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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relationship Structure, Relationship Texture: Case Studies in Non/Monogamies Research

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Abstract

This article develops case studies from qualitative interviews with people in negotiated non-monogamous relationships to ask what discursive or practical factors *besides* non/monogamy might play a role in assessments of a relationship's structure or worth. Beginning with an auto-ethnographic reflection on the way the 'significance' was recognised and misrecognised in one polyamorous 'thrupple', I introduce three case studies of people in negotiated non-monogamous relationships in order to bring a cultural studies method of the particular to the study of intimacy. For the individuals in these case studies, the practice and experience of non/monogamy is inextricably linked to the ideas and practices surrounding gender, sexuality, sex work, friendship, HIV status and ability. Sketching a middle path between the romantic's dream of love as a state of exception or exemption from the social and the theorist's map of the patterned effects of hetero- and mono-normativities, this paper attends to the contingency, flexibility and incoherence which so often underpins the sense we make of relationships, even as that sense is shaped by the practices, ideals and institutions of intimacy, love and friendship.

Keywords

Non-monogamy; polyamory; feminism; relationships; queer sexuality; mononormativity

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Method and non/monogamy

Often in mononormative culture ‘significant’, ‘serious’ and ‘monogamous’ are thought to be more or less synonymous: the importance of a relationship is assumed to reside, or be reflected, in the relationship’s exclusivity.¹ Under this logic monogamy is good in and of itself, but also insofar as it promises (or entails) commitment, longevity, security and love. A vow of monogamy is understood as a sign that a relationship is valued, and ongoing ‘fidelity’ a sign that a relationship is functional, stable and likely to last. As a result, people practicing non-monogamy are frequently asked to explain their relationships’ significance with regard to the absence of monogamy. This is the case both in everyday interactions and within empirical academic literature, which often investigates how non-monogamous people think about or manage the non-monogamy of their relationships. Not only does this tendency risk underplaying the discursive overlaps between monogamy and non-monogamy discussed by Angela Willey, and the ways that what Nathan Rambukkana describes as one’s ‘intimate privilege’ might shape how that non-monogamy is experienced, but it leaves other significant, meaning-laden aspects of those relationships uninvestigated or underdescribed.²

Of course, thinking about how people in non-monogamous relationships ‘do’ non-monogamy is important, and the past decade has seen some extremely valuable work along those lines, particularly in relation to polyamory. Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker, for example, explore the specific words and concepts people in polyamorous relationships have developed to describe their experiences of non-monogamy.³ Elsewhere, Barker asks about the extent to which people in polyamorous relationships see their non-monogamy as part of their identity.⁴ Across a number of publications, Christian Klesse discusses how polyamorists position other forms of non-monogamy, and how gay men and bisexual women think about their non-monogamy in relation to stigma surrounding promiscuity.⁵ These efforts to map the discursive terrain of non-monogamy within polyamorous relationships and communities is undoubtedly useful in its own right. Unchecked, however, this trend runs the risk of reproducing the common-sense assumption that monogamy, or its absence, is the most significant meaning-making factor in relationships.

A related trend is the theorisation of non-monogamy in relation to broad social structures. There is a long history of thought along these lines, especially regarding the way

1 I define ‘mononormativity’ as ‘the system of ideas, institutions and practical orientations that provide the backdrop against which the idea that monogamy is practical, common and right congeals’; Jessica Kean, ‘A Stunning Plurality: Unravelling Hetero- and Mono-normativities in HBO’s *Big Love*’, *Sexualities*, vols 5–6, 2015, p. 700.

2 Angela Willey, *Undoing Monogamy: The Politics of Science and the Possibilities of Biology*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016. Nathan Rambukkana, *Fraught Intimacies: Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2015.

3 Ani Ritchie and Meg Barker, ‘“There Aren’t Words For What We Do or How We Feel So We Have to Make Them Up”: Constructing Polyamorous Languages in a Culture of Compulsory Monogamy’, *Sexualities*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2006, pp. 584–601.

4 Meg Barker, ‘This is My Partner, and this is My ... Partner’s Partner: Constructing a Polyamorous Identity in a Monogamous World’, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2005, pp. 75–88.

5 Christian Klesse, ‘Polyamory: Intimate Practice, Identity or Sexual Orientation?’, *Sexualities*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2014, pp. 81–99. Christian Klesse, ‘Bisexual Women, Non-Monogamy and Differentialist Anti-Promiscuity Discourses’, *Sexualities*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2005, pp. 445. Christian Klesse, ‘Polyamory and its “Others”: Contesting the Terms of Non-Monogamy’, *Sexualities*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2006, pp. 565. Christian Klesse, *The Spectre of Promiscuity: Gay Male and Bisexual Non-monogamies and Polyamorities*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2007.

non-monogamy might challenge sexist and/or capitalist structures of relating.⁶ More recently, scholars have worked to conceptualise non/monogamy in relation to ‘mononormativity’ or ‘compulsory monogamy’—the discursive, institutional and practical systems which make monogamy appear coherent, normal and right.⁷ Just as it is important to consider what sense non-monogamous people are making of their non-monogamy, it is important to theorise those non-normative relationship practices in relation to the broad structures that shape our relational lives.

But if non-monogamous people are most often asked by researchers what the non-monogamy of their relationships means to them, and their relationships are most often theorised in terms of what that non-monogamy means politically, scholarship on non-monogamy repeats an error that passes as common sense. Evaluating the personal and political significance of a relationship solely in relation to its non/monogamy risks encoding mononormative assumptions about what makes a relationship significant into the scholarship itself. One of the driving questions for this article, then, is whether or not it is possible to suspend the assumption that the non/monogamy of a relationship is always its most significant locus of meaning, without losing sight of the way those relationships are materially and discursively shaped by broad social structures like mononormativity.

After all, in this time and place, a relationship’s monogamy, non-monogamy or style thereof, will certainly signify in excess of the sense participants make of it. Just as heteronormativity organises sexuality in such a way that the gender of your potential partners can monopolise the meaning people make of your desire, regardless of what other intensities you feel or ‘nonce taxonomies’ you generate, in mononormative cultures the non/monogamy of a relationship comes to be its salient feature.⁸ We could also anticipate that, in such a context, the non/monogamy of a relationship will often come to be central to the way the people involved make sense of it. Nonetheless, we must take care that the questions we ask of our participants, and of each other, don’t unwittingly reinforce those mononormative logics in the name of uncovering them. Similarly, we would do well as researchers not to translate an object of study (‘non-monogamous relationships’) into a fixed method (investigating the personal or political significance of the ‘non-monogamy’ of that relationship). Asking those questions at the expense of other questions at best impoverishes our accounts of non-monogamous relationships, and at worst confirms mononormative assumptions about the primary significance of non/monogamy to relational meaning making.

6 Stevie Jackson and Sue Scott, ‘The Personal *is* Still Political: Heterosexuality, Feminism and Monogamy’, *Feminism and Psychology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2004, pp. 151–7. Becky Rosa, ‘Anti-Monogamy: A Radical Challenge to Compulsory Heterosexuality’ in *Stirring It: Challenges for Feminism*, ed. Gabriele Griffin, Marianne Hester, Shirin Rai, Sasha Roseneil, Taylor & Francis, London, 1994. Victoria Robinson, ‘My Baby Just Cares for Me: Feminism, Heterosexuality and Non-monogamy’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 143–57. Marcia Munson and Judith P. Stelbourn, ‘Introduction: The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex’, in *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy, and Casual Sex*, ed. Marcia Munson and Judith P. Stelbourn The Haworth Press, Inc., New York and London, pp. 1–7.

7 For more on ‘mononormativity’ see Kean, ‘A Stunning Plurality’. For recent work on ‘compulsory monogamy’ as a central aspect of the way sexuality is organised, see Mimi Schippers, *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities*, New York University Press, New York, 2016. For a discussion of ‘compulsory monogamy’ in the US legal system see Elizabeth F. Emens, ‘Monogamy’s Law: Compulsory Monogamy and Polyamorous Existence’, *New York University Review of Law and Social Change*, vol. 29, no. 58, 2004.

8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2008 (originally published 1990), pp. 22–7.

This article is in part an experiment in ameliorating the results of my own decision to research non-monogamous relationships as non-monogamous relationships. In a qualitative research project, designed in 2010, I set out to study ‘negotiated non-monogamy’.⁹ I conducted twenty-four interviews with people who have experience in such relationships and asked them questions designed to understand their ‘practices, politics and philosophies’ of non-monogamy. Those questions generated a lot of valuable material, but left me wondering what I might have missed in focusing my inquiry narrowly on the non-monogamy itself. In what follows I return to three of those original interviews to generate case studies—a method chosen for its capacity to draw out and do justice to details provided by participants which would be deemed irrelevant if that same ‘data’ were mined exclusively for information about the practice and significance of the non-monogamy. Of course, the case studies cannot entirely escape the shape generated by the focus of the original interviews. But the net I cast at the beginning of the research project—specifically designed to capture non-monogamous dynamics—captured other dynamics as well. This article refocuses on that qualitative by-catch, arguing that these incidentals may in fact be essential to understanding the complexity with which participants make sense of their relationships (including their non-monogamy).

The practice of theorising through case studies has a long history in cultural studies. Meaghan Morris argues that holding oneself to a particular site (say, particular shopping centres), obliges the researcher to ‘learn from that place, make discoveries, change the drift of one’s analysis, rather than use it as a site of theoretical self-justification’.¹⁰ Lawrence Grossberg reminds us that this approach is at the ‘heart of Cultural Studies’, where:

that traditional notion of an object of study is only the opening, ... social facts as it were, which tell us—at least that is the gamble we take when we choose them—that there is a story to be told but we do not yet know what it is.¹¹

‘Objects of study’ in this tradition force us to wrestle with the messy details of the situations of everyday life, even if that means giving up the secure sense of ‘topic’ or analytical framework we started out with. Rather than allowing our sense of topic to dictate the terms of analysis, we should use topics as temporary marshalling points for attention, starting points from which we allow our eye to range and stray according to the demands of the analysis. Case studies are another type of marshalling area, inviting us to turn our attention toward what Morris calls ‘concrete social circumstances’ to see what can be seen once we are there.¹² Attempts to marshal attention according to topic or case study can both work, in different ways. Attempts to marshal attention according to topic and case study simultaneously, however, deadens the exploratory impulse, making us all too likely to ‘discover’ what we knew when we began. My turn toward case studies in this article is thus primarily inspired by the cultural studies practice of learning from specifics.

9 The case studies for this article have been developed from qualitative data collected for PhD research funded by an Australian Postgraduate Award. Using twenty-four semi-structured interviews with people who have been in non-monogamous relationships, I explored how participants understood the practical, political and philosophical underpinnings of their relationships, past and present. The research design, methodology and analysis was informed by feminist cultural studies and queer theory, and was approved by the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol number 13373).

10 Meaghan Morris, ‘Things to do with Shopping Centres’, in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 295–319.

11 Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2010, p. 26.

12 Morris, p. 306.

The methodological choice was bolstered by a desire to address the intellectual hesitation some of my students voiced when grappling with Lauren Berlant's assertion that love is 'a mask that ornaments the tic of repetition with the fantasy of singular, authentic, and expressive plentitude'.¹³ Following Berlant and other critical intimacy and queer theory scholars, I argue that relationships are shaped by social structures worth sketching, but my students remind me that we rarely encounter our own relationships on that scale alone. Queer theory's invitation to see the singular as wrapped up in patterns and regulatory norms is politically indispensable: gender, sexuality, race, mononormativity—these and other broad social structures shape our experience of love. But while in some ways my students were echoing Berlant when they reminded me that it is details or texture of a relationship on which we are most likely to feel snagged or seduced, they refused to dismiss these details as masks or ornamentation. Although these observations are not technically at odds with most theoretical approaches to structures as they are lived, the pedagogical problem remained: how might I describe relationships in such a way as to do justice to the deeply felt experience of singularity without endorsing the popular notion of the a-historical, individuating purity of love?

This led me to the twinned metaphors of structure and texture. For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'texture' is that 'array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degree of organisation hovers just below the level of shape or structure'.¹⁴ Without accounting for those relational experiences which register below the level of structure or shape, those particulars we could call 'texture', we miss something important about how relationships feel. Observation of the broad patterns and structures of everyday life is typically, but not exclusively, the core business of the critical humanities, while observation of the textures of everyday life is typically, but not exclusively, the core business of the fine arts. Critical humanities might shed light on those ideological, practical and institutional structures that shape a person's life, but the relatively neat descriptions of structures may seem less true to how it feels to live that life than, say, a novel that attends to the particularities of emotion and circumstance. The beauty of the structure/texture metaphor is that it reminds us these two types of knowledge are not incompatible, but rather the result of a shift in focus: after all, objects have both. Sometimes it is less important to know how something feels than to see the broad shape it makes in the world. Other times sketching the structure will be less important than exploring the way it feels to those who experience it. This metaphor provides a model for acknowledging that relationships may feel—indeed, can be—different to one another insofar as they are differently affected by forces both incidental and patterned, without relinquishing the significance of broader social shapes and structures.

Of course, as Sedgwick reminds us, the structure/texture distinction marks relative shifts in scale rather than natural kinds:

although texture has everything to do with scale, there is no one physical scale that intrinsically is the scale of texture. As your plane circles over an airport, texture is what a whole acre of trees can provide. But when you're chopping wood, a single tree may constitute shape or structure within your visual field, whereas texture pertains to the level of the cross-grained fibers of the wood in relation to the sleek bite of the axe.¹⁵

¹³ Lauren Berlant, 'Love [A Queer Feeling]' in *Psychoanalysis and Homosexuality*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2000, p. 440.

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

The flexibility of the metaphor is exactly what makes it so useful: it reminds the researcher that observations made at the level of structure (on whatever scale) risk missing patterns and accidents that a zoomed-in lens would map.¹⁶ In this article I mobilise the texture/structure distinction to offer a series of overlapping interventions. I am arguing that three different scales with which we might interact with the non-monogamous—interpersonal, methodological and pedagogical—exhibit a tendency to focus on structure at the expense of texture. Though the content of this metaphor shifts across the article, the central point is the same: while knowledge of structures is indispensable, we miss something important about how that structure is inhabited if we fail to attend to the textures.

Interpersonally, it is an error to imagine that how people understand or experience their relationships is evident in the relationships' non/monogamous 'structure' alone. People often inquire about the non/monogamy of a relationship and then, drawing on mononormative assumptions about what that non/monogamy means, infer the relative significance of those relationships. I have experienced the quiet pain of this interpersonal failure to attend to texture, watching my relationships get read as coupled or casual, as committed or frivolous, with little regard to the terms through which I make those assessments myself. The everyday assumption that non/monogamous structures, or the interpretation of those structures, will hold the key to understanding how that relationship feels overlooks all the other, dispersed, idiosyncratic, imperfectly patterned factors which also shape meaning. On an interpersonal level, then, the structure/texture distinction reminds us to challenge non/monogamy as the privileged and coherent site of relational meaning-making.

Methodologically, scholars should be mindful that whatever object of study 'structures' their study will be 'textured' in ways that speak to the messy complexity in which people live their lives, and that ignoring this texture risks impoverishing the study itself. In this study of non-monogamy this risk is redoubled, as the methodological choice to focus exclusively on the 'non-monogamy' of a relationship risks formalising the interpersonal elevation of non/monogamy as the primary site of relational meaning. This is not to say that scholars should eschew the study of non-monogamous structures, rules and philosophies, but that this study should be balanced by the knowledge that we can't assume in advance how those structures, rules and philosophies are experienced. This is another way of describing the cultural studies imperative to embrace our objects of study in the messy, vibrant social contexts. The field of non/monogamy studies as a whole needs to balance the study of non-monogamy as experienced at the level of structure and at the level of texture if it is to answer that call.

While both the interpersonal and methodological problems speak to the pervasive way mononormativity 'structures' our ideas about relationships, pedagogically we must also keep in mind that an account that fails to attend to the 'textures' of relationships risks missing something important about the way those structures are experienced. If, for example, relationships are 'structured' by mononormativity (which insists on the primary significance of the non/monogamous divide), they are also 'textured' by factors that are experienced as points of singularity or difference. We rarely experience structures like mononormativity (or racism or sexism and so on) as cool, consistent scaffolding. These ideological, practical and institutional architectures are lived in, furnished by the happenstance, textured by the uneven and obscured effects of other structures.

¹⁶ Some researchers may need the lesson the other way around—that we miss something crucial if we forget to zoom out from the texture of our object of study and see how it is structured.

My argument is not at all that we should, as scholars or individuals, eschew discussion of ‘structures’, but simply that we should be mindful of what an exclusive focus on structures costs. Interpersonally, methodologically and pedagogically, the failure to acknowledge the ‘texture’ of non-monogamous relationships risks misrepresenting the experience of everyday life.

Although the original design of this project failed to actively inquire about these other, ‘textural’, factors, the beauty of qualitative research is that you never get just what you ask for. Open-ended, qualitative interviews inevitably generate details that exceed the aims of the researcher. So, while there remains a lot to be learned from the material that did fit the original brief, in preparing this article I put those questions to one side. Instead, I took the cultural studies gamble described by Grossberg—to trust that there were stories to be told through these interviews and that, despite my role in their production, I could not know in advance exactly what those stories would be. In the stories that emerge it is clear that the experience of non-monogamous relationships structures, including the variety of emotions attached to sexual connections, the ‘rules’ or ‘agreements’ that are most salient to individuals (and what happens when they are broken), is textured by factors beyond the ‘non-monogamy’ itself.

Case study one: Pleasure on the job

Adelaide, a queer feminist sex worker in her late twenties, struggles with how best to frame the pleasure she experiences on the job. She had long believed that she was ill suited to monogamy, but had trouble finding partners who were willing to experiment with its alternatives. When Adelaide met her most recent partner, however, she was already working in the sex industry, and so sex with other people—at least in certain circumstances—was the status quo:

I’m a stripper so I do X-rated shows with other girls ... for bucks parties. And Erin was always completely fine with all of that ... she was always fine with the concept that that was work and that that was separate to our relationship. I could come home and tell her about it and we could laugh about it and she would give me tips on things ... she would help me choose my costumes or my music to make my shows better. It was just such a relief to have somebody who understood ... and who didn’t feel threatened.

For Adelaide and Erin, sex outside the relationship was okay because it was understood as work, and work connections were assumed to be different in quality from non-working connections. This emphasis on the work of sex work is in line with what Elizabeth Bernstein describes as a broader discursive movement toward ‘the social and political recognition of prostitution as “work” (as opposed to a uniquely degrading violation of self)’.¹⁷

The discursive framing of sex work as ‘work’ was supplemented in Adelaide’s relationship by a set of complex assumptions about the meaning of sex acts in relation to gender and sexual identity:

Maybe it was because I was doing shows with girls for men and we could laugh about, you know, how we were duping these straight men at the bucks parties ... I did raise the possibility a number of times of working in porn with men and she was more hesitant ... Even though I’ve always made it obvious that I like girls as well, and I like all people of all genders and sexual orientations. Because most of the girls that I work with doing shows are usually straight, it was more obvious that it was a working relationship.

17 Elizabeth Bernstein, ‘Sex Work for the Middle Classes’, *Sexualities*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2007, p 482. Bernstein argues that the ‘most strident purveyors of the normalising term “sex work”’ are middle-class women and men.

Sex work did not threaten the relationship in the same way that non-working sex did, largely because of the imagined distance of sex work from some of sex's potential meanings: work sex is assumed not to contain 'real' pleasure or emotional connection and it is assumed not to be motivated by 'real' desire. Performing lesbian acts in front of men who are (assumed to be) straight became a game of inspiring lust in those you're not attracted to, and performing with straight-identified women became a safety-net, framing sex and pleasure as unreal insofar as they fail to line up with stable sexual identities. Adelaide's accounts of gender and sexuality worked to establish a narrow zone for the 'authenticity' of desire, which was seen as determining the extent to which a sexual encounter has the potential to endanger a primary emotional bond.

Adelaide mentioned that Erin's initial openness to working sex eventually extended to permission for Adelaide to have non-working sex while away on work trips. Unable to be considered emotionally safe on the same grounds as working sex, recreational sex outside the relationship had its own rules:

We had a bit of a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy. Which seemed to work for her, because really she didn't want to think about it ... I would have preferred to be able to come home and share experiences with each other, but that wouldn't have worked for her.

A 'don't ask, don't tell' policy was imagined as providing an emotional buffer in the presence of 'real' desire and pleasure. The perceived risk was also contained by their agreement that the connections be spatially and temporally limited—what happens on the trip stays on the trip—an agreement aimed to limit the emotional intimacy of the encounter and its impact on their relationship. Adelaide found this condition impossible to comply with, and often secretly corresponded with her casual sex partners for weeks after she returned from work trips:

I'm not very good at having just one-off sexual encounters that just stay one-off ... I just always felt like you just have to, like, ride these rollercoasters, otherwise it's just going to build up inside you ... and you're going to become resentful ... Like ... I just, it's easier for me to like, just totally obsess, to become obsessive and infatuated with this person and then after a few weeks I'm totally over it ... whereas if it hadn't got to that state of fluctuation, I would always be thinking about them in the background: what if something further could happen?

Adelaide would continue to text and chat on Facebook until her 'infatuations' had run their course, calculating that it was better to break the no-contact rule and lie about it than risk becoming resentful or developing stronger desires for extra-dyadic connection. Adelaide appears to have broken the rules for the same reason Erin was making them—to limit the threat that outside connections posed to their relationship; they just had very different ideas about what that threat looked like. For Erin the risk was 'authentic' emotional or sexual connection, which could be measured by the extension of a connection beyond the sexual encounter and by the extent to which it corresponded to 'authentic' sexuality. But Adelaide believed the real risk to her primary relationship was denying emotional connections when they occurred. In secretly pursuing those connections Adelaide thus believed she was insuring herself, and her relationship, against the long-term consequence of denying pleasure, connection and intimacy when they occur.

Eventually this belief led Adelaide to become uncomfortable with the insignificance she had previously attributed to sex at work. Adelaide and Erin had previously shared a tacit sense that the 'truth' of sexuality emerged by spontaneously recreational acting upon deeply held

desires that correspond to one's 'real' sexual orientation. Over time, however, Adelaide began to depart from this view as she considered her work's potential to 'queer' her co-workers' sexuality. Where she had previously encouraged her partner to assume sex at work was inauthentic in part because of the sexual orientation of the participants, Adelaide began to shift the burden of 'authenticity' from sexuality to bodily pleasure. Rather than dismissing the sex she had on the job as inauthentic based on the heterosexuality of her scene partners, Adelaide began to note what she understood as the 'real' intimacy and pleasure emerging from those encounters. 'Reality' was no longer measured by Adelaide in terms of sexuality-as-identity, but in terms of bodily sensations and affective intensities.

The shift in Adelaide's commitment to authenticity at work caused a practical relationship dilemma. Since her partner's consent to non-monogamy hinged on an assumption that sex at work lacked pleasure, desire and intimacy—an assumption that Adelaide had come to believe was false—Adelaide was forced to choose between an omission that sustained the arrangement and honesty that could end it:

I think sometimes partners have this idea that because 'work is work' they don't need to feel threatened by it, and that's a really important thing, um, that we can divorce our own pleasures from the service that we provide at work. But I also think that what happens at work is more complex than that ... So, I'm doing shows with these beautiful women, and it's work, and while I'm on the job I'm thinking about, 'OK, it's this point in the show, in this song ... we need to get our vibrators out now.' Or, 'What's that guy doing? He's about to spill his beer on our rug' ... [But] I've never faked an orgasm in my life. So obviously, although that's work, it's still pleasurable ... So yeah, it's not just work all the time ... I think it also can be authentic pleasure. It's both.

Annamarie Jagose reminds us that the lauding of 'authentic' pleasure, perhaps especially when signified through orgasm, should not be uncritically accepted by queer scholarship: we should ask to what extent these narratives depend on the circulation of the limiting idea of 'true' and stable sexual subjectivity and authentic pleasure as the 'liberation' of that sexual subjectivity.¹⁸ And certain versions of feminist sex work's 'authenticity' discourse appear to subscribe to the notion of the benefits of liberating the 'truth' of one's desire that Jagose would have us critique. Maddison Young, for example, hopes that 'feminist porn' (primarily defined, as we have already seen, through the presence of 'authenticity'), might allow us all to 'discover ourselves and our relationships on newer and deeper levels'.¹⁹ Similarly, when Adelaide's partner Erin takes comfort in sex work's inauthenticity, read in its failure to seamlessly link identity, desire and sexual act, that comfort depends on an understanding of the truth of sex resting in one's 'singular nature' which queer theory, following Foucault, has robustly challenged.²⁰

But Adelaide's use of 'authenticity' does not rest on the 'truth' of one's sexuality *per se*. Adelaide, familiar with Foucauldian approaches to sexuality and enamoured with a vision of the queer potential of her work, seems to have detached 'authenticity' in sex from sexual identity—locating it in bodily acts, experiences and pleasures instead. 'Authentic pleasure', for Adelaide, might be read

18 Annamarie Jagose, 'Counterfeit Pleasures: Fake Orgasm and Queer Agency', *Textual Practice*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2010, p. 529.

19 Maddison Young, 'Authenticity and its Role within Feminist Pornography', *Porn Studies*, vol. 1, nos 1–2, 2014, p. 188.

20 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, Vintage Books, New York, 1980, p. 43.

less as an investment in uncovering the truth of sexuality and more as an attempt to say ‘pleasure’ and have it heard in a culture that considers sex work devoid of agency, honesty or joy. Adelaide wants her experience of pleasure at work to be on the record in part because of its capacity to trouble stable binaries of sexuality and predictable limits of relationality. She is invested in the sexual and relational boundaries that are blurred when one recognises the very existence of psychological and bodily pleasure on the job, and by insisting on the recognition of pleasure, Adelaide points to the way her work might trouble the lines between straightness and queerness, consumer and participant, scene partner and lover, work and play.

Adelaide’s relationship with Erin ended before she could resolve the tension caused by their very different ways of making sense of her work, and she is now determined to ensure her next relationship is more compatible with her understanding of sex, intimacy and pleasure, ‘I feel like this is a good opportunity to be able to say, from the start, if I enter into a relationship that I want it to have some form of negotiated non-monogamy.’

As is clear from her relationship with Erin, however, the difficulty is not simply finding someone who is willing to put negotiated non-monogamy on the table, but someone who will see that non-monogamy in a similar light. Having let go of monogamy as the measure of a serious, committed and meaningful relationship, Adelaide has, over time, developed her own sense of what makes sexual connections meaningful. The ability to engage with, acknowledge and pursue a range of pleasures—including giving straight women queer orgasms and getting caught up in ‘whirlwind’ crushes after one-night-stands—has become, for Adelaide, not only compatible with a long-term committed relationship but also essential to it.

Case study two: Sex as glue

When sex is sentimentalised it is often imagined as a demonstration of romantic love, but Ted, a gay man in his mid-twenties, entertains a sentimental vision of sex as a ‘bonding exercise’ for groups—capable of bringing together people who would otherwise struggle to get along. A few years ago Ted was dating Luke. Neither wanted a monogamous relationship, but each had a different preference for how their non-monogamy would be practised. Luke was a sex worker and also enjoyed having casual sex with strangers when he wasn’t on the job. Ted and Luke also had a close group of mutual friends that they enjoyed group sex with. Ted told me that while Luke most desired anonymous sex, Ted himself valued the sex shared within his circle of close friends most of all:

I sort of had this ideal at the time, which was a bit, you know, another one of my sort of naïve fantasies, I guess ... We went to buy a bed together, and I remember we went with a couple of our friends to see how many people we could sort of lay across it [laughs] ‘cause I had this sort of idea, that, you know, we’d eventually get this big house and we’d all live together and be like, this ... wonderful, big, loving family.

This vision of a loving family of friends, a community who had sex and shared beds, was central to the way Ted understood his non-monogamy. This sense of sex as ‘an intimate bonding thing’ had practical social consequences:

I was sort of sleeping with somebody who Luke didn’t really like very much, and ... you know, me and my naïve, utopian sort of ... [laughs] you know, thought that the best way to solve that problem was to get them to sleep together and to, like, make them all hang out and, you know, be a big happy family and, you know, ‘they’ll learn to love each other’. And, you know, yeah: no.

Despite the failure of sex to mend bridges between Luke and Ted's other lover, it did contribute to the affective and material bonds of the group as a whole. The sense of community, intimacy and care within the group contributed to a degree of flexibility in Ted and Luke's safe sex agreement:

a lot of the time [within the group we] were sort of having unsafe sex and stuff ... or we'd negotiate safe sex with people who we weren't close to in my group and, you know, it's risky sort of behaviour and stuff and, yeah, but ... With some people it'd be protected but sometimes you know, you'd be drunk or, yeah ... I don't know ... because you knew each other and you knew that everyone would look out for each other, sort of thing, and you know, we all got tested regularly, especially because Luke was a sex worker and stuff, so, you know, yeah, we got tested every three months.

This method of carving out contexts where unprotected sex is a 'tolerable risk' has been a notable feature of Australian HIV prevention strategies.²¹ Traditionally, this kind of arrangement is used to facilitate safer condom-less sex for couples who, after being tested and discussing both the hazards and the terms of their trust and communication, could agree to have unprotected sex within the relationship and protected sex outside it.²²

In non-monogamous communities this is often described as a couple being 'fluid bonded', an arrangement wherein people agree to 'have unprotected sex with each other and regularly come into contact with each other's bodily fluid'.²³ This strategy is described in HIV/AIDS prevention literature as 'negotiated safety', and depends on negotiating an explicit agreement to use condoms for penetrative sex outside the group.²⁴ Ted and Luke had explicitly agreed to be 'fluid bonded' to each other, but in practice this bonding extended to their whole close-knit friendship circle. Ted suggests that condom-less sex within the group was not a deliberate, patterned decision so much as one likely to be made when they were intoxicated, and influenced by a sense of presumed familiarity and reciprocal care.²⁵ The group's de facto 'fluid bonding' was in fact similar to the kinds of de facto practices that make monogamous relationships statistically risky—where a series of tacit assumptions about the intimacy and familiarity of the relationship can come to replace a deliberate, explicit safer-sex agreement.²⁶

The boundaries of this arrangement were altered, however, when Luke returned from a trip to his home town:

21 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*, Free Press, New York, 1999, p. 216. Susan Kippax and Kane Race, 'Sustaining Safe Practice: Twenty Years On', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2003.

22 Warner, p. 216.

23 Tristan Taormino, *Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships*, Cleis Press, San Francisco, 2008, p. 264.

24 Kippax and Race.

25 It is unclear whether Ted included these justifications in his disclosure within the interview in order to pre-emptively diffuse any moralist reaction I might have had or if those logics did in fact animate the decisions that were being made at the time.

26 For more on the practical similarities and differences between 'negotiated safety' and 'monogamy' as safer sex strategies see Kippax and Race, and Warner, p. 209–10.

He'd had sex with some people there. And we'd sort of negotiated that if you were having sex with people outside, you know, use protection and stuff ... but, um, and ... we were having unsafe sex again, and, when, um [sighs] ... probably a month after that went to get tested and I was like, 'Oh, I don't want to go alone, because I haven't been for a while, and it's sort of awkward.' And so he's like, 'Oh, I got tested not long ago, but I'll come with you', and we got tested together and his results came back positive. And we'd been having unsafe sex, and so I, ah, went on PEP, like, Post Exposure Prophylaxis ... fortunately, whether it worked or whether I just didn't catch it, ah, ah, yeah ... I am still negative. But, ah, then we had a relationship where, you know, he was positive and I was negative, and we were having this sort of open ... and he was doing sex work, so it sort of changed the dynamic a little bit ... and made it a bit more difficult.

The group adjusted their sexual practices in order to continue to include Luke in their sexual activities, a flexibility Ted associated with the fact that many of them had been involved in LGBT community organisations with a strong focus on developing cultures of safe sex. Although Luke's diagnosis did not change the rules of their non-monogamy, or their group's sexual dynamics, it began to affect Ted and Luke's relationship in more subtle ways:

Our relationship sort of started to suffer ... Part of that was because, you know, I was continuing to see other people ... and Luke sort of felt like he had to hold back from then on ... and sort of felt a little bit ... like, he still slept with other people and, you know, told them he was positive and was all out in the open and negotiated and, you know, safe sex sort of thing ... but, yeah, I don't know ... I think that he probably did want to be more monogamous with me. And he definitely stopped having sex with other people, as much as I sort of ... continued to ... have those sorts of relationships ... he definitely didn't have those kinds of relationships with anyone else but me. And he continued to do sex work and stuff ... but yeah, apart from that, not really.

In Ted's account, the significance of their non-monogamy shifted, not because of any new sense of what non-monogamy meant to them, not because of jealousy or the development of a more mature bond or any other of the reasons popularised in mononormative depictions of non-monogamous relationships, not because of any change in how either man framed non-monogamy in and of itself, but because of Luke's seroconversion and its discursive framing and emotional effects. These factors, combined with Ted's beliefs about friendship, intimacy, and the bonding potential of sex, fundamentally shaped his experience of non-monogamy.

Case study three: Lust-control coffee

Max was also preoccupied with the meaning of sex and friendship. Unlike Ted, however, Max was thinking through how she might contain, rather than embrace, the bonding potential of sex. A queer student in her late twenties, when I met Max she was in the process of working out how to define and explain a friendship that had recently become sexual:

I've been seeing a friend who I've known for a number of years and she's recently become single and ... um ... we don't really know what it is yet ... I get the impression that it is not a relationship of sorts ... like, it is a friendship with sex. Um, and I'm thinking how I'm going to talk to her about that. It doesn't feel like it's a dating relationship and that we're going to sleep with other people or dating other people. It feels like it's a friendship primarily and we're making space to sleep with each other within that.

Max had been non-monogamous before, but she has never before negotiated, or even disclosed, her non-monogamy to her partners. In opening up their friendship to sex, however, Max and Mary have been explicit about the ‘parameters’ of their intimacy:

One important thing was a way of having our friendship still continue even though now we’re sleeping together so that if and when that stops we’ve still got something here, and because we’re both aware that our friendship wasn’t particularly deep before we started to sleep together and we are getting to know each other more because we’re spending more time together, um, we wanted to kind of, um, find a way of keeping that friendship going. So, we kind of put down, ‘We wanna have lust-control coffee’, where we’ve gotta control our lust [laughs].

Max and Mary attempt to compartmentalise the sexual aspect of their relationship by agreeing on the tenor of an occasion in advance. Max explains that constructing the boundary between the two elements of their relationship has so far been complex:

It’s proving really interesting though, because she comes from a long-term relationship um, and, as I’ve said my history is monogamy and so I’m finding that even though we’ve set up these boundaries a lot of relationship-type behaviour is still finding its way in.

In response to this difficulty Max and Mary put extra boundaries in place. Some of those boundaries were temporal—designed to ensure that they continued to carve out time to interact ‘as friends’—but often the boundaries were spatial as well. Max described, for example, the first time they agreed that the bed should be a zone completely separate from friendly intimacy:

We were in bed together, and we were just laying around talking and whatever and I’d said something about the difference between sleeping with women for me and sleeping with guys in terms of emotionality and whatever, and she said, ‘Oh, I feel like that’s too personal. I feel like you’re asking me to engage in a discussion that is really personal for you and we’re in bed together and this isn’t the space to talk about that. We need to have a space when we’re being friends when we talk about these things, and when we’re in bed together this is a space where we’re fucking, even when we’re not fucking, that we don’t talk about emotional stuff.’ ... that was really interesting for me to be called up on something and to look at that and go, ‘Wow, did I just ... did I just unconsciously bring too much of myself into here. And how do I not do that?’

In this case, ‘too much’ involved frank discussion of her sexual desire and preferences—topics which friends who are not sexually involved might discuss easily, but which a friend who is also a sexual partner might feel more directly implicated in. Max explained that these rules were:

trying to make it so that we weren’t, kind of, blending into relationship into sex into hot sex and then cuddly time and then cuddly emotional talk-about-yourself time. Like, it was kind of going, ‘Yeah, no, we can still be affectionate and loving and whatever but we’re not going to have your whole personality slip into bed with us as well.’

Through this kind of explicit negotiation Max and Mary attempted to agree upon the nature of interactions in advance, using certain spaces, and certain topics of conversation, as ‘framing devices’.²⁷

27 Kane Race, ‘Speculative Pragmatism and Intimate Arrangements: Online Hook-up Devices in Gay Life’, *Culture, Health and Society*, vol. 17, no. 4, July 2014.

Ultimately Max and Mary abandoned the rules prohibiting friendly intimacy in the bedroom, agreeing they could be themselves ‘whenever and however’, but the loss of these original boundaries has led Max to question again the nature of their relationship. In particular, Max has started to wonder how best to explain their relationship to mutual friends. In doing so Max weighs her discomfort at her relationship being over-simplified, against her attraction, as a person who uses a wheelchair, to labels which have the potential to disrupt ideas of people with disabilities as asexual:

At the moment we’re just kind of saying, ‘Yeah, we’re mates,’ or ‘Yeah, we’re fuck buddies’ and both of those I ... if it’s going to continue I don’t really feel like they encapsulate what’s happening ... It’s not that I don’t feel comfortable being someone’s fuck buddy, like, I think that’s really interesting and really hot, particularly from a disability and sexualities perspective. Often women with disabilities get asexualised and don’t, um, get seen as sexual, so to be somebody’s just total toy-boy and fuck-buddy is really, you know, empowering and a great kind of thing ... and I think, ‘Wow, cool, if that’s all I am is a hot body for you—what a great thing to be!’ But at the same time, um, because we have a friendship ... I don’t want to, when she says oh, ‘I’m’, you know, ‘I’m fucking’ me to somebody I kind of think, ‘Well, that’s just reducing it to this one particular thing we’re doing and actually we’re maintaining a friendship underneath that.’

Max’s discomfort with ‘fuck buddy’ is not due to its juxtaposition with ‘girlfriend’; she agrees that the nature of their relationship would not be accurately reflected by the language of traditional relationships, perhaps especially given the lengths they have both gone to in order to cognitively separate out the parts of their relationship. Nonetheless, Max believes ‘fuck buddy’ would also be an inaccurate description of their relationship—a relationship which involves both emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy, even as it strives to keep those elements apart. What is clear, is that the decision about how best to label their relationship has as much to do with the way Max thinks that relationship, and the people in it, are likely to be read by people close to them as it does to what she understands as the accuracy of any particular title. Max, for example, finds herself drawn toward the over-simplification ‘fuck-buddy’ would represent insofar as it might correct the common perception that people with disabilities are ‘incapable of or uninterested in sex’.²⁸

About half way through our interview Max discloses that she is also, secretly, having sex with a man who is her ex-partner. One of the key appeals of the arrangement appears to be the extent to which Max feels sure the sex is not going to lead to a relationship:

I know I can just go, ‘Hey, you’re in town, alright, cool, see you in half an hour. Alright. Bye.’ That that’s really good ... um ... yeah, that I kind of ... I feel like we’ve worked through all of the intimacy issues and who we are as people issues, because we were together for so long, we don’t have to go there, we don’t have to worry that it’s going to go to some different space. Because we’ve already been there, you know?

Max keeps the relationship a secret from Mary, even though they do not have a monogamous arrangement, because she is concerned that Mary would change the way she sees Max if it was known that she was sleeping with a man:

28 Robert McRuer, ‘Disabling Sex: Notes for a Crip Theory of Sexuality’, *GLQ*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2010, p. 107.

I guess for me my identity ... I do feel like most of the time unless I'm actually physically in bed with him I am gay, and so I don't want to have to have that conversation of, 'Hey, you know, sometimes I sleep with dudes', and whatever. I guess if she knew that that would kind of change how she is with me.

The meaning at stake is not seen as located in the non-monogamy itself but in the gender of Max's other lover. Max is concerned that the fact her ex-partner is a man might impact on the way her own gender is read—a particular concern for Max as she is actively considering whether or not she feels comfortable being read as feminine—and so she keeps the affair secret.

At several points in the interview Max suggests that the casual, bounded nature of the sex she was currently having was not what she was used to. Part of Max's project of avoiding relationships involves continuous reminders—to herself and, when necessary, her lovers—of the agreed-upon boundaries of their connection. By consciously fighting what she experiences as her default trajectory of intimacy Max avoids 'falling' into a mode of relationship that she has been hurt by before:

I got my heart completely broken and I guess having had that experience (it was a year ago now) but, I just don't really feel in the space to ever go near any ... Or not ever, but for a long time go near anything like that again. So, I'm sleeping with people that I know that I can just sleep with. And that I'm not going to fall in love with. Like, I'm choosing the people that I become intimate with.

Her two choices of lover so far have involved different mechanisms for securing that limitation. Her secret, sex-only relationship with an ex-partner is limited to 'just' sex by virtue of their relationship history, combined with Max's increasing awareness of her own queerness and accompanying discomfort with normative heterosexual dynamics. Her relationship with Mary is secured by the deliberate segmenting of their connection into two parallel relationships—their friendship and their sexual connection, a boundary she sees as flexible, fragile and nonetheless worth defending. Rather than looking for her partners to fulfil her, Max looks for them to perform clearly contained and categorised functions in her life—functions whose meaning is not slippery and whose outcomes she attempts to control.

Max's personal history and circumstances (a difficult breakup, an ex-partner and a new friend) explicitly animate the relationship dynamics she pursues, colliding in meaningful ways with the complex discursive trappings of gender, sexuality and ability. At every step of the way her decisions about what she does and what it means are shaped by that range of factors, not only subtly, as it does with us all, but explicitly as she imagines how others will read her actions in the context of her body.

Conclusion

The material and discursive realities of health, dis/ability, gender, friendship and work are just some of the factors that have the capacity to texture one's experience of non-monogamous relationship structures. Too often as scholars of non-monogamy we forget to look for that texture, fixating instead on the absence of monogamy and asking how that absence is accounted for. Of course, a close look at the way any three individuals make sense of sex and intimacy in their non-monogamous relationships could never provide an exhaustive picture of the diverse practical, discursive and affective considerations that inform our understanding of relational significance. Instead, the three case studies in this article should stand as examples of the type of bespoke meaning-making which so many people explicitly engage in.

The rules, agreements and discursive attachments that fuel these case studies are not concerned with non-monogamy alone. Although all three participants signed on for some form of non-monogamy and thus share, to some extent, a structure of non-exclusivity, their experiences of that non-exclusivity are textured differently. Relational factors which were salient in the meaning-making of one participant might be absent entirely from another. It is also clear that the mononormative assumption of the primary significance of monogamy as a rule, an assumption which also allows ‘cheating’ and ‘infidelity’ to be synonymous with non-exclusivity, is inadequate for the task of measuring the full range of ways that people break faith with intra-relational agreements, and the meanings that are made of those decisions. ‘Cheating’, weighed down as it is with mononormative assumptions, cannot capture the differences between someone choosing not to mention one lover to another, a person having unprotected sex outside of the agreed-upon fluid bonded group and someone texting their fling without their partner’s consent or knowledge in order to enjoy—and defuse—the exhilaration of a one night stand. Nor can ‘infidelity’, with its associations of oath breaking and dishonesty, capture the spirit in which these agreements were transgressed or in which those transgressions were received. The pleasure, hurt and other meanings made of these decisions cannot be found in the ‘structure’ of non-monogamy itself.

This is not to say that monogamous relationships have more straightforward patterns of signification, but that, in the context of mononormativity, monogamy is able to stand in for, or cover over, more complex economies of meaning and value. In contrast to the regular, explicit interrogation many non-monogamous relationships face, the significance of a monogamous relationship is often reached (or assumed) tacitly, resulting in some curious gaps—notably around the perception of flirtation, the importance of sustaining eroticism within a partnership or the weight of sexual fantasy.²⁹ When monogamy is around we don’t ask enough questions about a relationship’s meaning or value. When we do, we often assume far too quickly that we know what the answers depend on. Quite often ‘monogamy’ is allowed to stand in for an answer—in some way connoting or corresponding to commitment, longevity, stability, love. The belief that monogamy routinely signifies these things has resulted in a neglect of other aspects of relationships that may also shape meaning and measure intimacy. Perhaps the necessarily explicit negotiation of meaning engaged in by many people who practice non-monogamy can teach us to wonder if monogamous relationships might also be textured by a wide range of meaning-making factors that get overlooked when we assume in advance the primacy and coherence of the structure of monogamy itself.

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²⁹ See Phillips and Nelson for discussions of the ways monogamous couples negotiated and re-negotiated the explicit and implicit rules that ground their practice of monogamy. Tammy Nelson, ‘The New Monogamy: How Far Should We Go?’, *Psychotherapy Networker*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2010; Adam Phillips, *Monogamy*, Vintage Books Random House, New York, 1996, note 33.

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