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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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The ‘hard work’ of polyamory: ethnographic accounts of intimacy and difference in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The subversive potential of nonmonogamous relationships to provide nonpossessive and meaningful modes of bonding beyond heteropatriarchal monogamous relationships has been a concern of feminist scholarship and activism for more than a century. Focusing on polyamory in the Netherlands, this paper aims to contribute to this scholarship by putting power relations at the centre of analysis. Ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviews with people in polyamorous relationships show that their experiences of polyamory as emotionally, ethically, and subjectively hard work are deeply entangled with gender, age, class, and racial difference, which is understood as both fluid and as emerging in social contexts. This entanglement of hard work and difference is identified and investigated in three areas: resisting stigmatization, negotiating autonomy and commitment, and managing jealousy. It is argued that although polyamory’s appeal to ethical plurality offers possibilities for resisting heteropatriarchal forces in society, its simultaneous reliance on an individualistic therapeutic discourse undermines those very possibilities for resistance, serving an apolitical late-capitalist demand for self-management and -improvement.

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Nonmonogamies and difference

Polyamory refers to multiple, committed, love-based relationships with the consent of all the partners (Klesse, 2015). Polyamorous relationships take a variety of household forms and (non)hierarchical emotional and sexual commitments among the partners. In the Netherlands, polyamory has gained popularity in the last decade, evidenced by the growing online spaces, therapeutic offerings, public events, and organizations and associations where interests and concerns about polyamory are expressed and shaped (Stichting Polyamorie Nederland, 2022). Polyamory is also increasingly studied by scholars in a range of social science disciplines and geographical contexts (e.g. Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006; Jordan, Grogan, Muruthi, & Bermúdez, 2017; Klesse, 2014; Shannon & Willis, 2010).

Based on an ethnographic research conducted in 2019 and 2020 on polyamory in the Netherlands, this paper presents ‘the hard work’ of polyamory as a conceptual framework to capture what my interlocutors shared about their experiences with this type of relationship. Previous research has shown how polyamory self-help literature conceptualizes such relationships as ‘work’, foregrounding its complexity and emotionally and ethically demanding character (Petrella, 2007). This paper furthers this discussion in two ways. First, it looks at what this ‘work’ comes to mean in polyamorous practices in everyday life. Second, it weaves into this ‘work’ various constructions of difference that indicate the underlying power relations based on gender, class, race, and age.

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In addition, I draw upon theory from interdisciplinary critical feminism to understand power mechanisms in the constructions of intimate bonding in contemporary, late-capitalist societies where heteropatriarchal structures are still hard at work (Jónasdóttir & Ferguson, 2014). Late-capitalism is a particularly relevant context to study intimacy because of two conditions: in late-capitalist societies hyper-subjectivity is promoted by making the self as the ultimate project for improvement, and the intimate has become one of the foremost realms for seeking self-value given the increasing precarities in other life domains (Illouz, 1997, 2007, 2019).

For more than a century, multiple strands of feminist theory have critiqued the institutions of monogamy, marriage, and romantic love as systems of power entangled with patriarchy and capitalism (e.g. Alexander, 1997; Beauvoir, [1949] 1976; Collins, 2004; Comer, 1974; Goldman, [1911] 2008; Holland, 2012; hooks, 2000; [1991] 1994; Kollontai, [1923] 1977; Lewis, 1982; Lorde, [1984] 2007; Robinson, 1997; Willey, 2006, 2016a). Women's economic dependence, emotional overinvestment in the couple relationship, compulsory (hetero)sexuality, and sociopolitical isolation, as well as the exploitation of women's reproductive labour, are among the key elements of this critique. This body of scholarship also addresses historical constitutions of romantic love that depends on racial and socioeconomic stratification, and underlying discourses of proper, civilized, and ethical sexuality, love, and intimacy.

Alongside this critique, radical, feminist, antiracist, queer, and (new) materialist researchers have developed new frameworks to envision nonoppressive and more fulfilling modes of intimate bonding. Consensual nonmonogamy, in all its variety, has been investigated for its potential to allow and create more inclusive, reflexive, and queer approach to love, intimacy, and sexuality and a re-evaluation of community and friendship beyond coupling (Campbell, 1974; Comer, 1974; Healey, 1996; hooks, 2000; Robinson, 1997; Rosa, 1994; Schippers, 2016; Willey, 2016a). This body of research suggests that, through nonmonogamy, gender relations, care, and (re)productive labour could be fundamentally redefined and re-regulated as part of a feminist project that strives towards social justice and envisions alternative ways of being, knowing, and relating.

Many scholars of nonmonogamies, however, have cautioned against casting nonmonogamy as universally and automatically progressive and liberating (Haritaworn et al., 2006). The concept of 'polynormativity' (Schippers, 2016) has been used to highlight privileges allowing some within polyamory communities to have more influence than others. Several scholars have pointed out that because of the 'intersectional context of privilege and oppression' (Rambukkana, 2015) certain forms of nonmonogamies, including polyamory, are more likely to be perceived as progressive and ethical, whereas others are labelled as backward, women-unfriendly and patriarchal, such as Islamic polygyny (Moors, de Koning, & Vroon-Najem, 2018; Pérez Navarro, 2016; Vasallo, 2019). Additionally, polyamory tends to be debated within the community in a depoliticized way, by a mere focus on micro-management of everyday life rather than discussing more philosophical, political and queer aspects of love and intimacy (Cardoso, Martins, & Coelho, 2013).

Furthermore, specific axes of difference have been the focus of critical non-monogamies studies. Amongst others, sociologist Cristian Klesse (2005) has pointed at a double standard in the UK polyamory community that positively reviews sexual accumulation among men while condemning it among women, who risk being labelled 'sluts', 'slags', or 'whores', reproducing gendered, classed, and racialized notions of sexuality. Similarly, in an ethnographic study of nonmonogamies in Belgium, anthropologist Katrien De Graeve (2019) has shown how men who either openly or discreetly participate in nonmonogamous dating scenes use a moral reasoning that enables the simultaneous separation of sex from emotion and the normalization of sex without commitment.

Focusing more specifically on processes of racialization and class, accounts both academic (Sheff & Hammers, 2011) and activist (Patterson, 2018) point to the over-representation of highly educated white people in polyamory communities. This composition both reflects and reinforces class and racial divisions based on middle-class sensibilities and habitus, such as the valuing of continual self-reflection and highly scripted negotiations between partners (Klesse, 2007). Cultivating such sensibilities often depends on supportive, wealthy, and liberal environments (McDermott, 2011).

Furthermore, racialized and classed labels of 'lewdness' and 'promiscuity' are more likely to stick to certain bodies within nonmonogamous communities, namely those of black people and working-class women (Holland, 2012).

With this paper I aim to contribute to this critical scholarship on nonmonogamies that reveals and interrogates sexist, heteronormative, classist, and racist power relations. My goal is to look both into and beyond the workings of power by attending to its everyday configurations in practice. Although it is difficult observe people in their everyday intimate life and interactions, 'practice' can serve as an analytical focus to examine narrated experiences by tracing the specific contexts in which difference 'emerges' in people's stories. For instance, when they talk about facing or resisting sexism, racism and ageism. This includes avoiding locating difference in the bodies of interlocutors, such as bisexual women or women more generally, the working class, and black people and people of colour. I recognize that exposing hierarchical power relations can also lead to essentialising race, gender, and class when these are seen as demographic variables attached to certain individuals or groups of people.

Anthropologist Amade M'charek (2010, 2013) proposes an understanding of difference as contextually enacted in specific spaces. Rather than entities that can speak to us, differences are continually made and unmade in relation to other categories; they are the effects of those relations, instead of existing outside of how we know or study them. Following M'charek, this paper assumes that deconstructing heteronormativity, racism, classism, and sexism depends not only on problematizing them as ideologies but also on paying attention to how and when they are manifest in interlocutors' narrated everyday practices, thereby highlighting their lack of inherent stability and wholeness. Whereas the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1995) focuses on the complicated juncture of the various axes of oppression and privilege, M'charek proposes to simultaneously interrogate the shaky and ambiguous emergence of difference itself. With this framework, I discuss the 'hard work' of polyamory in order to illuminate both power relations and the fluidity of identity categories.

Methodology

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted between September 2019 and June 2020 within what seems to be a well-organized Dutch 'poly' scene. The website www.polyamorie.nl proved particularly helpful in exploring this scene. Using this platform, I was able to attend numerous monthly, weekly, and occasional activities across the country for participant observation, including *praatgroepen* (focused discussion groups), poly *borrels* (literally, 'small drink', a common term for informal social gatherings), movie nights, walk-in clinics with a coach, book discussion meetings, picnics, and parties. Different, often regional, organizations are involved in initiating and setting up these activities. The themes covered during group discussions range from jealousy, dating, and communication to time management, personal development, and stigmatization. The website exhibits inspirational personal stories and provides a link to a private Facebook community with more than two thousand members. Additionally, I posted a call for in-depth interviews on the abovementioned Facebook page. In total I was able to interview thirty individuals. An overview of some of their characteristics relevant to the discussions in this paper is given in Table 1. The interviews were taken in person and lasted between two and four hours and were all audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using open and focused coding according to the grounded theory (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013).

Verbal consent was sought before interviews, informal conversations and participate observation. The first three months of the fieldwork, I attended several public events to get to know the people in the community. I always introduced myself to the organizer and people I spoke to as a researcher, answered questions about both my intellectual and personal background, and shared some of my previous work on gender and sexuality when requested. Although some of the organizers were initially hesitant about my presence at smaller gatherings, which was mainly based on previous

Table 1. Demographic overview of interlocutors. Number of individuals between parentheses.

Self-identified ethnicity	Age cohort	Number of partners	Self-identified gender	Highest level of education attained
Surinamese Dutch (1)	20–29 (5)	None (2)	Woman (13)	Secondary (2)
Vietnamese Dutch (1)	30–39 (9)	One (14)	Man (15)	College/University (19)
Iranian Dutch (1)	40–49 (6)	More than two (13)	Queer (2)	Not mentioned (9)
Greek Dutch (1)	50–59 (6)	Not mentioned (1)		
Belgian (1)	60–69 (4)			
Not mentioned (25)				

'misrepresentations' by journalists, gradually they were convinced of my 'serious' intentions and allowed me to participate in discussions on sensitive issues. In addition, my access to the community was significantly aided through my existing connection with a well-known figure in the community who I had met when I was working on a research grant proposal that led into this project.

The stories presented in this paper are pseudonymised and anonymized to protect the privacy of the participants. Many of the shorter quotes are based on informal conversations during participant observation, but most of the data are extracts from in-depth interviews. The interviews were often preceded and followed by meetings during participant observation – an important part of creating a trust relationship with interlocutors, but also a methodological strategy to enable a more holistic understanding of the stories. I also spoke with people involved in nonmonogamous relationships who for various reasons did not identify as polyamorous (see Author, forthcoming), however, this paper focuses on interlocutors who somehow connected themselves to 'polyamory', even though their understandings and practices of polyamory varied significantly.

Polyamory as 'hard work'

Despite polyamory's association with abundance, frivolity, and hedonism in popular discourses (Easton & Hardy, 2009, pp. 11–14), or perhaps precisely because of such associations, the interlocutors in my research emphasized repeatedly, in different ways and both implicitly and explicitly, that their relationships were by no means easy or superficial, and in fact, required seriously hard work, both emotionally and ethically. In the following sections, I discuss and analyse some of the most striking aspects of that hard work. In doing so I pay attention to difference using a critical feminist perspective that interrogates intimacy's constructions at the intersection of patriarchy and late capitalism in contemporary Western societies. Although each section focuses on one observation about what this hard work entails, all of the topics are deeply interrelated, and all, as will become clear, concern the ethical and emotional management of the self and the intimate relationship. This hard work includes 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979) and 'emotional labour' (Brents & Jackson, 2013), but also ethical work and subjectivity work both within the relationship and in relation to larger society. Emotion work concerns the emotional toll and management that is specific to negotiations of intimacy in polyamory. Ethical work is related to transparency and consent, and is supposed to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' nonmonogamies. Subjectivity work, in addition, is about how one negotiates one's own identity (for instance, with regard to gender, class, race and age) in the constructions of polyamory. By developing and using this concept of hard work, this paper aims to contribute to critical scholarship on nonmonogamies that seeks to examine not only what 'intimate privilege' (Rambukkana, 2015) in polyamory entails, but also how its practitioners work around and against privilege and

oppression in everyday practices of intimacy. Additionally, the hard work will be a framework through which the field of critical nonmonogamies will be brought into dialogue with (feminist) scholarship on the psychological and therapeutic authority over late-modern self-management and individualization (Beck & Beck-Gemshem, 2002; Illouz, 2007, 2008; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1990, 1998).

Resisting stigmatization

One of the prominent aspects of the hard work of polyamory is the recurrent need to deal with stereotypical images and stigmas attached to the public image of polyamory (Séguin, 2019; Witherspoon & Theodore, 2021). Most notably, many interlocutors put considerable effort into undoing suspicions of promiscuity. ‘Some people ask me: “Polyamory is just following your dick, isn’t it?” They have no idea’, said Chris during a one-on-one interview. Such gendered stigmatizations appeared also from other conversation. Some of the younger women I spoke, for instance, to mentioned they felt that they needed to reassure their family members that they were not being used. ‘My mother asked me: “Are you sure you are not his mistress?” You know, someone to be used and dismissed after a while’, said Catherine, a thirty-one-year-old woman. Polyamory, according to these stigmatized public conceptualizations, is seen as a site where men can indulge in sexual hunting against which naïve women should be protected. Resisting stigmatization is therefore simultaneously a form of ‘genderwork’ as one has to refute gendered difference-making in dominant notions of sexual promiscuity. Inspired by Steinbugler’s conceptualization of ‘racework’ (Steinbugler, 2012, p. 156), I use ‘genderwork’ as a reference to a ‘set of everyday actions and strategies through which individuals establish and maintain bonds of trust, love and communication across systems of [gendered] stratification’. My interlocutors need to work through gendered understandings of sexual promiscuity not only in relation to the outside world, but, as we will see, also within their intimate relationships. Genderwork differs slightly from ‘doing gender’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) for it goes beyond the affirmative ‘interactional work involved in being a gendered person in society’ (p. 125) and includes the potentially disruptive hard work of continually crafting and recrafting the gendered dynamics of the intimate relationship itself. The difference is not fundamental, but gradual. Although genderwork is not limited to polyamory, it is arguably an inherent part of nonmonogamies emerging beyond existing cultural scripts, which may create possibilities for questioning sex as the central organizing principle of the relationship (Rosa, 1994).

Stigmatization within the polyamory community has been less researched. In my study, for instance, complaints were sometimes expressed towards other community members who mistook polyamory as a *carte blanche* for uncommitted sexual encounters. According to the sixty-one-year-old Hugo:

You see these people in the poly community constantly changing partners. That’s just *seksopzoekerij* [sex seeking]. For me, polyamory is about real relationships, with everything that comes with that. Crying together, raising children together, building a home, not knowing if the relationship will survive and going to therapy. [...] I mean, all those things are part of it, just like monogamy.

Here, difference emerges as intimacy-based versus promiscuity-based nonmonogamy, enabling an ethical distinction between fake and real polyamory. Safeguarding ‘good’ polyamory against ‘bad’ polyamory as part of the hard work, serves the construction of what the sociologist Mimi Schippers has called ‘polynormativity’ (Schippers, 2016). On several occasions, interlocutors ensured me that what they were doing was ‘true’ polyamory as opposed to ‘messing around’ they ascribed to Others in the poly community. The stigmatized public image of polyamory from outside the community may have found its way in internal difference-making processes.

Beside dismissing promiscuity, some of the interlocutors worked hard against another, yet related, image of women's easy availability and sexual objectification. As argued by other scholars, sexual objectification within nonmonogamous relationships is profoundly gendered (De Graeve, 2019; Klesse, 2005). In my fieldwork, too, according to several participants, a lot of men they had been dating expected to have unlimited and uncommitted sexual access to women. Reflecting on a 'very bad date', Ida said: 'I came in and saw tracks of sex from the previous date everywhere. Used condoms, wine glasses, everything. I told him I didn't appreciate that. He said, "If you can't handle this, then why are you on a poly dating site?" I told him, "But this is not polyamory!"' Ida's frustration was not limited to this particular case, and she said she had lost her trust in men within the poly dating scene. She explained her decision to build friendships first and postpone sexual intimacy: 'I want to see if he remains interested after several months. We can take a walk in the park, have lunch together, that kind of stuff. For sure. But let's see how long he stays around'. Her previous experiences of uncaring sex resonated with her disappointments in dating poly men, which helped enable her to identify and protest such behaviour as sexual objectification and to develop strategies to protect herself. Hard work is at once emotional, ethical, and gendered.

Other women also encountered sexual objectification in poly dating scenes, but linked it to their unmarried status. Chelsy, who identified as solo poly and bisexual, said, 'People think you just don't care. You don't mention a partner, so you must be interested in having a lot of sex. That's not at all the case. So, I end up explaining to people what it actually means quite often'. She elaborated: 'In solo polyamory, we are just looking after ourselves as number one priority. We have a house, a job, and are completely independent. I really value my own time and autonomy. That doesn't mean that I cannot have loving and committed relationships with other people'. Reflecting on a negative dating experience with a couple, another interlocutor, the twenty-five-year-old Lisa, who also identified as bisexual, said: 'They expected me to like both of them equally and if I didn't, they said, "No problem. We will just break it off and go on". As if it is that simple. I'm a person too. I have feelings. Ending a relationship is intense'. For married couples looking for excitement and pleasure, Chelsy's and Lisa's bisexuality and young age were almost like commodities. While a sex-centric image of polyamory affects many interlocutors, women – especially unmarried, bisexual women – seem to carry a heavier burden of resisting this image than others. At the same time, the ability to resist this image relies on sexual and economic capital; both Chelsy and Lisa are young, sought-after, highly educated, and financially independent women, and thus could afford to set boundaries and say 'no'. Bisexuality, gender, age, and class are co-constructed in the hard work of resisting assumptions of promiscuity.

Promiscuity myths were sometimes co-constituted by racialized stories about sexuality and masculinity, the rejection of which required both 'genderwork' and 'racework' (Steinbugler, 2012), understood as working around or resisting gendered and racialized stereotypes. This dynamic was clear when Edgar, a Dutch-Surinamese man in his mid-thirties, described some of the aspects of his polyamorous life while the two of us were drinking coffee at a café of his choosing. When people heard he was having consensual relationships with two women at the same time, he said, they often connected that to his background: 'They say, "Sure, for you Rasta men, these kinds of things are normal". They see this [pointing at his dreadlocks] and assume I'm a Rasta man'. Stereotyped images of polyamory, in Edgar's case, are clearly based on racialized notions of masculinity, indicating how resisting them simultaneously involves resisting difference-making. Additionally, as a member of the Surinamese Dutch community, Edgar was accused of jeopardizing the reputation of the community, which is already suspected of sexual deviance and supposedly should hold itself to higher standards: 'They tell me they are ashamed of me. You are giving them [white Dutch people] more ammunition'. In the specific, yet not unique, Dutch context, where racial othering heavily depends on categories of sexuality and gender (Wekker, 2016), Edgar's nonmonogamy becomes seen as a threat to the Surinamese Dutch community's status and respectability, an association that underlines the racialization and othering of that community in the Dutch context.

Racialization was at work in yet another form in Edgar's life. Given the predominantly white, middle-class composition of the Dutch poly community, he said he felt underrepresented, and he named this as a reason why he did not frequent poly events: 'I have been to some events, but I appeared to be the only black person in the room'. The over-representation of white, and often highly educated, people in polyamory communities is not limited to the Dutch context and has also been observed in other countries (Johnson, 2019; Patterson, 2018; Smith, 2016). However, having visited a meeting in Amsterdam where there were relatively many nonmonogamous black people and people of colour present, Edgar said he did not feel at home either, this time because of the heightened political atmosphere: 'It felt like I was at a gathering organised by a political party. Suddenly, I was surrounded by all these extremist, pro-black, vegan, leftist activists [laughing]'. Edgar refused to participate in what felt like forced activism for racial inclusivity. His refusal, moreover, extended to commenting on other black people's nonmonogamy: 'They hear a story about some American black rapper who comes out as polyamorous and guess who gets to comment on that? It immediately lands on my plate. As if I represent all black people'. Again, Edgar rejects the black ambassadorship that is ascribed to him in this specific context. 'Blackness' occurs in relation to the broader white-majority poly community in the Netherlands, yet it diminishes through the refusal to participate in racialized activism and representation. In his effort to resist stereotypes, racialization remains at work, forcing Edgar to constantly change his position between embracing and rejecting blackness depending on the context.

The examples in this section illustrate the hard work poly people engage in while rejecting and correcting the stereotypes about promiscuity that are attached to nonmonogamy, showing them as deeply entangled with constructions of difference, notably in relation to the categories of gender, age, class, sexuality, and race. Promiscuity appears 'stickier' (Ahmed, 2007) for certain bodies (female, young, racialized), and its disavowal requires harder work. At the same time, this stickiness is not absolute or static, and it may increase or decrease depending on other social categories of difference, such as class or sexual capital. While economic independence makes it easier for young bisexual women to reject unwanted attention, racialization is more persistent, forcing the exclusion and inclusion of the racialized body from different communities (polyamory, ethnic community, Dutch society), and requiring constant shifting between politically charged spaces.

Negotiating autonomy and commitment

The hard work of polyamory entails dealing with the paradoxical values of autonomy and commitment. One of the domains in which this became apparent was household arrangement. In a conversation with Laura, who depended on childcare services to maintain her two part-time jobs, the option of living with one of her four partners came up: 'I can think of many benefits. Financially and practically. But also, the idea of coming home to someone after a long day of working hard is very attractive. But I also value my autonomy, which I would give up substantially by cohabiting with someone. Being lonely at times is the price for that autonomy'. Elaborating on autonomy, she said: 'Being alone can be hard, but it makes you stronger'. Autonomy is something to be protected and endured at once.

The trade-off between companionship and autonomy was also discussed by Stella, a woman in her fifties who lived alone, worked four days a week in a nursing house, and was involved in a relationship with three men. She explained:

Sometimes I come to a dark, cold house, tired from work, and then I think: 'I don't like this.' And then I need to have a dialogue with myself: 'This is what you wanted. You need to face the consequences. You made this choice.' Do I like it? No. Can I cry about it? Yes. Can I be angry about it? Yes, I can be. Then I think: 'It is what it is'. I turn on the TV and light some candles. I make it cosy for myself. I try to connect to myself. A blanket. Going through tv channels. How nice is that? [There's] No one who says: 'Shall we go to bed?' Ohhh . . . That can be the nicest feeling. So, that is the price. It's like a scale, you know?

I only encountered this theme of loneliness in exchange for autonomy in stories shared by women. This is not to suggest that polyamorous men do not experience loneliness. My point is that none of the men I spoke to associated autonomy with the lack of companionship. Instead, men who spoke about autonomy used positive references, such as having the sexual and emotional freedom to explore connections with several people. Although women sometimes made similar references, they additionally linked autonomy to creating space for the self, which at times could be harsh and lonely, as Stella's comments illustrate. Some of the men, especially the heterosexual older men in single households, expressed anxiety about being left alone. The scenarios they drew, however, implied a concern for losing sexual capital or the inability to meet women's requirements for communication rather than fearing isolation as the price for autonomy.

This gendered difference could be interpreted as women having a more ambiguous conception of autonomy, but it could also attest to the higher emotional price they pay to create intimate security outside monogamy. As mentioned earlier, the dominant model of monogamy requires women's emotional overinvestment in the nuclear family, while men's sense of security is linked to their emotional and social engagement both within and outside the romantic-sexual relationship (Willey, 2016a). By disrupting the ideal of the nuclear family, nonmonogamies might then offer opportunities for women to redirect their attention towards other meaningful connections, such as friendships and political solidarities. However, these opportunities will remain scarce if the romantic-sexual couple continues to be prioritized in nonmonogamous practices without providing the emotional and financial security of the nuclear family. In other words, polyamory's potential to disrupt the confinement of monogamous romantic bond in theory does not necessarily translate into practice, because it continues to prioritize romantic love. This missing opportunity is gendered as it strips women from the emotional security offered by romantic love in monogamy without orienting them towards other meaningful relationships outside the privatized sphere of romance. Although seeking and receiving emotional security in committed monogamous relationships is exploitative as argued by feminist scholars, it simultaneously helps to empower women to ensure that they are loved (Gunnarsson, 2014; [1991] 1994). When this sense of security disappears in nonmonogamous constructions of intimacy in a context where the couple-norm continues to govern intimate citizenship (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, & Stoilova, 2020), it provides a potential for women's liberation that goes hand in hand with a risk of emotional deprivation. Such gendered mechanisms clearly impact the field of power relations within which men and women negotiate autonomy and commitment in nonmonogamous relationships.

Finding a balance between 'leaving things open' and 'defining the relationship' was another domain in which the paradoxical values of autonomy and commitment were negotiated. Chelsy, an American Dutch woman in her mid-thirties said: 'I appreciate letting a relationship becoming what it is, but I do think that we need to define it at some point. [...] I want to know if we are or we aren't [laughing]. It's not that I necessary expect all the relationship escalator stuff, but I need to know from somebody if they're in or out'. (The phrase 'relationship escalator' refers to the social script that assumes a progressive process from a casual status towards full commitment.) Chelsy's comment suggests that openness and certainty in the intimate realm are secured through the relatively vague deadline of 'at some point'. At the same time, financial security was sacrificed, as Chelsy explained: 'Even though I have a full-time job that pays well, sometimes I'm stretched thin. I think this is the sacrifice that I have to make to be able to live my life the way I want'. Like Laura, Chelsy is a mother who works full time. The refusal to cohabit, while ensuring her autonomy to a certain level, comes with its own costs. She continued: 'I can't be the mother who invites other kids for a playdate. I don't have time for it. And yes, other mothers talk behind my back. I'm aware of that'. Protecting one's autonomy by avoiding monogamous cohabitation goes hand in hand with assuming the lion's share of parental responsibilities, accepting a financially precarious situation, and risking one's reputation as a 'good' mother.

In these cases, negotiations of autonomy and commitment – and the potential gains and losses these entail – are built upon gendered and socioeconomic differences. But while these differences become relevant in specific ways, they are also resisted, both in the rejection of normative understandings of motherhood and in the giving up of financial and emotional security. Thus, they carry the potential to transform the gendered and classed field of power relations in which the trade-offs between autonomy and commitment take place. Polyamory's simultaneous appeal to sexual liberation and ethical relationality underlying the negotiations of autonomy and commitment indeed reveals and reinforces existing gendered and classed precarities in larger society. However, by embracing a 'hard work' attitude these precarities also become the subject of continuous reflection and change. Previous work on the imperative of autonomy in neoliberalism (e.g. Beck & Beck-Gemshem, 2002) has shown that as a value autonomy can ironically become a norm to which individuals must succumb in order to exercise subjectivity. My findings, however, complicate this observation. While my interlocutors indeed seem to be inclined towards autonomy (by the specific means of financial and emotional independence), the same inclination equips them with a will to resist gendered and socioeconomic expectations. These complicated configurations of autonomy in polyamory become visible through a difference-sensitive lens beyond the assumption of a universal subject.

Managing jealousy

The most striking aspect of polyamory's hard work concerns the management of suffering and, more specifically, jealousy. In academic and self-help literature on polyamory, jealousy has received ample attention (Deri, 2015; Mint, 2010; Veaux, Hardy, & Gill, 2014). This literature has pointed out the opportunities in polyamory for individuals to unlearn their heteronormative emotional socialization orienting individuals towards jealousy based on ideas of possession and betrayal, and to instead learn to experience joy for the partner's love of another (an emotional experience called compersion) (Deri, 2015; Veaux et al., 2014). In my research, I also found that jealousy is a considerable concern, while being embraced as worthwhile the hard work. 'Who are we kidding. There are always feelings involved. I have been jealous many times, I have to admit', said sixty-five-year-old Henry, the oldest person I spoke with for this research. Lisa, my youngest interlocutor, had similar experiences: 'I think jealousy is inevitable. It's not a nice feeling, but it's part of it'. Nevertheless, rather than avoiding jealousy, most of the people I spoke to said they had learned to deal with it or to work around it. For instance, Chris said he would deliberately plan an activity, such as going to a movie, having drinks with friends, or attending a workshop while his wife was on a date with another man: 'I make sure I'm not sitting home alone. I do that very consciously and it works for me'. In addition, jealousy is something to dissect and comprehend. According to Hugo, also a man in his sixties, engaging with jealousy is 'one of the most beautiful characteristics' of polyamory: 'I think very few people understand jealousy as well as polyamorists do. They have to do it every day [laughing]. You're jealous, so what do you do? You need to deal with it. You can't run away. You face it, together with your partner. Whether it's a school for enrichment or a form of masochism, I don't know [laughing]'.

As part of managing this kind of emotional suffering, some made a distinction between justified and unjustified jealousy; in the former case, one partner was accused of secrecy or deceit, and in the latter case a partner's childhood traumas, which had generated abandonment anxiety, were pointed out as the cause of the problem. For Lisa, dealing with jealousy meant, in the first instance, asking herself questions, such as: 'Why am I feeling this? What is this about?' Depending on the answers, further steps were considered. This form of self-interrogation, while meant as a technique to find the true cause of jealousy, appeared to be calming by the very act of applying it. Lisa continued: 'These reflections already help a lot in becoming calmer. It allows my feeling to exist, but it also makes me feel less anxious'.

The acknowledgement of jealousy, Lisa explained, helped lessen the pain accompanying it. This therapeutic approach to jealousy contained a gendered mechanism simultaneously, which became clear when I asked her to share an example. She mentioned her boyfriend's brief relationship 'with a much younger woman' while on vacation: 'She was only eighteen, and I found that very tricky. I wondered if she would truly understand polyamory. I was afraid she wouldn't and that he would leave me for her. He was so in love and he was far away. I don't see myself as a jealous type, but I was so emotional'. Lisa admitted, 'I threw some of my feelings at him' during a phone conversation; she regretted doing this right away and apologized during the call. She continued, 'But he was so understanding. He said, "This is indeed a complicated situation for you". That helped enormously'. Lisa's emotional response as pain and fear can be seen as materializations of a gendered and ageist discourse in which the body of a younger woman is commodified as sexual capital, and in a context in which women compete with one another. Lisa, however, did not make any critical comment on how her boyfriend handled the situation and focused solely on first justifying then scrutinizing her own insecurity.

Feminist scholarship on ageing has revealed the different gendered ways in which ageing is punished by society (Rajan-Rankin, 2018; Rubenstein, 2001; Sontag, 1972). While men's sexual capital may even increase by age, as long as they are financially well-off, women, and especially working class women and women of colour, have a much harder time to experience and prove their worth as they grow older. This scholarship thus shows that at the structural level, power is not outside but part of ageing itself. Nevertheless, Lisa's self-declared 'jealous' reaction was directed inward, accompanied by a sense of guilt and resulting in an apology to her boyfriend. The emotional experience of guilt and her apologetic attitude, in turn, may be viewed as manifestations of the individualistic therapeutic discourses of jealousy circulating in polyamorous networks (Petrella, 2007). On the one hand, Lisa's investment in her boyfriend's point of view can be applauded as a mode of 'relationality' (Santos, 2019) beyond the individual concern that characterizes coupledom's normativity. On the other hand, however, the therapeutic approach to jealousy enables the reproduction of a gendered dynamic by exonerating the boyfriend from emotion work, a dynamic that facilitates 'poly-hegemonic masculinity' (Sheff, 2006) in negotiations of intimacy in polyamorous relationships.

The presence of contradictory discourses also became clear in Ida's story. Looking back on a previous relationship, Ida exclaimed, sounding aggravated: 'Yes, I was pretty jealous! He was with her even when he was with me. Sitting next to me, he would use his phone all the time to chat with her and when I objected, he started going to the bathroom with his phone in his pocket, sometimes for half an hour!' Despite problematizing this behaviour, she went on to emphasize the importance of shared responsibility: 'Look, what I want is that he looks into his own issues. But I also take my own responsibility. I know that I suffer from abandonment issues and I am willing to work on that'. Ida felt pulled in two different directions. She objected to what she perceived as betrayal and neglect while also engaging in self-scrutiny and sharing blame.

Similarly, Edgar, the Dutch-Surinamese man I introduced earlier, said his second partner, a white woman, needed extra assurance that he would not become too jealous of her other sexual relationships: 'She even jokingly asked me: you will not kill him because you're jealous, right?'. This, Edgar, believed was because of black men being associated with excessive violence. 'She learned how I am different from other black men, who everyone thinks will rob you or kill you or whatever'. When I asked Edgar how he dealt with this stereotypical racialized concern of his partner, he said: 'Look, I am jealous at times, to be honest. What I do is not listen to this kind of nonsense, which is not her fault. She is influenced by the media, I guess. I focus on how I can be a good, considerate partner who talks things out instead of going crazy with my emotions'. Edgar too attributed the hard work of dealing with jealousy to himself by applying an individualist therapeutic approach, dismissing the clearly racist structure putting him in a position to prove his innocence in the first place. The therapeutic approach to jealousy downplays its underlying 'racework' (Steinbugler, 2012) that it simultaneously requires and focuses instead on improving the self.

Feminist scholars Sara Ahmed (2010) and Eva Illouz (2007) argue that emotions are socially constructed and historically specific. Intense emotions are instantaneous because, rather than being unmediated, they contain too much culture. 'The intense, compact compression of cultural meanings and social relationships', Illouz writes (Illouz, 2007, p. 11), '[give] emotions their prereflexive, often semiconscious character'. My interlocutors' acceptance of jealousy as an inevitable part of polyamory suggests a willingness to move beyond ownership and possession, but it could also reflect and even help reinforce a (gendered and racialized) power-imbalance. Dealing with the emotional distress of jealousy may be an unavoidable part of transgressing the emotional culture of monogamy. But given its intimate connection to self-management, dealing with jealousy might obscure the role of heteropatriarchal structures. The use of self-scrutiny as a technique to manage the self and suffering might end up depriving the polyamorous subject of the ability to use justified aggravation during relationship conflicts. Rather than critical reflections on patriarchal structures underlying gendered and racialized experiences of jealousy, the individual is busy managing emotions internally in order to improve the self.

At the same time, such as an ideological take disguises how active engagement in a therapeutic discourse produces both a reality and a sociability. Ahmed (2007, p. 109) qualifies the emotional arrangements in contemporary Western societies as 'emotional capitalism', whereby 'emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified and commodified'. This process implies a sense of remoteness between the subject and their emotions as entities that can be put at a distance and analysed, using a standardized (therapeutic) language. While emotional capitalism carries the promise of liberation, it has, paradoxically, 'emptied the self from communal and political content' (Illouz, 2008, p. 2). But focusing on the workings of emotional capitalism without attending to what is at stake for individuals engaged in emotion-talk misses an important point: their engagement enables emotional subjectivity as a social practice, as the stories of my interlocutors in this section suggest. The polyamorous subject's engagement in therapeutic discourse is a way of relating to others with whom they share a specific sexual and emotional field.

Nevertheless, this therapeutic culture of self-scrutiny is likely to impoverish the political will of the subject and to weaken the disruptive potential of polyamory to unsettle heteropatriarchal and racist structures. To become sociable, the subject's attention is directed towards scrutinizing, managing and improving the self instead of structural inequality (Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1990, 1998). The therapeutic practice of self-scrutiny may help produce and prolong gendered and racialized difference and power dynamics, while asking constant effort from the subject to improve the self. Here, depending on its inward or outward orientation, the hard work of polyamory contains possibilities for both disruption and maintenance of (gendered) power relations.

Concluding remarks

My interlocutors' accounts illustrate the multiple dimensions of the 'hard work' of polyamory in everyday life, while also pointing at power relations at work in processes of rethinking and reshaping intimacy outside the framework of monogamy. Analysing polyamory in terms of hard work and difference contributes to a critical feminist scholarship that rejects decontextualized understandings of polyamory. I have discussed four areas in which this entanglement of hard work and difference are materialized: resisting stigmatization, negotiating autonomy and commitment, and managing jealousy. This materialization became apparent in practices of emotional commitment, self-enhancement, constant trade-offs between seemingly opposing values, and emotional self-management.

These practices were simultaneously embedded in and informed by gendered, racialized, classist and ageist discourses of intimacy and sexuality. Correcting stereotypes about polyamory required harder work from bodies that were racialized and gendered, such as 'black men' and 'bisexual women'. When negotiating between autonomy and commitment, specific gender-related considerations interfered, forcing women to take greater risks in terms of loneliness and 'proper' motherhood. Lastly,

managing jealousy entailed emotion-talk oriented towards self-improvement, which, while it enabled sociability, discouraged a critical attitude and left little room for radical engagements beyond the intimate.

The 'hard work' functions as a nodal point where the materialization of contemporary late-capitalist demands of self-management and self-improvement as well as attempts to overcome the patriarchal ideology of monogamy come together in everyday life. Polyamory's 'hard work', analysed in terms of everyday practices, reveals the interaction of various realities of life in how people deal with issues of intimacy and love. More specifically, hard work as practice shows how concerns beyond the intimate interfere with one another, creating and destabilizing difference in matters of work, parenthood, children, exclusion, and resistance.

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