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The end or the revival of love? Ethnographic accounts of consensual non-monogamy in Belgium and the Netherlands

(O fim ou o renascimento do amor? Relatos etnográficos de não monogâmias consensuais na Bélgica e na Holanda)

(¿El fin o el renacimiento del amor? Relatos etnográficos de no monogâmias consensuadas en Bélgica y Holanda)

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on ethnographic methods, this paper investigates the cultural and emotional dynamics of contemporary Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) in relation to late-modern conditions of “the end of love”. It establishes a dialogue between the two fields of sociology of love and non-monogamies studies by asking whether emerging CNM represents the dissolution of romantic commitment in late modernity or an attempt to revive or reanimate love by seeking more of it. Based on multimethod ethnographic research, including interviews, participant observations, focus group discussions and on-line data analysis conducted in Belgium and the Netherlands, it argues that CNM narratives of freedom, sexual desire, consent, care and love simultaneously reflect, facilitate and remedy late-modern precarity and break down of social bonds.

KEYWORDS: Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM); late modernity; love; intimacy.

Resumo: Com base em métodos etnográficos, este artigo investiga as dinâmicas culturais e emocionais da Não Monogamia Consensual contemporânea (NMC) em relação ao “fim do amor”, nas condições da pós-modernidade tardia. Ele estabelece um diálogo entre os dois campos da sociologia do amor e dos estudos sobre não monogâmias, questionando se a NMC emergente representa a dissolução do compromisso romântico na pós-modernidade tardia ou uma tentativa de reviver ou reanimar o amor, buscando mais dele. Focando nos contextos da Bélgica e dos Países Baixos, argumenta-se que as narrativas de NMC sobre liberdade, desejo sexual, consentimento, cuidado e amor refletem simultaneamente, facilitam e remedeiam a precariedade da pós-modernidade tardia e a quebra dos laços sociais.

Palavras-chave: Não Monogamia Consensual (NMC); pós-modernidade tardia; amor; intimidade.

Resumen: Basándose en métodos etnográficos, este artículo investiga las dinámicas culturales y emocionales de la No Monogamia Consensuada contemporánea (NMC) en relación con el “fin del amor” en las condiciones de la posmodernidad tardía. Establece un diálogo entre los dos campos de la sociología del amor y los estudios sobre no monogamias, preguntándose si la emergente NMC representa la disolución del compromiso romántico en la posmodernidad tardía o un intento de revivir o reanimar el amor buscando más de él. Centrándose en los contextos de Bélgica y los Países Bajos, se argumenta que las narrativas de la NMC sobre libertad, deseo sexual, consentimiento, cuidado y amor reflejan, simultáneamente, facilitan y remedian la precariedad de la posmodernidad tardía y la ruptura de los lazos sociales.

Palabras clave: No Monogamia Consensuada (NMC); posmodernidad tardía; amor; intimidad.

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1 Introduction

Consensual non-monogamous relationships take a variety of household forms and (non-) hierarchal emotional and sexual commitments among the partners. In Belgium and the Netherlands, Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) has gained popularity in the last decade, evidenced by the growing self-help literature, media attention, on-line spaces, therapeutic offerings, public events, and organisations and associations where interests and concerns about polyamory are expressed and shaped. CNM is also increasingly studied by scholars in a range of social science disciplines and geographical contexts (Haritaworn; Lin; Klesse, 2006; Jordan *et al.*, 2017; Klesse, 2014; Shannon; Willis, 2010). This article builds on this work, drawing on ethnographic research in Belgium and the Netherlands. Using in-depth interviewing, participant observations and on-line data analysis, we investigated intimate experiences of people engaged in different kinds of CNM, varying from polyamory to relationship anarchy and open relationship. Our goal in this paper is to analyse our research participants' narratives alongside a larger discussion on late-modern conditions of love and intimacy, notably the work of sociologist Eva Illouz (2019) on “the end of love”.

“The end of love” is the provocative qualification that Illouz (2019) ascribes to the current state of late-modern intimate affairs. Illouz focuses on the ways in which social bonds break down or dissolve, observing a deep, nagging uncertainty about emotional life in the way people approach and engage with others romantically. According to Illouz, in late-modern societies, i.e. Western European and North American countries after World War II (WW-II), interiority has become the most important level of existence and the ground for moral claims to freedom and autonomy. Questions such as “is this the right person for me?”, “am I missing out on something more meaningful?”, “are we really happy?” or “why can't I be happy?” have become an integral part of daily life, cultural scripts and – informal – therapeutic discourses, and many individuals struggle with these questions regardless of whether or not they succeed in entering into and sustaining a romantic relationship. The liberal ideology of choice that prevails in late-modern societies, Illouz argues, orients individuals towards hedonistic calculation, comparison and efficiency without giving them contractual terms for dealing with intimate relationships. She believes that the option of opting out has never been more psychologically and culturally available than today.

The book is situated in a longer tradition of research on the sociology of emotion and love with “cold intimacies” (Illouz, 2007) as perhaps one of Illouz's most influential conceptual contributions to the study of capitalism's intrusion into the private sphere. Zygmunt Bauman (2003) referred to the network-like, elusive nature of intimate bonds in late modernity as “liquid love”, or Hartmut Rosa (2019) described the lack of “resonance” in our relationships to one



another and to the world to reflect on acceleration in modern life. Their overall diagnosis is that the matrix of freedom, autonomy and interiority has paradoxically led to an organisation of the will into desires, appetites and emotions on the one hand, and the melting away of the normativity of relationships on the other. While love remains one of the most meaningful ways to enter social relationships, individuals are increasingly stripped of the will, moral framework and necessary social skills to enter and maintain committed love relationships. To the extent that emotions guide and justify the freedom to have and end sexual and romantic contacts, they argue that the language of commitment, justice and equality has become increasingly incomprehensible.

Illouz believes that the social impact of such late-modern transformations of intimacy is evident, among other things, in the contemporary proliferation of alternative intimate and sexual arrangements that question loyalty and long-term commitment, such as CNM (Illouz, 2019). She points out that while the emergence of these relationships might be celebrated as an achievement of feminist and queer movements that aim to de-naturalise monogamy, the nuclear family and heterosexuality, currently the disruptive and political potential of such practises of sexuality and intimacy are appropriated and distorted by economic and technological forces. This analysis is consistent with critical scholarship on CNM, which rejects uncritical, power-neutral approaches to such relationships and warns against presenting them as universally and automatically progressive and liberating (Haritaworn; Lin; Klesse, 2006; Park, 2017). It also resonates with work that points to the ambivalent position of CNMs as being hijacked by neoliberal imperatives of individualism, casualisation, consumerism, self-optimisation and happiness (Adamczak, 2022; Klesse, 2014; Roodsaz, 2022; Woltersdorff, 2011). However, the focus of Illouz's sociological analysis remains on heterosexual monogamous relationships, while critical scholarship on CNM refrains from broader discussions of contemporary transformations of love and intimacy. This paper aims to establish a closer dialogue between these two fields. We aim to contribute to theorising about the sociocultural significance of the affective and subjective structures of contemporary CNM by adopting an ethnographic perspective and focusing on the contexts of Belgium and the Netherlands.

We will argue that a more complex picture is required that allows for contradictory features of CNM that both reflect and remedy the social conditions of "the end of love". As we will discuss below, in the consensual non-monogamous experiences we have encountered, interiority and emotions are indeed prioritised as guiding principles in individual decision-making – including rejection and withdrawal –, a language of accumulation and diversity is prominent, relationship contracts are elusive and constantly renegotiated by partners, and a depoliticised understanding of freedom is emphasised while references to commitment, equality and justice are mostly absent.



Moreover, contemporary non-monogamies tend to emerge in white, middle-class dominated – on-line – spaces (Johnson, 2019; Patterson, 2018; Smith, 2016) that reflect and reproduce the neoliberal valorisation of the transparent, authentic self that knows – or should know – who it is and what it wants.

At the same time, however, we observed an underlying assumption of infinite love – rather than the end of it –, a widespread determination to tackle problems – albeit through the therapeutic techniques of communication – rather than a sense of paralysis, an openness to broaden one’s horizons, a willingness to engage in the “hard work” of intimacy – see also Roodsaz (2022) –, embracing “uneasiness” as a sign of maturity and personal growth, and sometimes the explicit rejection of instant gratification as part of the search for meaningful connections. These paradoxical tendencies and attitudes raise the question of whether CNM should be seen as a sign of the end of love – as Illouz suggests – or as an attempt to revive or reanimate love by seeking more of it. How should we interpret the cultural and emotional dynamics of currently emerging alternative relationships in terms of what they reveal about the broader transformations of love and intimacy in late modernity? Before we address these questions through our empirical material on everyday experiences of CNM, we will briefly discuss how we approached our studies methodologically.

2 Multimethod ethnographic research

From 2016 to 2019 and from 2019 to 2021, we conducted multimethod ethnographic research on people interested in non-monogamous sex and relationships in Belgium – especially in Flanders and Brussels – and in the Netherlands³. This paper is based on data collected through interviews with people engaged in various forms of CNM and participant observation in non-monogamy advocacy groups, informal social gatherings, movie nights, book clubs and thematic group discussions. Non-monogamy communities in Belgium and the Netherlands have grown steadily in recent years, partly due to increasing local media attention to CNM practises in White, secular and middle-class milieus – see, e.g., Stichting [...] (2022). The groups are linked by members’ interest in openly non-monogamous relationships, but they are heterogeneous in terms of practises and beliefs, both within and between groups. Some groups aim to bring together both Dutch and French-speaking Belgians or Dutch natives and expatriates – with English as the working

³ Data collection, storage and analysis in the Netherlands were conducted according to the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity: <https://www.nwo.nl/en/netherlands-code-conduct-research-integrity> (accessed on April 18, 2024). The Dutch research project was funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), [016.Veni.195.277]. The Belgian project was funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), [FWO16/PDOH1/030] and received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy of Ghent University (September 17, 2016). The American Anthropological Association Ethics Code was used as a guideline (AAA, 2012).



language – while other groups are exclusively Dutch or French-speaking. We participated in open and closed on-line CNM groups and in social and informational meetings, with a focus on the polyamory community in midsize and larger urban areas. With a feminist-activist approach – see, e.g., Craven (2013, p. 920) – that combines research with activist goals, we actively participated in the groups by attending and organising events, taking part in discussions and voicing our opinion, but always explicitly indicated our research-based intentions.

The fieldwork also enabled us to find participants for interviews in which we could delve deeper into individual situations. Together, we conducted recorded individual and focus group interviews with 55 people, including 51 who described themselves as polyamorous and four who reported living in open couple relationships. Of these 55 people, four described themselves as gender fluid or non-binary, 21 as men and 30 as women. Their sexual identity was either not mentioned (15) or reported as asexual (1), bisexual (8), heterosexual (18), heteroflexible (3), lesbian (2), pansexual (4) and queer (4). Ages ranged from the 20s to the 60s. Twenty-five of them lived in medium-sized cities – such as Ghent or Nijmegen – or in the capital – Brussels or Amsterdam –, 12 in smaller cities, and the place of residence of the others was unknown. Most of the participants belong to the middle-class ethnic majority in Belgium and the Netherlands, but ten had a mixed-ethnic or non-native background⁴.

3 The end of love?

If you love someone, then you must.... then you love that person for what they are, and then you have to take the whole package. Also the fact that they may love other people too, or that they have other relationships or sex or whatever they want to do. If you try to prevent that, you will make the person unhappy. So I mean, if you give people the freedom to do what they want, that will make them happy and their happiness will rub off on you. That is the philosophy [of polyamory].

This is a quotation from Julian, a Belgian man in his early 40s who described himself as bisexual and polyamorous⁵. His description of polyamory refers to an ethic of respect for pluralism and the self-determination of the other – “*love that person for what they are*” – and uses language that emphasises the right to exercise the freedom to do “*whatever they want to do*”. As discussed in the introduction, in sociological work on love in late modernity, interiority is identified as a central feature and the normative ground for claims to freedom (Illouz, 2013, 2019). In the abovementioned quote, this freedom is perceived as the means to other’s and, ultimately, one’s

⁴ The research included participants of Belgian-Austrian, Belgian-Jewish, Belgian-Polish, British, Dutch-American, Dutch-Belgian, Dutch-Greek, Dutch-Iranian, Dutch-Surinamese and Dutch-Vietnamese ethnic background.

⁵ We have replaced the real names of the interviewees and other participants by pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. In some cases, we have also removed or altered traceable details.



own happiness. The notion of individual freedom as a prerequisite for happiness and the disavowal of any restrictions played an important role in many of the participants' narratives.

Except for interiority, freedom was also associated with the labelling of the relationship. In CNM advocacy groups in Belgium and the Netherlands, the term polyamory was often used as an umbrella term for a wide range of practises and philosophies of CNM but was also criticised for giving priority to love relationships. This criticism even led to group members increasingly preferring the term “ethical non-monogamy” to “polyamory” over the course of the fieldwork in Belgium, which included setting up a dedicated Dutch-language social media group page using the term. This group had been joined by people who found that polyamory's focus on love and emotional connections in multiple sexual-romantic relationships was too narrow to cover their actual sexual and relationship practises. “Ethical non-monogamy” was described by them as a broader range of non-monogamous practises compared to polyamory, including casual sex, Bondage, Discipline, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) and swinging, and simultaneously allowed for distancing from supposedly “unethical” non-monogamous practises – such as cheating. Self-representation as ethically non-monogamous indicated a desire to reject moral restrictions except for consent. In the Netherlands, such conceptual discussions were less pronounced, and most study participants continued to use the term “polyamory” while emphasising the importance of individual freedom to choose their own specific interpretation. Love, in other words, was valued and celebrated, but never to the extent of limiting one's freedom to negotiate specific intimate arrangements through labelling.

CNM would also allow for the freedom to explore and expand sexual desire. Chiara, a Dutch woman in her mid-30s, for example, explained: “[...] *just the possibility that you can explore your desires with different people and different bodies is what I love about polyamory*”. Chiara saw transformative potential in plurality in the sexual sphere, drawing on narratives that portray the accumulation of diverse sexual experiences not only as a source of pleasure but also of personal growth. On her sexual experiences, Chiara added: “*I used to be very shy about what I wanted in bed, and although it's still a challenge, I've gotten much better at knowing what I want and communicating it to my partners. This has improved our relationship*”. Chiara presented herself here as emancipated from the chains of sexual passivity and ignorance. Yet, this positioning constrained the exploratory dimension of desire through the expectation to know and to communicate what one desires. On the one hand, the plurality principle of polyamory opened up a space for transformation by allowing desire to become a matter of exploration with various others. On the other hand, the communication principle of polyamory closed off this very space by



directing Chiara towards knowledge and clarity. The former invites the self to become something else as an open-ended, exploratory outward process, while the latter implies discovery, inward movement and the search for authenticity. The assumption here is that sexual desire emerges as a deeply rooted entity, rather than being constantly re-constructed in relationships with others. The sexual freedom offered by CNM is thus simultaneously restricted by the imperative to know.

In the three accounts we presented in this section, freedom in CNM was associated with interiority as the normative ground for happiness – one must let themselves be led by interiority to become happy –, with ethical mutual negotiations – consent is the only justifiable restriction to CNM –, and with the exploration of individual sexual desire that is simultaneously knowable. In all three accounts love was – sometimes implicitly – subjected to certain conditions: it should not clash with one’s deepest needs or will only emerge in its true, authentic form when individual freedom is guaranteed. These understandings of freedom implied an invitation to open up – to be brave, one could say –, yet to also push away anything that contradicts the individual’s emotions, desires, or subjective goals. In the next section, we will expand on more explicit expressions of love in CNM, including its relationship to care.

4 Unloving, uncaring

In the narratives of the research participants on love, we identified an ambiguous discourse on care and responsibility for others. On the one hand, the prevailing account of CNM praised people’s potential to love and commit to more than one person at the same time and conveyed an image of the poly lifestyle based on infinite love and care for each other. On the other hand, the heavy reliance on individual subjectivity implied that caring and emotional labour were purely voluntary acts and consequently could not be relied upon. In this section we discuss how this paradox played out in participants’ accounts of love and caring for each other.

First, love understood as desire implied a sense of inevitability and was therefore given precedence over other commitments. Fleur, for example, a woman in her 30s who identified as pansexual, recounted how she fell in love with Luna, a woman she had met at a BDSM party she had gone to with Tom, her partner of about two years at the time. She and Luna had kissed when they were alone in the smoking area. She explained:

I’ve had sex with, yes, lots of people, and with... always casual sex, and it didn’t do much for me. It was fun and exciting and, yeah, it was just cool. But now all of a sudden, I was really in love [with someone other than her partner]. And I hadn’t really experienced that before.

Fleur said she was head over heels in love with Luna and that she and Tom had therefore



agreed to try and turn their relationship into a triad, but on the condition that they would prioritise their relationship if the new construction did not work out. Although initially, Fleur said, her strong feelings for Luna had also fuelled the passion between her and Tom, she soon began to find Tom a burden on her relationship with Luna. Luna would stay over at their house from Friday night until Monday morning, sleeping in their bed with Fleur in the middle. The lack of space in the rather small flat and financial problems began to cause tension and Fleur realised that she really did not want to be with Tom anymore. She finally decided to give in to her strong feelings for Luna and not keep her promise to Tom. Tom moved out of the flat and Luna moved in. Fleur explained that her feelings for Luna were much stronger than what she had ever felt for Tom, which is why she saw the final separation between her and Tom as inevitable. Her account testifies to a notion of love as a desire upon which the subject must act – and which she cannot and should not control – and is ultimately prioritised above responsibility and accountability (hooks, 2000). The increasing desire felt for Luna and the decreasing desire in relation to Tom justify how committed love begins and ends. CNM strengthens this desire-based structure of flexibility by inviting individuals to wilfully and consensually look around for more. The plurality principle of CNM enhances the chance of arranging intimacy around flexible individual desire, rendering commitment and responsibility as less valid motivations.

Despite the language of infinite love, furthermore, some of the participants shared that their willingness to provide care and to sustain a loving relationship was limited to immediate partners and only to issues that affected them directly. Heather, a young American-Dutch expatriate and mother in her mid-30s, for example, stressed the importance of “maturity” and “independence” in order not to bother others with “[one’s] emotional crap from other relationships”. She further explained:

That doesn’t mean I don’t love you or don’t care about you, but I just don’t think I need to listen to your problems with anyone else. I expect you to be mature and independent enough to handle these things yourself. If you want to talk about us, then yes, sure, I’ll be there for you.

However, this position was controversial within the larger polyamory communities, as some would reject this as a *wel de lusten, maar geen lasten* – Dutch for wanting the gains without the pain – attitude. Yet the majority of people we spoke to felt that it was hard and complicated enough to focus on their own emotional problems. Edgar, a Dutch-Surinamese man in his mid-30s, who was in a relationship with two women at the time of the interview, held a similar view to Heather:



If they [his two love partners] want my advice, sure, we can talk about it, but if they just need a shoulder to cry on because of something another lover has done or said... No, no, I have got enough on my plate as it is. [...] How is talking about your boyfriend mistreating you going to help us?

Both Heather and Edgar showed interest in their partners' interiority as long as it served something in their own relationship. They presented emotional care for partners as a tool to enhance the quality of the relationship, which excludes engagement with the rest of the partner's – love – life. Beside this calculative approach, dependence and complaint were disavowed, even when it concerned immediate partners. Edgar, for example, emphasised that it was his own choice to help his pregnant partner: “[...] *she would never ask for it. Her independence is exactly what I love about her. She is such a strong woman*”. Rather than thinking of care as a prerequisite of the relationship, he believed the individual is in charge of providing or withholding care and emotional support. To ask for help seemed unattractive to him and a sign of weakness or immaturity. The CNM's potential to share care responsibilities beyond the nuclear household is therefore hampered by the logics of calculation and individual responsibility.

The idea that a polyamorous relationship is hard work for which each individual is responsible was widespread in the polyamory communities. Feeling hurt, jealous or unhappy was often seen as unwanted emotions that can be prevented or remedied by working harder on oneself. A Belgian woman who posted on the noticeboard of a social media group about her feelings of incredible loneliness despite being in a romantic relationship with three people – and, it could be argued, about how the promise of happiness through free love had failed her – received several comments urging her to work on herself. In one of the comments, a woman pointed out that “years of inner work” had helped her go from being a very lonely person to “a very happy person”. Happiness, Sara Ahmed (2010, p. 7) argues, has become the responsibility of the individual in relation to others; “the idea that there is a necessary and inevitable relationship between one person's happiness and the happiness of others”. CNM seemed to cultivate this happiness culture through the imperative of self-work. Not only was this individual redirected from seeking care from others to inner work, the lack of happiness was also simultaneously implied to be a matter of personal failure.

Happiness as the duty towards others also became apparent in group discussions where statements praising non-monogamy as a rewarding lifestyle were received sympathetically and supportively. For example, the courage to face negative reactions from outsiders and sharing feelings of empowerment and liberation through non-monogamous relationships or sex were applauded. Accounts that indicated unhappiness, such as stories of emotional despair, break-up or rejection,



could expect some empathy but were usually framed in purely individualised psychological terms; a problem to be dealt with privately, with or without the help of a “poly-friendly” professional therapist.

The reluctance to request care, furthermore, reflected and helped produce structural inequality, which became clear in the story of Lise, a twenty-five year-old, university educated Dutch woman. According to Lisa when her boyfriend met another considerably younger woman on holiday, she was extremely anxious and worried about how this would affect their relationship.

Although jealousy was definitely a factor, I was also worried about her age in terms of whether she would be able to deal with the complex realities of polyamory. Plus, they were far away and I had no idea who this person really was or what was going on. [...] I did not call him to tell him about my feelings. I didn't want him to think of me as a weak jealous person. I was scared to ruin what we had, which is very important to me.

Instead of making her fears and worries into a matter of emotional care for herself and her relationship, Lisa opted for critical self-reflection. More women in our studies worried about new younger women receiving more attention, a fear based on a patriarchal ageist construction of attractiveness. While this form of structural inequality is certainly not unique to CNM (Beauvoir, 1972; Sontag, 1972), the principles of openness and plurality in CNM do increase the chance of being subjected to such gendered hierarchies. This susceptibility coupled with the expectation of self-responsibility led to individualised and unacknowledged suffering. Illouz (2007, p. 47) argues that mechanisms of self-responsibility are driven by the therapeutic narrative of self-help, which is “not only closely intertwined with a narrative of psychic failure and misery, but is actually put into motion by it”; by blaming the self, the self can be held responsible for alleviating misery. In case of Lisa, self-responsibility helped to delegitimise her misery and her worries about the future of her relationship.

The CNM narratives about love and care discussed in this section illustrate that values and logics of desire-based flexibility, calculation and individual responsibility informed decision-making on how to enter/exit a relationship, set boundaries for provision, and manage emotions. While the narratives clearly reflect a sense of struggle, in the end our research participants seemed inclined to prioritise a libertarian take on love and care above solidarity-based commitment.

5 The (a)politics of non-monogamies in Belgium and the Netherlands

In this section we address awareness of and responses to structural inequalities within the communities we studied. As has been observed in other studies on CNM (Klesse, 2014; Noël, 2006; Sheff, 2006; Sheff; Hammers, 2011; Willey, 2006), structural inequalities have generally



been downplayed or seen as irrelevant based on the assumption that intimate partners are equally capable of negotiating the terms of the relationship. The valuing of personal freedom over equality was also reflected in most groups that we followed and whose activist agenda revolved mainly around accepting non-monogamous lifestyles rather than addressing injustice. In the Netherlands, in particular, collaborations and mergers with other non-political, spiritually oriented groups were often sought, especially with the Tantra community. Additionally, as was evident from most individual interviews, the Dutch participants lacked active engagement and connections within the polyamory community itself, or their involvement mainly concerned occasional personal interests or experiences of *gezelligheid* – Dutch for “conviviality”, “cosiness” and “fun”. Nevertheless – on-line – spaces did provide a platform to – especially new – members to explore and get acquainted with emotional and practical intricacies of alternative relationships.

In the Belgian groups, polyamory was more explicitly and broadly contested for its lack of political or subversive intentions. This critique seemed to be put forward by a few people who sympathised with queer and anarchist movements but tended to resonate with a growing number of people. This line of reasoning draws on critiques of what is known as “polynormativity” (Barker; Heckert; Wilkinson, 2013; Barker; Langdrige, 2011; Pascas, 2018), which refers to the “beliefs, practices, and values within polyamory that reflect and sustain regimes of sexual and relationship normalcy and/or social privilege along the lines of class, race, gender, religion, citizenship, and so on” (Schippers, 2016, p. 18). Polyamory was increasingly rejected because it was believed to have become synonymous with poly-normative interpretations of polyamory that favoured relationship types that were as similar as possible to traditional relationship models and therefore could pose no real threat to the social order (Pascas, 2018). The increasing popularity of “relationship anarchy” in Belgium and the formation of a local social media group around this movement can be seen as related to this growing dissatisfaction with polyamory philosophies that failed to shake established relationship hierarchies and norms. Relationship anarchy was seen as truly disruptive and anti-normative through its appeal to abundance, love, and respect (Nordgren, 2012), while polyamory, accordingly, kept falling into the neoliberal trap of depoliticised love. In more recent public discussions on polyamory in the Netherlands similar dissatisfaction has been voiced (Polyamorie, 2023). In other words, a growing sensitivity to inequality seems to be emerging, acknowledging and critically engaging with normalised a-political intimacies.

However, in the rare occasions when the topic of inequality came up in the group discussions, it often led to tense debates. One example was an incident in one of the Belgian on-line groups that even led to some group members leaving the group. The incident was triggered by the well-



intentioned initiative of one of the group members to make the checklist *tijgerpunten*⁶ – “tiger points” – more inclusive. The checklist was launched by a Dutch website to help – young – people assess how “wild” their sex life is through a series of questions about where, with whom, how and how often sex was had. The discussion started after one of the group members noticed that the list was very popular in the group but reflected heteronormative and sexist tendencies. The discussion got out of hand after some participants suggested that sex with a trans person or with a disabled person should bring tiger marks. One person responded as follows:

I think everyone acted with the noblest of intentions to be inclusive, but I think you can do better. In many groups where there is awareness of feminist ethics, (physical) disability is really a big blind spot. I cannot speak for everyone, but many people with a disability – and this is similar for trans people, sex workers etc. – have to constantly fight not to be reduced to this one identity marker by others. When it comes to sex, this amplifies [...]. For many, being on a checklist of sexual achievements – I did it with a handicapped! – is a great fear that they see confirmed. Especially when this happens in a group where better is expected.

Within CNM communities, as we see here, questions of diversity and inclusion were debated. This discussion questioned the liberal notions that orient people towards – and celebrates – the accumulation of diverse – sexual – experiences. Inclusive sex as a means of asserting a progressive self was exposed as apolitical, insensitive and objectifying, contradicting the “feminist ethics” to which the group supposedly adheres. To point out this contradiction was to make visible prejudice but also to allow for different subjectivities to take shape.

Similarly, an informal meeting on dating for polyamorists in Amsterdam addressed heteronormativity within the polyamory scene. We met at the home of the organiser of the event, which was attended by eight people. While two younger women in their 20s seemed confident about finding a date and gave advice about on-line dating sites, other participants seemed less optimistic. One non-binary person, for example, shared that they had much more difficulty finding a partner because of the “very heteronormative” atmosphere on dating platforms: “[...] *you would expect non-monogamous people to be more open-minded, but I feel completely left out*”. Following on from this comment, another participant, a man in his 50s, said that he did indeed feel uncomfortable being approached by other men at polyamory social events. “*I admit that being surrounded by women boosts my ego, but I try to discourage men who approach me by looking away immediately*”. The organiser, a woman in her early 30s, replied, “[...] *well, maybe it's time for a Dutch queer poly dating website*”. The discussion then derailed to other topics.

This case shows that the solution to the problem of heteronormativity raised by the non-

⁶ See: <https://www.tijgerpunt.nl/>.



binary participant was sought from a supply and demand perspective. Instead of challenging heteronormativity as a power system, a depoliticised response was given that built upon the value of individual choice. Sharing the experience of being left out in the group provided a potential for critical reflection and intersubjective engagement beyond heteronormative structures. This potential, however, remained untapped as the solution of “*a Dutch queer poly dating website*” particularises the problem. Particularisation then becomes a tool to neutralise a structural problem.

But we have also seen some collective action against perceived injustices. The Dutch social media group page Poly Sister is a good example. It was initiated by a group of women who decided to organise against what one of the initiators called “male abuse”, alluding to men who use the framework of polyamory as a pretext for non-committal sex with as many women as possible. One of the main goals of this women-only site is to raise awareness and warn each other, especially new community members, about men with dishonest intentions. The co-initiator, a Dutch woman in her late 40s, explained:

For new female members it is important to know that you are not the problem. He will try to make you feel bad when you ask for fair treatment. He will say, ‘what are you doing on a poly dating site if you can’t control your jealous feelings’. Don’t doubt yourself. Your feeling that something is wrong is probably correct.

Even though these women do not necessarily see their activities as political, through their association they are actively resisting what they see as sexist and heteronormative tendencies in the Dutch poly community. It remains to be seen how this initiative will develop and whether it will lead to more fundamental changes. Nevertheless, it does represent a simultaneous act of solidarity and resistance beyond the limited sphere of intimate relationships. As polyamory is still a marginalised practice in the Netherlands – and beyond –, its practitioners are likely to find each other and share personal experiences, which could lead to collective initiatives, such as the Poly Sister group. While the conflation with a liberal understanding of autonomy – you are responsible for your own happiness and well-being – may make CNM extra susceptible to patriarchal exploitation – unequal distribution of emotional labour –, the marginality of non-monogamy still provides an opportunity to see and organise around – gendered – injustice.

The ethnographic accounts in this section indicate that normativity and its underlying power relations were topics of discussion within CNM groups. Although the issues of power themselves – ableism, heteronormativity, sexism, and gendered emotional labour – are not unique to CNM, the expectation of being progressive and the factual marginality of CNM induced the tendency to be reflective and to set the bar high, even though this tendency not necessarily led to organised collective struggle.



7 The revival of love

While discussions about power structures seemed to be slowly emerging, our conversations with practitioners of CNM mainly revolved around their personal motivations for seeking non-normative relationships and the strong desire for love and attachment. In this section, we discuss how non-monogamous relationships may also explicitly carry a desire for a revival of love and commitment in the face of the late capitalist fragmentation of the social world.

Although the elimination of inequalities was not a central item on the agenda of CNM advocacy groups, we met several participants whose choice of CNM was guided by antipatriarchal and anticapitalist sentiments. The way they talked about their non-monogamous relationships testified to a late-modern urge for self-development and emotional autonomy and freedom – as we saw in previous sections –, but also to the desire to make relationship scripts more explicit and just. They were not concerned with abolishing the scripts that regulate attachment and care, but with rethinking them. They tended to see the hard work and uncertainty of a polyamorous relationship as a terrain of possibility that encourages openness and discovery and could eventually lead to more egalitarian relationships. Some described this shared search for a common path that contradicts normative structures as a binding force between partners. Lena, for example, a Belgian woman in her 20s who identifies as queer and leftist, put it this way: “[...] *there is no blueprint for non-monogamous relationships*”. She used the metaphor of a small boat to describe her open triangular relationship with two women:

As a couple, you know how things are going to go, more or less. And our metaphor is that the three of us are in a small boat, on a river or on the sea, and the boat moves by itself, with the waves. But we still have a steering wheel, and sometimes the current is stronger, sometimes the steering wheel is stronger. But we are in this boat, and we are on the way. So, it's not about looking at things as if we have arrived somewhere. It's about us being on the way, with each other.

Lena thus described her triangular relationship as a – sometimes difficult – process of becoming rather than being, in which the three partners have the ability to exercise agency – the wheel –, yet not without being affected by the constraints and possibilities that the structural context offers – the current. Lena designated her and her partners' involvement in left-wing, queer circles as an important element in a sustained commitment to “swim against the current” and to question and rethink intimate relationships.

The link between political consciousness and a subversive attitude towards compulsory heterosexual coupledness and the exploration of alternative forms of relationship, household and cohabiting styles became even more explicit in the story of Stella, a Belgian lesbian woman in her mid-30s. For the past ten years, Stella had consistently lived in communal houses and cohousing



arrangements. At the time of the interview, she was parenting three children – one of them her biological child – with her female ex-partner. Her life history revealed an ever-changing network of multiple adults and children with whom she feels connected and with whom she has different kinds of relationships and commitments. Stella's intimate interactions with others tended to defy traditional assumptions about with whom to live and to parent and were subject to change and reinvention. This critical personal engagement was also nurtured and shaped by her left-wing feminist and queer activism. The interplay between progressive political orientation, communal living and CNM enabled Stella's strong emotional investment beyond the nuclear family. The transformative potential of CNM amplifies when the individual's commitments inside and outside the home coalesce.

We read in several of our participants' stories a strong desire for love and lasting, committed relationships and a determination to find solutions to late-modern relationship precariousness and uncertainty. For example, let us go back to Anna and Rob's story. At the time of the interview, which took place in their flat in an upscale neighbourhood in Brussels, they were both in their early 30s and had been together for 14 years. They had agreed to an open relationship from the beginning, but at first it was limited to the option of having sex with other people. Only after two years did they extend their agreement to the possibility of also having romantic feelings for others. In the first years they were together, neither Anna nor Rob had relationships or sex with other people. That changed when they both fell in love with their roommate in their final year of university and the three of them spent a night together. Anna described this as a moment that was *"the catalyst for a series of very deep and intense conversations between [her] and Rob about what [they] expected from [their] relationship and how [they] could organise things"*.

Anna mentioned another milestone, that she also had a brief relationship two years later with another man, Liam, who identified as polyamorous. Anna explained that Liam had *"guided"* both Anna and Rob on how to organise a polyamorous relationship, and that the three of them regularly met to discuss their boundaries and practical arrangements. After the relationship between Anna and Liam had ended, Anna and Rob went back to a *"pretty much monogamous"* relationship for about five years, finally getting married. Anna also explained, that eventually the two participated in *"relationship escalator"*⁷ events, such as having shared bank accounts and buying a house together. When Anna started a relationship with David – also in his 30s –, their arrangements drastically changed. As David *"was very conscious of not wanting to feel like a*

7 "Relationship escalator" is a concept that is often used by people in polyamory communities to criticise the progressive set of steps that are expected when people are in an intimate relationship (Veaux; Hardy; Gill, 2014).



secondary”, the three agreed on a non-hierarchical polyamorous relationship in which no one relationship was prioritised over another. After a year, they moved in with each other and started to discuss the possibility of raising a child between the three of them. After Rob realised that he did not have a desire to have children, and to make sure that David could become the legal father of the child, Anna and Rob divorced or “*un-married*” as they prefer to call it. At the time of the interview, Anna, David and Rob were looking forward to the birth of Anna and David’s baby, the first child in their shared household.

Like many of the other interviewees, Anna and Rob spoke about their experiences of constantly negotiating personal boundaries, desires and identities in non-monogamous relationships. They were determined to challenge the normative rules and expectations that structure heterosexual monogamous marriage. The strategies they described tended to prioritise individual freedom and choice, a matter of personal and/or relationship growth. Anna and Rob framed this as a gradual shift away from learned beliefs and normative expectations. However, their desire to break away from more traditional relationship scripts did not equate to a yearning for absolute freedom in relationship and sexuality, or a complete rejection of a relationship contract – the absence of which Illouz sees as one of the fundamental principles of modern relationships. Anna and Rob emphasised that they wanted to consider alternative perspectives and solutions outside the norm. This process was marked by a series of milestones that led to a re-evaluation and change in the way they thought, felt and related to each other. This process also included the invention of rituals, such as their un-marriage, aimed at establishing more equal arrangements between partners and consolidating care and commitment to each other and to the child. In this case, CNM orients people towards constantly creating their own relationship contract anew. Although the terms of the contract must be negotiated by individuals rather than being readily available – which resonates with Illouz’s observation –, their absence becomes explicit in CNM and a site of reflection, creating opportunities for intentional negotiations of commitment.

Edgar, who we introduced earlier, also testified that he was trying to make arrangements that would ensure reciprocity and care. He was about to have a child with one partner and had a second partner, a slightly younger woman, who was travelling abroad at the time of the interview. Normally, he said, he would live in his own small flat in the city centre of The Hague, as he valued his “*independence and freedom*”, but now he was temporarily staying with his pregnant partner to help her with the housework and “*just to be there for her*”. Edgar spoke of constant negotiation and gradual change when talking about his experience of non-monogamy. “*In the past*”, he said, “*I simply cheated. Well, not simply, because I felt guilty about it. I hated myself for it, but I*



kept cheating with yet another person to avoid feeling bad". Still, he explained, "*something was gnawing at me all the time*" without being able to say exactly what it was. Although he was successful in his dating, he did not feel satisfied and it was only when he opened up to one of his partners and showed vulnerability that they began a conversation about transparency, exploring possibilities for what he considered a more ethical non-monogamous relationship.

When I started reading about polyamory, I was immediately excited. I was excited because what I was reading was primarily about love. I guess because in the past I thought that's how young men should behave, my quest for more freedom and independence pushed me in the direction of having sex with more and more women. So, the emphasis on love sounded so liberating.

Edgar went on to describe how polyamory had helped him change his life, but at the same time pointed out the difficulties of such an arrangement in practise.

We are three people, each with our own aspirations and needs. It's a lot of balancing and I never quite know if I am doing right by both my partners. At the moment, for example, I am paying a lot more attention to my pregnant partner. The other one is travelling the world right now and when she comes back I sometimes worry, will she still be interested in me? People think polyamory is all about having fun. That's far from my experience. I mean, I love it, it's rewarding, much more so than the way I have lived my life in the past, but it's also very hard.

Edgar described how the casual and non-committal sex he was attracted to as a younger man was not only unsatisfying but also created a sense of unease within him. This is consistent with the "anomic desire" that Illouz (2019, p. 20), quoting Durkheim, calls the result of the breakdown of the emotional, normative and institutional order. This anomic desire is restless, manic and constantly searching for something, but unsatisfying and without an overarching goal. Edgar's "discovery" of the possibility of centralising love as an organising principle, and his qualification of this possibility as liberating, can be read both as an extension of his anomic desire and as an attempt to escape it. His emphasis on each partner's own aspirations and needs, and the need for constant negotiation – rather than an appeal to a set of predetermined rules and obligations – pointed to an adherence to emotional autonomy and freedom as the normative basis of late-modern love that Illouz describes. But he also presented love as a way out of the insatiable urge for freedom and independence in which he found himself.

Polyamory seemed to have enabled Edgar to explore new ethical and emotional capacities. He experienced his polyamorous construct as ethically and emotionally challenging, but also liberating, as it allowed him to move into a different emotional space and experience new ways of relating to himself and others. His story is a testament to the attempt to create a structure that offers love and attachment as a framework and thus more security and sustainability. He also pointed to



the difficulties he and his partners encountered in doing so and his fears of becoming the object of the withdrawal of commitment by his partners. As he laboriously navigated emotional and sexual freedom and autonomy, Edgar hoped to find in love a way to escape the prevailing scripts of masculine hedonism.

One of the Belgian participants, Myriam, a woman in her mid-40s who was in a long-term relationship with a man at the time of the research, pointed to another way in which CNM could contribute to the strengthening of bonds and provide an alternative to the volatility of bonds offered by the culturally dominant serial monogamy. In an informal conversation she said that fear of abandonment played a role in her asking her partner to open up their relationship. She said she or her partner might become sexually attracted to or fall in love with someone else, and then the other person might end up alone if the relationship is supposed to be monogamous. Instead, CNM created more security for her, because it meant that the freedom to engage in sexual and romantic contact with others did not have to result in dissolving the love relationship with her partner. While monogamous contract might be under threat in late modernity, the urge for commitment is still prevalent and mediated through a CNM construction. CNM thus can be both a symptom of and an attempt to mitigate the late-modern dissolution of love, care and commitment.

“The end of love” understood as the diminishing self-evidence of standard relationship contract is at the heart of emerging CNM, as also indicated by the stories in this paper. At the same time, CNM’s position in late modernity seems more complicated as it also offers a manoeuvring space by evoking a critical reflective perspective on societal norms and an intentional attitude towards renegotiating – rather than avoiding – commitment. If the will to commit has weakened in late modernity, as Illouz and other sociologists of emotion have suggested, then CNM could be interpreted as an attempt to revive a sense of commitment and to remedy precarity in love relationships. This, however, is not a common feature of CNM. Those forms that make an explicit appeal to intimacy, care and commitment and centre political projects of solidarity and justice, are more likely to remedy precarity than CNM relationships that prioritise a liberal notion of choice. At the same time, the principles of intimacy, care and commitment should not be romanticised either as negotiations within all kinds of relationships are subjected to power differentials between partners. Intimacy, care and commitment are not necessarily anti-capitalist, feminist acts of refusing exchangeability. They might as well be informed and reinforce – e.g. gendered and/or racialised – precarity. An emphasis on intimacy, care and commitment could also be a response to stigmatisation of CNM in broader society by creating a boundary between proper and improper – e.g. promiscuous – CNM (Klesse, 2007).



8 Concluding remarks

In this paper we engaged with the sociocultural significance of the affective and subjective structures of contemporary CNM in relation to “the end of love” as an indication of late-modern transformations of romantic intimacy. The narratives that we discussed attest to CNM’s simultaneous response to the late modernity’s insistence on a liberal ideology of choice and the unanswered need for intimacy and connection. The CNM practices we encountered can be seen as the materialisation of the individual choice based on a negative understanding of freedom – the removal of obstacles in order to act upon one’s desires. This became apparent in a focus on interiority that CNM practitioners were invited to do as a way to break free from normative frameworks of love and relationship. The individual desire was here legitimatised as the main authority for action. Moreover, individuality was confirmed through consent and the assumption that one should know and be able to act upon one’s desires. The responsibility for one’s well-being was therefore primarily ascribed to individual persons, while structural constraints shaping the conditions of consent were generally absent from discussions. Self-responsibility was not only an expectation, but praised as a sign of strength that resonates with the courage ascribed to practicing CNM in the first place.

However, as appears from the stories of the participants, CNM could simultaneously be interpreted as a response to dissatisfaction with emotional distance in relationships. Many people we spoke with were looking for connection, excitement and resonance in the intimate sphere. To achieve this they constantly negotiated relationship contracts. These were ethical contracts of transparency by rejecting “cheating” or distancing oneself from harmful – gendered – norms and values they had grown up with. Most research participants were eager to find and maintain genuine relationships based on honesty and mutuality. They expressed a strong sense of commitment to make their non-traditional relationships work and rejected superficial and hedonistic notions of non-monogamy. In short, while, as Illouz (2019) argues, traditional notions of loyalty and commitment might be losing authority as a late-modern trend, the ethnographic accounts in this paper show that CNM’s affective and subjective structures both facilitate and remedy this loss.

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