to draw the line” (*ibid.*, p. 152) between good and bad sexualities. This is the reason why contemporary mainstream LGBT activism struggles to purge its image of allegations of promiscuity, perversion, infidelity and commercial sex and, similarly, the polyamorous community seems to enact the same mechanism. The other two topics raised by the interviewees are the emphasis on ideology and the contractualisation of affective relationships. These two topics are likewise closely connected to each other and reiterate the tendency highlighted in previous sections and criticised by different authors (*cf.* Kipnis 2003, Petrella 2007) to apply the ethic of work to affective relationships.

I see these observations, as well as those reported in the previous sections, as potentially offering a point of departure for initiating reflection and discussion within polyamorous communities as well.

## *Conclusions*

In the beginning of the chapter I asked different questions: what is the individual strategy/theoretical approach of the social actors? They are closer to an essentialist approach or a constructivist one? Can the community be considered a collective subject? And if so, what is the role of this subject? Is the possibility of changing the social structure a shared goal? And, if so, are there shared strategies for acting on the social structure?

Drawing together the different aspects analysed throughout the chapter, I can say that different narratives and interpretations coexist in my respondents' accounts in terms of their theories and practices of non-monogamy. The identity approach to polyamory is present – often accompanied by a more essentialist narrative about their predisposition to non-monogamy that resembles a Freudo-Marxist view on sexuality (*cf.* Bernini 2017) – but there are also narratives that highlight the cultural influences they have been subjected to and are more similar to a constructivist perspective. Interestingly, some people refused this dichotomy and instead pursued an overcoming of the nature/nurture debate.

This blurred approach to identity seems to be confirmed when looking at interviewees' relationships with the reference community: while on one hand the community seems to carry out an intense activity of gatekeeping, on the other hand it seems to have a bland and porous approach to identity, even as expressed by members who can be considered insiders.

Similarly to what has been reported for LGBT coming out (Seidman 2002; Mosher 2001), polyamorous coming out is context-specific: some respondents are out with some people (especially friends) and not with others, or they conceal this information in some specific contexts (especially work). Moreover, coming out is often not direct, with individuals seeming to prefer a strategy of gradual disclosure. However, the fact that few people are out in the workplace and that this is a specific concern for many of them seems to indicate

that many of the people interviewed perceive their behaviour to be socially stigmatised.

Finally, in relation to political approach, the administrators of the online groups seem to have confirmed an intersectionally informed political position but the polyamorous community in general does not seem to share an idea of political strategy, neither in the sense of rights-claiming nor in the sense of a radical questioning of society. This is one of the reasons why some queer activists have dismissed the polyamorous community, instead situating the discourse on consensual non-monogamies within a broader radical critique of reality based on a fundamentally anti-capitalist perspective.

## Conclusions

My lengthy journey around theories and practices of Consensual Affective Non-Monogamies began at least four years before starting my doctorate and five before starting the fieldwork, and I hope it will continue even after writing the last word of this dissertation.

I consider my research as inductive because my relationship with “the field” started before my relationship with “theory”. My relationship with theory (or at least deeper engagement with it) began with the writing of my doctoral project and continued before, during and after fieldwork.

In the first two chapters I tried to present the theoretical framework in which I moved. First of all, I sought to take into account different constructions around the concept of “romantic” and “passionate” love in the West. I then concentrated on theories of intimacy in late modernity. In particular, in the first part of my project I was guided by individualisation and de-traditionalization theories that also reflect on the increase of self-reflexivity. I referred in particular to Giddens (1992) and Roseneil (2000) and their focus on certain changes in intimacy such as the increase of equality in gender relations (both sexually and emotionally), a more contingent idea of intimate relationships as open to transformation, an increase in the importance of deep emotional sharing, a more recreational form of sexuality, greater questioning of fixed gender identities and a broader concept of family. Other theorists have highlighted the emergence of the conflict between personal autonomy and emotional needs (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), which was one of the fundamental issues of this dissertation. Later in my research process, I adopted a more critical perspective that reflected on some risks of de-traditionalization theories, namely: the risk of neglecting to consider the gender inequalities that continue to exist, the risk of neglecting class and race inequalities, and the over-romanticisation of same-sex relationships (*cf.* Jamieson 1998, 1999; Klesse 2007). Furthermore, I highlighted the need to

overcome the emotions/reason dichotomy (*cf.* Herrera Gómez 2010; Deri 2011, 2015).

In the second chapter I presented polyamorous theory more closely, starting from its origins. In particular, readers were presented with polyamorous “new sexual ethics” (*cf.* Anapol 2010), characterised above all by the problematisation of emotional and financial dependency, a focus on letting love spread and accepting its transformations, an expansion of the concepts of loyalty and commitment, and the great importance given to the values of honesty and transparency with the aim of building more authentic relationships. Another central tenant of polyamorous theory is the emphasis on the culture of consent, as opposed to rape culture (*cf.* Hamer 1994). Shortly, however, I opened up a space for the criticism that has emerged in part from activists and theorists within the polyamorous community. These criticisms concern: the risk of a neoliberal interpretation of polyamory that favours a disposable vision of relationships (*cf.* Vassallo 2018); the risk of exclusion on the basis of class and race; and the emergence of polynormativity, characterised by couple-centrism, the hierarchisation of affects, an emphasis on rules and, in general, presenting a reassuring representation to mainstream society (Zanin 2013; Ferrer 2018). This coincided with the assumption of a more critical perspective on my part, a perspective that aimed to rebalance agency and structure by reconsidering the structural limits on free choice and problematising the liberal notion of sexual agency and consent (*cf.* Klesse 2007; Bauer 2014). I have also given space to the most radical voices that have emerged in recent decades (such as the philosophy of Relationship Anarchy), which focus on overcoming romantic love and critique the hierarchisation of affections and the canalisation of care into romantic relationships and the nuclear family (e.g. Nordgren 2006; SomMovimento NazioAnale 2015, 2016; yingchen and yingtong 2016).

After my first engagement with the theory I went back into the field, this time with more structured objectives. My fieldwork lasted from October 2017 to July 2018 and was carried out in ten different Italian cities/regions,



alternating interviews, participant observation and the study of online discourses and public discourses about CANM.

Once the fieldwork was finished, it was time to analyse the collected data and I sought to bring theory and empirical research into dialogue in the process of analysis. In the first chapter dedicated to empirical analysis (Chapter 4), I presented my findings as to my respondents' theories about love and forms of intimacy. Elements emerged from the respondents' definitions of love which were similar to Giddens's (1992) pure relationship (focus on emotional sharing, equality in the relationship) and, at the same time, attempts to reconcile individualistic drives and desire for emotional stability (*cf.* Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). The interviewees also displayed a certain tendency towards rationalisation and the downsizing of the weight of sexuality, in line with the "polyromanticism" highlighted by Wilkinson (2010). Compared to the romantic model outlined at the beginning of Chapter 1, I found signs of overcoming (or at least a desire to overcome) that model of suffered and totalising love (*cf.* Giddens 1992; Herrera Gómez 2010).

The analysis of the respondents' narratives about their polyamorous practices (Chapter 5) also found some elements of rationalisation, such as establishing agreements, attempts to control jealousy, a great deal of accountability applied to emotions, and neglecting feelings of vulnerability in the effort to be a "good polyamorous person" (*cf.* Petrella 2007; Ritchie 2010). In general, however, the level of contractualisation of the relationships of the people interviewed does not seem to be very high (e.g. only one person had written agreements for his relationship and there were attempts to bring the body and the emotions back to the centre). Asymmetries of power in relationships also emerged, and these were not always easily readable by the people interviewed. I believe that some of these reflections may also be useful for initiating a discussion within the polyamorous community about the concept of emotional vulnerability, which is sometimes overlooked even by the self-help books dedicated to Consensual Non-Monogamies.

As outlined in the last chapter, the research findings were similar to those of Barker (2005), Klesse (2006, 2007) and Aviram (2010) in terms of people taking different positions in relation to polyamorous identity: these varied from interviewees who completely embrace an identity approach (“I was born this way”) to more constructivist positions (“My experiences led me to discover CNM”) as well as positions that try to overcome the nature/nurture dichotomy. In looking at the role of the community, we can briefly summarise that there is intense gatekeeping being varied out (especially online) but a bland and porous approach to polyamorous identity and to the concept of community itself. Moreover, the coming-out of the people interviewed is context-specific, similar to that of LGBT people, and often blurred/gradual rather than direct. However, there is social stigma towards people who practice consensual non-monogamous relationships which can be seen especially in the workplace, in a society shaped by heteronormativity (Warner 1991), amatonormativity (Brake 2012a, 2012b), and mononormativity (Pieper and Bauer 2005). Finally, the polyamorous community does not have a shared political strategy at the moment, nor does it have a strong political characterisation, and this is one of the reasons some queer people have chosen to move away from polyamorous groups and towards more politicised circles, especially with an anti-capitalist characterisation.

In general, the emergent picture of people practicing CANM in Italy is complex and polyphonic, with positions ranging from more individualistic to more network-oriented ones, from highly hierarchical to relationship anarchists, from approaches that focus on rationality to attempts to put the body and emotions at the centre. Positions include essentialist approaches and constructionist approaches, but also approaches that attempt to overcome this dichotomy; interviewees expressed apolitical, liberal and radical positions alike.

In these conclusive pages I will try to recollect some ideas and considerations arising from the analysis in relation to the axes mentioned in the introduction.

### *Personal autonomy/emotional stability*

The tension between the social drive towards personal autonomy and the social drive towards emotional stability has emerged particularly intensely in late/post-modernity. One of my aims, at first, was to investigate if CANM approaches could be read as one of the strategies implemented by social actors to reconcile these two social forces. As expected, I do not have a yes/no answer to this question, but I can say that the narratives of my interlocutors conveyed an awareness of this conflict and the importance of explicitly negotiating these two dimensions. Furthermore, in the definitions of love provided by my interview partners, the focus is centred much more often on the partner rather than oneself, and this would seem to indicate they are oriented towards looking for a bond rather than pursuing unbridled individualism. On the other hand, relationships are more often defined by intimacy than by planning/commitment. Overall, by also comparing their narratives before and after the “non-monogamous turn”, it seems that many of them view relationships as paths that can undergo different phases and forms, not necessarily on a regular basis, and that CANM has aided them in accepting more irregular and non-normative affective paths.

### *Hierarchical/non-hierarchical*

The most radical approaches of which I have written (in particular Relationship Anarchy) theorise a non-hierarchical view of relationships — that is, one that does not prioritise romantic and sexual relationships — and a conception of care which is not restricted to the couple or to the family but widespread at the level of the affective network.

Regarding the relationships of the people interviewed, a non-hierarchical polyamorous model seems to prevail. However, even though a non-hierarchical and non-romance-centred approach is rather widespread at a

theoretical level, in practice deconstructing amatormativity involves considerable emotional effort.

### *Emotions/reason*

I have tried to adopt an approach with regard to the emotions/reason dichotomy as well that seeks to overcome this dichotomy.

One of the salient aspects of polynormativity is a strong rationalisation applied to affective relationships. This aspect is partially reflected in the theories and practices of my interlocutors (e.g. reflections on the symbolic meaning of saying “I love you” and reflections on the meaning of the words “love” and “relationship” in general; strategies of rationalisation to manage jealousy; feelings of guilt for the emotions people feel; neglect of their own feelings of vulnerability). In some cases, however, this focus seems to bring to light contradictions between rationalisation and affective practice in which “plans” are often “hampered” by the emergence of unexpected emotions.

### *Orientation/choice*

Some theorists (Emans 2004, Tweedy 2011) have suggested that a political strategy that presents polyamory as an orientation (similar to sexual orientation discourses) would be effective in fostering the recognition of the claims or demands of polyamorous people/groups. However, as Klesse (2014) has pointed out, this association has some significant drawbacks, such as that of leaving behind all the “not decent” polyamorous people, and it could potentially undermine the radical potential of polyamorous discourse by reducing the potentialities of alliances and facilitating a process of assimilating to the dominant social frame of reference rather than transforming it.

Both essentialist and more constructionist narratives appeared among the narratives of my interview partners, but there were also some narratives attempting to situate themselves outside of this dichotomy.

In general, a rather blurred approach to affective and sexual identities and behaviours (as noted by Aviram 2010) seems to be confirmed, as well as a rather bland and porous approach to the idea of “community”.

### *Desire for social legitimacy/political radicalism*

Initially, my perspective was much more centred on agency, in an attempt to highlight the relative power of social actors to re-negotiate conflicting social drives. In the course of my research, however, I have adopted a more balanced perspective on structure and agency by re-evaluating the weight of the social structure, for example in the diverse possibilities to access to polyamorous community (on class and race basis) or to live openly as polyamorous.

As far as political approach is concerned, it seems that the goal of changing the social structure is currently a minority objective within the polyamorous community, and this also appears to be the reason why some people more deeply involved in queer transfeminist activism do not frequent (or no longer frequent) polyamorous community groups and meetings. However, within the online community the group administrators have taken a more firm political position that is oriented towards an intersectional, although not explicitly anti-capitalistic, perspective.

I conclude this dissertation with the awareness that some (too many?) questions remain open. Here below I present some of the as-yet-unanswered questions that I wish I had the time to investigate further, in the hope of having the opportunity to do so in the future: how much weight do gender asymmetries have in the management of polyamorous relationships? How much does the class dimension weigh in determining access to the polyamorous community and in

the management of polyamorous relationships? How are transformations in polyamorous relationships managed, and what happens when people break up? Are there any important differences between these practices and those of monogamous relationships?

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## Appendix 1

### *Glossary of polyamorous terms*

The glossary collects all the terms used through the dissertation and some of the other most common or peculiar. For the preparation of the glossary I referred to several sources of activists or academics who dealt with polyamory: the glossary of poly terms in Veaux's website *morethantwo.com*; the glossary in the website *lovingmorenonprofit.org* and Ritchie and Barker's article about polyamorous languages (2006).

- *Compersion* (or *frubbly*) = the feeling of empathetic happiness or joy that comes from seeing your partner happy or joyful (especially — but not limited to — with another partner); the term was coined by the Kerista commune;
- *cowboy/cowgirl* = a person who tries to hinder the other (usually previous) relationships to a polyamorous partner with the purpose of starting a monogamous relationship with them;
- *cuddle party* = event where the participants are allowed (but not obliged) to exchange non-sexual physical contact; every contact must be consensual and usually there are precise rules to establish it, defined *a priori*;
- *Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT)* = relationship agreement in which the members are allowed to have additional sexual and/or romantic connections with the condition that one cannot speak about them; many polyamorous people do not like this type of relationship and decide to avoid commitment with people who have this type of agreement;

- *Ethical Slut* = a person who openly chooses to have simultaneous sexual and/or romantic partners in a “ethical” way (that normally implies the consent and knowledge of all the partners involved); the term comes from the book *The Ethical Slut*, in which the authors propose the positive re-semanticisation of the term *slut*, normally used with a derogatory meaning;
- *fluid bonding* = term related to practices which involve the exchange of bodily fluids, normally it refers to the agreement, within a specific relationship, to have barrier-free sex in that relationship;
- *kitchen-table polyamory* = a style of polyamory where the polycule (see below) has family-style connections; it is not necessary that all the people of the polycule had romantic/sexual connections;
- *metamour/metapartner* = the partner of one’s partner;
- *mono/poly* (or *poly/mono* or *poly mixed relationship*) = term related to a relationship between a person who self-identifies as polyamorous and a person who self-identifies as monogamous;
- *N* = a (polyamorous) relationship involving generally two couples, where one member of one couple is also involved sexually and/or romantically with one member of the other couple;
- *New Relationship Energy (NRE)* = high erotic or emotional “energy” consequent to the beginning of a new relationship;

- *NRE junkie* = a term usually used to indicate (normally in derogatory terms) a person who begins many relationships one after the other and concludes them in a short period of time; the term derives from the presupposition that the person in question seeks out the euphoria and intense emotion associated with New Relationship Energy over the maintenance of a long-term relationship;
- *Old Relationship Energy (ORE)* = a mix of feelings such as comfort, security, and stability in relation with a long-standing affective relationship (in contrast with NRE);
- *One Penis Policy* = expression normally used in a derogatory meaning that identify an agreement stipulated within a (normally heterosexual) relationship in which the woman can have additional relationships only with other women but not with men, while normally the man can have additional relationships with other women; this agreement is normally not viewed as favourably within the polyamorous community because it is considered sexist;
- *polycule* = more or less complex relationship structure that includes primary and secondary partners, who normally are closely connected (but not necessarily all in an intimate relationship with each other);
- *polyfidelity* = form of affective non-monogamy where all members of the (close) group agree to restrict the sexual activities to only other members of the group;
- *primary partner* = a partner to which one gives priority in time and energy and with which one normally has a relationship that includes long term

commitments and plans (the term can be prescriptive if there is a specific agreement to define the relationship as primary or descriptive if it just describes the situation in that specific moment);

- *quad* = a (polyamorous) relationship involving four people, not necessarily all involved in a sexual and/or romantic relationship with each other;
- *solo poly* = an approach to polyamory that normally excludes the involvement in primary or tightly couple-centric relationships; people who self-define solo poly normally prioritised autonomy and flexibility in the form their relationships take;
- *secondary partner* = a partner that is secondary in terms of time and energy in a person's life in comparison to the primary relationship and with which one normally does not have long term commitments and plans;
- *serial monogamy* = expression that identifies the practice of engaging in multiple monogamous relationships during the lifetime, one after another;
- *triad* (or *trouple*) = a (polyamorous) relationship that involves three people that all have a relationship with each other;
- *unicorn* = term that normally refers to a (hypothetical) bisexual woman who agrees to date a (usually heterosexual) couple and has the same level of sexual and/or romantic attraction with both the members of the couple; the term is used to emphasise the rarity of bisexual women who accept such a relational configuration, whereas couples looking for a woman

who will agree to these terms are largely more common; with this meaning, the term is usually used to highlight the power inequality; more generally, the term identifies a person who date a couple, also within the LGBT community;

- *unicorn hunters* = term normally used with derogatory meaning to indicate a (usually heterosexual) couple who is looking for a unicorn (see above);
- *V* = a (polyamorous) relationship involving three people, in which one person is romantically and/or sexually involved with two partners who are not romantically and/or sexually involved with each other;
- *wibble* (or *wibbly*) = feeling of insecurity respect to one of the partner's relationships.



## **Appendix 2**

### *Brief relational biography of the interviewees*

I use the historical present, but all the facts reported have to be considered as in reference to the moment of the interview.

- 1) Adele (29) is a genderqueer person, they is bisexual and prefers the term relationship anarchist. At the moment of the interview they identifies two affective relationships (with a man and with a woman), but they finds difficult to clearly label and quantify their relationships.
- 2) Alberto (34) is a heterosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he identifies at least four relationships plus other four more fluid relationships. He co-habits from six years with Beatrice, with whom he had a relationship from eight years.
- 3) Alessandra (43) prefers to not define their gender and their orientation. They has a fluid approach to relationships, actually they co-habits with their partner and their child, but they considers to have also a relationship with their former co-habiting partner.
- 4) Alessio (33) is a heterosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he has just one relationship, but in the past he had more relationships simultaneously.
- 5) Alfredo (36) is a heterosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he co-habits with his partner from around two years. They had an open relationship from the beginning and then a polyamorous relationship. Alfredo had other important relationships along the years, the last one with a girl with whom he dated for seven months, and for the last two-three months they experienced a triad also with his primary partner.
- 6) Amedeo (35) is a heteroflexible/sapiosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he has a relationship with Roberta from two years and an half, with whom he co-habits from two years. He has also a relationship with

- Irene (32)<sup>75</sup> from one year. This relationship began with a triad but then Roberta and Irene broke up.
- 7) Angelica (31) is a pansexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she is single, but in the past she lived an experience of co-habitation with her ex-husband and another man (she was the vertex of the V configuration) for almost nine years.
  - 8) Anna (53) is a heterosexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she speaks to me of three relationships with three different men, but actually lately she is seeing often only the last of the three. She has two children.
  - 9) Attilio (42) is a pansexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he lives together with his partner Lara from six years and he has another relationship from three months. In the past, he had different experiences of polyamorous relationships, and also one of co-habitation with Lara and his former partner for six months.
  - 10) Barbara (38) is a bisexual cisgender woman. She has a fluid approach to relationships, at the moment of the interview she has a relationship with a man from two-three years, she has also a non-sexual relationship with a gay man that she defines “unnamed relationship” and she considers also to continue an undefined relationship with another partner with whom previously had a more tight relationship.
  - 11) Carlo (48) is a heterosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he has a primary relationship from six years and he has also some other secondary relationships, in particular from around a year with a woman that he sees around once a week and others that he sees once every two weeks. There are also other women that he knows for over ten years but that sees less often.
  - 12) Cinzia (32) is a cisgender woman, she defines herself heteroflexible. At the moment of the interview she has a primary relationship with a man that lasts

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<sup>75</sup> See point 32.

- from ten years, she also lives with him and they have a child. During the years of their relationship they had different relationships, some shared and some not. In particular, Cinzia remembered during the interview a relationship with another couple, that is still very important in her life and another experience with a girl in a triad.
- 13) Claudio (28) is an homosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he is in a monogamous relationship with a man from one year and eight months. In the past he had a more fluid approach to relationship, in particular in a period he had three relationships simultaneously.
- 14) Daniele (45) is an homosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he lives together with his former romantic partner, the new romantic partner of his former partner and the three children of the new couple. Although he does not have other relationships at the moment I included him in the sample because I thought that his situation could be interesting in a perspective of “other intimacies”, not necessary romantic.
- 15) Davide (33) is a bisexual agender person. At the moment of the interview they has a relationship from three years with Rebecca (24)<sup>76</sup> and Elia, the partner with whom she lives. Rebecca and Elia live in another region. Previously, Davide had also an experience of co-habitation (of one year) with a genderqueer person and a man with whom they lived in a triad for two years and an half. For around two years they had a relationship in five all together with Rebecca and Elia.
- 16) Edoardo (25) is an homosexual cisgender man. He has a relationship with Stefano from one year and seven months (a long distance relationship at the moment of the interview) and another relationship with Michele (28)<sup>77</sup> from around nine months.

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<sup>76</sup> See point 51.

<sup>77</sup> See point 42.

- 17) Elena (28) is a heterosexual transgender woman. She has a fluid approach to relationships, but at the moment of the interview she has two more structured relationships: with Loris from more than a year and with Francesco from a couple of months.
- 18) Eleonora (32) is a heterosexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she lives with her husband Gabriele (27)<sup>78</sup>, their child and another partner. She met her husband six years before and they live together from five years. At the moment of the interview she lives together with the two men from six months but she and Gabriele previously lived for around one year and an half with another Eleonora's former partner.
- 19) Emanuele (34) is a heterosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he lives with his partner Livia that he met eight years before. He refers to me to have also another relationship from almost three years and other two relationship from around one year. Recently these two latest girls also started a relationship between each other.
- 20) Emilia (30) is a bisexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she lives with her husband who she met in 2011. They are married from two years and previously – always during her relationship with her husband – she co-habited with a former girlfriend. Currently, she has also a relationship with another partner from some months, with whom she had already had a relationship for seven months four years before.
- 21) Enzo (60) is a heterosexual cisgender man. He is the other person who does not fit all my interview criteria, in fact just one of the three women with whom he has a relationship at the moment of the interview is aware of the situation. Anyway, he expresses the ideal to be openly polyamorous. He met the aware partner one year and an half before, while he knew one of the other partner many years before and the last one from a year. He has also a child and he co-habits with him.

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<sup>78</sup> See point 28.

- 22) Ettore (29) is a bisexual non-binary transgender man. He is relationship anarchist. At the moment of the interview he has two defined relationships, with a man with whom he was in a triad for a while (with the other former component of the triad he has now a more fluid relationship) and with a girl he knew one year before. With both the relationship they see each other normally once a month. Being relationship anarchist, he has also a network of other relationships less defined but important.
- 23) Fabio (37) is a heterosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he is single, but previously he had two relationships at the same time for around six months with two girls and then another experience for some months of simultaneous relationships with other two girls. With all these girls he had a soft D/s relationship.
- 24) Federica (27) is a bisexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she has a relationship with Valentino from three years – with whom she also co-habits with other flatmates – and a relationship with Giovanni from around one year.
- 25) Federico (55) is an homosexual cisgender man. He is in a triad with Mauro (40)<sup>79</sup> and Gerardo from around four years. Before, he was already in a relationship with Mauro from around six years. During the week he co-habits with his former partner, while for the weekend he and Gerardo reach Mauro in his house in the countryside (they live in three different cities of the Northern Italy).
- 26) Felice (69) is a heterosexual cisgender man. He is married with Giorgia (48)<sup>80</sup> from around twenty years and they have a child who has just become a young adult. He has also a special friend that he knows from more than twenty years and with whom it has happened to also have sexual exchanges. At the moment of the interview they don't see each other often, with an average of once every

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<sup>79</sup> See point 41.

<sup>80</sup> See point 29.

- two years, because she is very nomadic. When she reaches him, they normally spend their time also with Giorgia.
- 27) Filippo (48) is an homosexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he is in a relationship with Giorgio from around four years. At the beginning of their relationships they had a polyamorous experience for around six months, because when they met Filippo was already in a relationship with Sabino. This last man is a bisexual man that was, in turn, in a relationship with a woman from around ten years and they have a child.
- 28) Gabriele (27) is a heterosexual cisgender man. He is married with Eleonora (30)<sup>81</sup> and they have a child. At the moment of the interview he lives together with his wife, his child and the other partner of his wife from around six months. He also had another relationship, but just for around four months.
- 29) Giorgia (48) is a heterosexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she is married with Felice (69)<sup>82</sup> from around twenty years and they have a child that has just become a young adult. She tell me having also a special friend (and former partner) that she knows from more than twenty years with occasional sexual exchanges. At the moment of the interview, anyway, they see each other very rarely but before they saw each other around once every six months.
- 30) Greta (26) is an asexual “queer-romantic” transgender intersex woman. At the moment of the interview she is in a triad with a girl and a guy. She is in a relationship with the girl from around eight months and also with the guy from four months. In the last year she also had some other relationships that overlapped. Being “queer-romantic” and asexual means that is difficult to her to draw a clear line of demarcation between friendships and romantic partners.

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<sup>81</sup> See point 18.

<sup>82</sup> See point 26.

- 31) Guido (30) is a pansexual genderfluid person. At the moment of the interview they lives together with Martina (31)<sup>83</sup> with whom they is in a relationship from seven years. They has also a relationship with Barbara from around seven months, with whom he and Martina began a relationship in triad (lasted around three-four months), but then Martina and Barbara broke up.
- 32) Irene (32) is a bisexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she is co-habiting with Fabrizio – who is her partner from ten years – from six years. She has other three relationships: she usually spends the weekends with her other partner Ivan – with whom she has a relationship from two years – in his house, and normally once a week she meets the other two partners, one of whom is Amedeo (35)<sup>84</sup>. She is helping Ivan to design a “poly house”, where she will also have a room for some days of the week.
- 33) Laura (26) is a bisexual cisgender woman. She has a fluid approach to the definition of relationships, but at the moment of the interview she tell me having a relationship with Enrico from six years and an half, then she is dating from around a year a guy who lives in another city and who she sees around once a month. Besides, she still feel strong feelings also for a man who lives abroad and in a monogamous relationship (but they continue keeping in touch). She also considers very important her flatmate.
- 34) Alessandro is a heterosexual cisgender man. Although his ideal relationship is monogamous and at the moment of the interview he is in a monogamous relationship, in the recent past he had four different relationships simultaneously. With all these women he had a D/s relationship and he saw them normally twice a week (two of them often together).
- 35) Manuel (32) is a bisexual non-binary transgender man. His approach to relationships is close to relationship anarchy. At the moment of the interview he has three relationships: with Matteo, with whom he is together from some

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<sup>83</sup> See point 38.

<sup>84</sup> See point 6.

- years, with Sam (37)<sup>85</sup>, with whom he has a more relaxed relationship without performance anxiety and with Domenico, who he knew just some months before and who lives in another city.
- 36) Mario (42) is a bisexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he is in a relationship with Valerio (42)<sup>86</sup> from around four years. Before he never had important relationships. With Valerio, they had also an experience of triad with a woman for around one year.
- 37) Marta (42) is a pansexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she has a relationship with Maurizio from around three years and a relationship with another man from around a year. This man lives in another city and they see each other once or twice a month.
- 38) Martina (31) is a pansexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview he is in relationship with Guido (30)<sup>87</sup> from seven years, and they co-habit. They had also an experience in triad for some months but then she and the other woman broke up. At the moment she has also another relationship with Samuel from around seven months, they see each other three-four times a week.
- 39) Marzia (25) is a pansexual cisgender woman. She has three relationships: Alessio is the partner who lives closest and the only one she introduced to his parents; Davide lives in another city and they meet about once a month; recently she also met Alf, who is originally from Northern Europe and chose a nomadic life since few years. For the period in which Alf remained in her city (a month and a half), they have been together several times for three-four consecutive days in the mountains; at the moment of the interview they were planning to meet again in a month.

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<sup>85</sup> See point 54.

<sup>86</sup> See point 60.

<sup>87</sup> See point 31.



- 40) Massimo (50) is a heterosexual cisgender man. He has a relationship with Paola (51)<sup>88</sup> from around seven years. Besides, he has a friend who lives in another city who meet around once every three-four months, and another friend who lives in his same city and sees more often. With both these friends there are also sexual exchanges, but he does not feel the same emotional intensity he feels for Paola. He has two children from a previous relationship who live with him for half the time.
- 41) Mauro (40) is an homosexual transgender man. He is in a triad with Federico (55)<sup>89</sup> and Gerardo from around four years. Before, he was already in a relationship with Mauro from around six years. They normally spend the weekend together in Mauro's house in the countryside.
- 42) Michele (28) is an homosexual cisgender man. He is in a relationship with Edoardo (25)<sup>90</sup> from around nine months. When they began to date Michele was in an open relationship with another man from two years, but they then broke up. At the moment of the interview he has also a relationship with Diego from seven months.
- 43) Morena (37) is a pansexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview has just a relationship, with Lorena. Previously, they had been in a triad with Andrea for around six months. Morena was co-habiting with Andrea since around ten years and was in a relationship with him since several more years. For the time they were together, Lorena reached them every weekend and at any time free from work. Nine months before the interview Andrea and Lorena broke the relationship and Morena continued the two relationships separately for a while. Then, she also broke up with Andrea.
- 44) Nubia (25) is a cisgender woman, at the moment of the interview is confuse about their sexual orientation. She is in a relationship with an AMAB person

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<sup>88</sup> See point 45.

<sup>89</sup> See point 25.

<sup>90</sup> See point 16.

- who began a gender transition path. They are together from almost four years, with a pause of eight months. During their relationship, Nubia had also a relationship with a guy for one year.
- 45) Paola (51) is a heterosexual (or maybe heteroflexible) cisgender woman. She is in a relationship with Massimo (50)<sup>91</sup> from around seven years. During their relationship she had different other less important connections, but from some months she has another relationship with a man who lives in another city. She has two children from a previous relationship.
- 46) Paolo (41) is a pansexual cisgender man. He is relationship anarchist and prefer not to label relationships. He spoke to me of around ten different connections with people of different genders with whom he has different types of relationships, he loves them and with some of them there are also sexual exchanges and emotional and material support.
- 47) Patrizia (23) is a bisexual cisgender woman. She has a very important platonic relationship with Enrico from two years and an half, she considers him a mentor. At the moment of the interview she had recently broke up with Christian, with whom she had a relationship for one year and an half and they are still friends. During this relationship she also had some other connections, in particular an intense connection with Manuela and some play partners (all the people involved attend the BDSM community). Besides, she has a new connection with another guy from few months.
- 48) Pau (25) is pansexual. At the moment of the interview she defines herself just as “non-cis” but at the moment I am writing she began a gender transition path. At the moment of the interview she has a relationship with Sonia from four years, with whom she co-habits with other flatmates. She has also a relationship with another girl from four months. Previously she had different other relationships simultaneously.

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<sup>91</sup> See point 40.

- 49) Pietro (30) is a heterosexual cisgender man. His relationship ideal is monogamy but at the moment he has six different relationships, mainly based on sex but with affective components (for example, he keeps in touch with all of them every day and one of them has also invited him to her son's birthday party).
- 50) Rachele (26) is a homosexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she has just a relationship with Stefania, but previously she maintained two relationship at the same for one year and an half, with Gabriele and with Alessia.
- 51) Rebecca (24) is a pansexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she has just a relationship with Davide (33)<sup>92</sup> who lives in another region and with whom she has a relationship from three years. She recently broke up with Elia with whom she had a relationship for almost eight years. For the last two years and an half they also lived together, for a year they co-habited also with a girl with whom they were in a triad and for the last year with another girl that was Elia's partner. Besides, for around two years she and Elia had a relationship in five all together with Davide and his previous two partners.
- 52) Roberta (27) is a bisexual cisgender woman. She was in relationship with two men (who are also her colleagues) for around nine months, but she recently broke up with one of them.
- 53) Roberto (35) is a heterosexual cisgender man. He is married with Silvia (36)<sup>93</sup> from three years and they have a relationship from ten years. They used to co-habit, but now not anymore. They normally meet two-three times a week. Roberto has also a girlfriend from two years and he meets her one-two times

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<sup>92</sup> See point 15.

<sup>93</sup> See point 57.

- a week, but usually for a longer time respect to when he meets Silvia: normally, when they meet they spend 24 hours together.
- 54) Sam (37) is a bisexual genderfluid person. They is a relationship anarchist. At the moment of the interview they lives with two very important people for them, with one of whom they had also a romantic relationship in the past. In addition to these two people, they has a romantic relationship with Monica from some years. Besides, with Manuel (32)<sup>94</sup> they managed to build a dilated and peaceful relationship.
- 55) Serena (28) is a heteroflexible/bisexual cisgender woman. At the moment of the interview she co-habits with Aldo, who is her partner since 14 years. She meets almost every day also Samuele, with whom she has a relationship from one year and an half and who visits also often their house. Besides, Serena has also another partner that she meets on average twice a month and another one that she meets on average once a month. She has also a special relationship with a female friend, who she meets on average once every ten days.
- 56) Sergio (30) is a cisgender man and he is questioning about her sexual-romantic orientation. He is married with Alba with whom he has a relationship from five years. At the moment they do not live together because he moved for work. During these five years he had three complicated relationships with other women and he currently does not consider these relationships completely closed. Besides, he has a connection, that included sexual exchanges, with his current flatmate.
- 57) Silvia (36) is a heterosexual cisgender woman. She is married with Roberto (35)<sup>95</sup> from three years and they are together from ten years. They used to co-habit but now not anymore. At the moment of the interview she lives with her

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<sup>94</sup> See point 35.

<sup>95</sup> See point 53.

- other partner with whom she has a relationship from two years. She normally meets Roberto two-three times a week.
- 58) Sonia (55) is a heterosexual cisgender woman. She lives very well the dynamic of the “pack”, at the moment of the interview she has different important connections in her life, more or less sexual, but surely of emotional and material support.
- 59) Valeria (35) is an homosexual cisgender woman. She has two relationships: with Alice from six years and with Veronica from two years. The two women are also friends with each other.
- 60) Valerio (42) is a bisexual cisgender man. At the moment of the interview he is in a relationship with Mario (42)<sup>96</sup> from around four years. Previously, he had an experience of triad with Mario and a woman for around one year.

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<sup>96</sup> See point 36.

## **Appendix 3**

### *Fieldwork itinerary*

- 1<sup>st</sup> October-14 October: interviews in Turin;
- 15<sup>th</sup> October- 16<sup>th</sup> November 2017: interviews and participant observation in Rome;
- 20<sup>th</sup> November- 20<sup>th</sup> December 2017: interviews and participant observation in Bologna;
- January 2018: interviews and participant observation in Turin;
- 4<sup>th</sup> February- 1<sup>st</sup> March 2018: interviews and participant observation in Padua and Veneto region;
- March 2018: interviews and participant observation in Florence and Tuscany region;
- April 2018: interviews and participant observation in Turin and Milan;
- 1<sup>st</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> May 2018: interviews and participant observation in Cagliari and Sardinia region;
- 1<sup>st</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> June 2018: participant observation in Naples;
- 7<sup>th</sup> June-7<sup>th</sup> July 2018: interviews in Palermo;
- July 2018: last interviews in Turin + 1 in Emilia-Romagna region.

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