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Queering potentials: Negotiations of gender, parenthood, and family in polyamorous relationships in the Netherlands

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Rahil Roodsaz** 

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Abstract

Using a critical feminist perspective, this article provides an ethnographic account of negotiations of gender relations, parenthood, and family in polyamorous relationships in the Netherlands. A conceptual framework is developed and employed to analyze the *queering potentials* of polyamory by looking at (1) a difference-oriented self, (2) expansion of political community, (3) deconstructions of gender, (4) enduring and unexpected care, and (5) an awareness of existence with people we do not know. Based on a thick description of everyday negotiations, it is argued that the categories of “gender,” “parent,” and “family” are mainly stretched and diffused rather than fundamentally disrupted.

Keywords

Queering potential, polyamory, gender, parenthood, family

Despite the prevailing model of the nuclear family, social scientists observe growing diversity of non/monogamous family arrangements and intimate bonding, including multi-parenting, single households, living apart together (LAT), living together apart (LTA), relationship anarchy, and polyamory (Halsaa et al., 2012; Sempruch and Justyna, 2018). This diversification offers a robust field for critical feminist scholarship seeking

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alternatives to heteropatriarchal and capitalist models of monogamy that perpetuate possession and atomization (Campbell, 1974; Comer, 1974; Healey, 1996; hooks, 2000; Robinson, 1997; Rosa, 1994; Schippers, 2016; TallBear and Willey, 2019; Willey, 2006). But can new forms of family and bonding lead to more inclusive, just, and fulfilling ways of being, knowing, and relating? Given the implications of racialized, gendered, classed, and able-bodied power relations, queer feminist scholars caution against presuming these emerging households are “progressive” (De Graeve, 2019; Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2014; Peller, 2013; Willey, 2016a). Furthermore, their concern is not whether non/monogamies are essentially progressive or oppressive, but rather what *queering potentials* (Willey, 2016b) these constructions of intimacy have to effect political change and subjective transformation. Queerness in this scholarship involves problematizing dominant naturalized concepts of family, kinship, and parenthood.

Heeding queer feminist studies scholars, I aim to investigate the queer potentials of polyamory in a Dutch context. Specifically, I examine the disruptive potentials of the multiplicity of parenthood combined with committed love in polyamorous constructions to break open and rebuild gender relations as well as notions and practices of family and parenthood. My goal is to contribute to discussions about whether the liberal ideals of individual choice and freedom underlying 20th century feminist projects have been hijacked by capitalist and neoliberal imperatives of flexibility, quick satisfaction, and atomization, thereby undermining the feminist emancipatory agenda while disposing the values of emotional connection and commitment (Illouz, 2019).

Polyamory is interesting because it evokes ethical principles of both multiplicity and commitment (Klesse, 2015; Woltersdorff, 2011). Yet, queer feminist analyses of how polyamorous relationships handle the organization of care are scarce (Klesse, 2018; Schadler, 2016). A recent review of studies on parenting in polyamorous families (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020) discusses research on poly-parenting, kinship practices beyond biological ties and existing legal frameworks, and resilience and flexibility to overcome hardship and stigmatization (e.g. Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006, 2010a, 2010b; Sheff, 2010, 2011, 2016). Still, a research bias exists due to overrepresentation of white middle-class subjects (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020). Hence, the loudening calls for intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991).

While sensitive to power relations, this article does not depart from pre-established categories of difference and marks difference only when and how it becomes a matter of concern to my interlocutors (M’charek 2010). This approach casts difference as “real” in everyday social life, but also as contextual and relational. I hope this contributes to research on non/monogamies by examining how categories of difference in gender, family, and parenthood *come to be* sites of power while avoiding essentializing any difference as already out there and ready to be grasped (Willey, 2016b).

To this end, I provide an ethnographic account of interlocutors’ everyday experiences and their potentials to queer what is considered “proper,” “natural,” or “ethical” kinship. Queering refers to the constructed and relational nature of the categories of gender, family, and parenthood as well as their potentials to disrupt binaries, such as man/woman,

feminine/masculine, heterosexual/homosexual, natural/unnatural, and ethical/unethical (Valocchi, 2005).

First, however, I offer remarks on language. Some scholars use the adjective “consensual” in reference to non/monogamous relationships to underline the transparency and autonomy for people involved. Others (e.g., Zhu, 2018) find the disclosure imperative implied in the ethical distinction between consensual and non-consensual to contradict the queer idea that identities are always opaque and entail contradictory elements (Sedgwick, 1990); moreover, uncritical appropriation of this imperative neglects social, political, and economic conditions for transparency. I follow queer feminist scholars (e.g., Willey, 2016a) who propose the construction “non/monogamies” to denaturalize the categories of “monogamy” and “non-monogamy” and their separation based on hierarchical relations (e.g., civilized/uncivilized and progressive/traditional). However, rather than dismissing the relevance of categories in meaning-making, politics, and law-making, these choices should be seen as part and parcel of the queer feminist cause that champions suspicion and critique of categories as indispensable steps toward more equality and justice.

Using “queering” as a verb, I emphasize the structural work that polyamorous relationships *do* rather than what they are. I do not judge interlocutors on their ability to engage in queering acts as individuals. Instead, I understand queering potential as relational possibilities generated within intersubjective embodied and sociopolitical structures and negotiations to question and disrupt categories.

Queering care and intimate bonding

Critical feminist scholarship on non/monogamies seeks ways to queer relationality and rethink home, kinship, and family beyond the intimate priorities of individual and couple (Willey, 2016a), contesting both heteronormativity and neoliberalism (Woltersdorff, 2011). This feminist project’s goal is to move from the personal realm into a theory of justice, connect relationships to social and political change, and extend values of care and support beyond privatized notions of sex and romance (Haraway, 2015; Nash, 2013; TallBear and Willey, 2019).

The queer potentials of non/monogamies can go in several directions. Based on second-wave Black feminist work, Nash (2013) presents a theoretical framework to investigate the political potential of love more generally. Inspired by Walker’s womanism, Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,” and Jordan’s self-love, Nash proposes a more generous conception of love beyond the nuclear family. This generosity implies a self that is oriented towards others by embracing difference—including one’s fear of it—as well as expansive utopian understanding of political community and a politics of openness or the yet unknown. In a similar vein, Haraway (2015) seeks possibilities for rich multispecies assemblages, intense commitment, and collaborative work by proposing to “make kin.” This refers to non-natalist “off-category” relations of care that are “unexpected and enduring” (2015, 163), such as non-dyadic parenthood and multi-generational households. Valuation of relationships beyond the nuclear family as sites of intimacy, meaning-making, resource-sharing, and re-worlding is argued by Tallbear and Willy (2019) in their

work on “critical relationality.” They too emphasize recognizing that “[w]e exist in relationship with people we do not know” (2019, 12). They identify the task to see our personal lives and choices as imbricated not only in material conditions of possibility, but in simultaneously distributing harms and benefits to others.

Drawing from this work, I see the queering potentials of non/monogamies as entailing (1) a difference-oriented self, (2) expansive understanding of collectivity and political community, (3) deconstruction of gender relations, (4) engaging in enduring non-natalist and off-category relations of care, and (5) awareness of the material conditions of relationships with others beyond sexual and romantic bonds. I use this five-point conceptualization to trace points at which my interlocutors queered categories of gender, parenthood, and family through resisting binary gender identities as parents and partners, redefining parenthood beyond biological and monogamous arrangements, and reconstructing family outside the belonging and commitment dyad. Simultaneously, I focus on the social inequality that restrains queering. Power hierarchies, including race, ethnicity, age, religiosity, and able-bodiedness, are rooted in social institutions and cultural scripts, creating and limiting possibilities for queering in everyday life. This premise requires analysis sensitive to the emergence of social differences in relation to one another, also referred to as “intra-action” or “mak[ing] each other up” in a fluid process of mutual influence (Barad, 2007: 40). In this approach, although difference has “real” effects in daily life, a focus on *emergence* avoids naturalizing axes of difference as characteristics a priori allocatable to certain bodies. This corresponds with queer theory’s emphasis on identity’s performativity, inconsistency, and incoherence without dismissing the material structures and power relations that restrain individuals’ experiences and subjectivities (Valocchi, 2005).

Methodology

The fieldwork for this article was conducted between September 2019 and June 2020. I made contact with interlocutors during and after six occasions of participant observation at informal social gatherings and discussion groups organized by several Dutch polyamory organizations as well as through a call for research participants via a private Dutch polyamory Facebook page. I collected data through one-on-one in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation all in the Netherlands. The interviews took place at the interlocutors’ homes, workplaces, cafes, and my university office. In total, I interviewed 30 individuals living in different constructions of non/monogamous relationships. Fifteen identified as women, 13 as men, and two as queer. They were in their twenties (5), thirties (9), forties (6), fifties (6), and sixties (3); a 22-year-old woman was the youngest and a 65-year-old man was the oldest. At least 19 had university-level education and two secondary-level education. None identified as religious. Six identified as having mixed backgrounds (Dutch–Surinamese, Dutch–Vietnamese, Dutch–Iranian, Dutch–Greek, Dutch–Belgian, and Dutch–American).

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using open and focused coding according to the grounded theory (Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013). I sought

consent verbally prior to each conversation. All information in this article is anonymized, with pseudonyms used to protect privacy. I chose to organize analyses around four cases representing different types of households to enable an in-depth contextual understanding of individual considerations, possible inconsistencies in individual stories and subjectivities, and the material realities of the everyday life. I take on the feminist concern with self-reflexivity (Haraway, 1988; Mol, 2010; Wekker, 2006) and consider the analyses an inevitable result of my personal encounters with the interlocutors, which I acknowledge explicitly when relevant.

Rik, Sophie, and Brenda

Rik, Sophie, and Brenda are in what they called a “polyfidelity triad,” a relationship construction comprising three partners considered equal in all respects with no sexual or romantic involvement outside the group (Pines and Aronson, 1981). They share a big house in a wealthy neighborhood in a small town, two dogs, a cat, and a bedroom. Rik and Sophie were married for almost 10 years. Brenda joined the relationship after Sophie came out as bisexual to Rik. “I never wanted to explore that side of myself without Rik being part of it,” Sophie said. Though all considered themselves polyamorous, they repeatedly assured me of their involvement expressly with each other, qualifying their relationship as a monogamous and closed. “For us, it feels like we have one relationship. It’s not easy for new people to join us, as it became painfully clear in the past,” Rik explained. All their time and energy, he added, was focused on their own household, making it hard for others to enter their triad. Sophie clarified: “We really love spending time with each other. It comes from a strong need to be deeply connected with one another.” Rik added: “Actually, we are very boring [they laugh]. There are three of us in this relationship, but if you look at it closely, we are not polyamorous. You could say we have a monogamous relationship.” While joyful, their sense of closeness was clearly oriented away from difference in the form of anyone outside the triad.

When I interviewed them at their dining table, Sophie was seven months pregnant.

Author: How have you prepared for the arrival of the child?

Rik: We bought books about parenthood. For instance, [book title], which I immediately gave to Brenda because that is really for her to read. But you [Brenda] are also reading a book on motherhood, right?

Brenda: Yes.

Author: So you are anticipating your role to be as both father and mother?

Brenda: Yes, but actually, I’m not entirely sure about this. I expected myself to be more like a father figure, but recently I found I have strong motherly feelings too. Especially when our

cat was just a kitten, I completely turned into a mother, petting and cuddling the poor thing all the time. At the same time, I'm very much manly in my behavior or, how should I put it, I also have strong fatherly characteristics. We'll see what happens when the baby arrives.

This exchange shows how the category of parent went beyond a static father/mother dichotomy by shifting traditional gender roles, though the resulting ambiguity was left unresolved. None provided a comprehensive alternative notion of "parent." They seemed comfortable with the ambiguity around gender roles and the lack of a fixed role division surrounding parenthood.

The shifting of traditional gender roles emerged in another segment of our conversation about sexual orientation, following a discussion on the openness of the relationship.

Rik: We never do anything without taking the other two into consideration. We would never start something with another man or woman.

Brenda: Well, definitely not a man.

Author: What do you mean?

Brenda: I just don't think there would ever be space for another man in our relationship. Another woman would be possible, though.

Sophie: You [Brenda] identify as a lesbian, right

Brenda: Yes. I don't feel like I want to connect with men at all, neither sexually nor emotionally. I'm just not into them. You [Rik] are an exception.

Author: What makes Rik an exception?

Brenda: He doesn't treat me like a lady. That makes my skin crawl. He treats me like an equal human being.

Rik: But we do have an intimate relationship, both emotionally and sexually, right? We do have man-woman sex, sometimes the two of us, sometimes the three of us.

Brenda: That is possible only with you.

Author: And maybe with other women?

Brenda: Yes, it's different with women.

Here lesbianism was produced as a fluid identity category that transcends boundaries in the case of exceptional masculinity. Rik was a man with whom Brenda, while still labeled a lesbian, can have a fulfilling relationship. Ambiguous gendered identities for both—Rik

as an exceptional man and Brenda as an exceptional lesbian—were thus conceivable. This ambiguity was not necessarily limited to non/monogamous family arrangements. What did seem specific to this household were possibilities beyond the binary constructions of parenthood. As Sophie noted: “Often you see this traditional binary of father and mother, but there are three of us. We get to define how we play our roles based on what we feel comfortable with. I think we have more freedom.”

Being a unit of more than two provides necessarily opportunities to redistribute gender roles through deliberate individual choice and negotiation, which opens a space for broadening understandings of gender relations. For instance, Rik said he was busy ensuring they were eating healthy food since Sophie became pregnant.

Rene: I’m in charge of deciding what we eat and the groceries. And you [Brenda] do the actual cooking.

Brenda: Yes, but that is only this week. Last week, it was actually the other way around, remember?

Rik: That’s true. We constantly switch chores.

The tasks circulated among the partners depend on context. The non-pregnant partners, in particular, divided responsibilities based according to personal preference, which was echoed during our talk about parent-oriented role division.

Rik: You [Brenda] go to the pregnancy fitness classes with Sophie.

Brenda: Yeah, that’s really fun [laughing].

Rik: I’m so happy I don’t have to [looking at me]. I would be so annoyed. I also never would want to go to fatherhood courses. Oh my god!

Brenda: Maybe I should take that responsibility [taking fatherhood courses] too [everyone laughs].

By either refusing expected tasks and responsibilities or embracing unexpected ones beyond biological sex, gender roles were switched and transcended without fundamentally disrupting the categories of man/woman. Gender was diffused rather than deconstructed. Diffusion allows for a flexibilization of norms, providing “women” and “men” a broader range of subjectivities. Disruption, however, requires contestation of the binary thinking that still dominates parental role division.

My position as a gender and sexuality studies researcher might have played a role in sharing such revelations. When Rik came forward as a potential participant, he asked about my publications on related topics to prepare for the interview. Many of the three individuals’ articulations illustrated a sharp critical awareness and confidence to push boundaries, including of some legal restrictions on multi-parenthood. According to Dutch

civil law, marriage between more than two individuals is illegal and punishable, and although one person can have multiple cohabitation contracts in the Netherlands, they do not provide the same parental rights as marriage ([State Commission Recalibration Parenthood, 2016](#)). Multi-parenthood families therefore need to resort to informal arrangements. Discussing how they envisioned parenthood, Sophie said they had talked to their family doctor about the importance of recognizing all three individuals as expectant parents. “We communicated that if anything happens, it’s not just me and Rik who make decisions about the baby, but Brenda too.” Brenda continued:

That is now being documented in our family dossier. Actually, you can provide for a lot of stuff like this if you make the effort, although the law is not always on our side. Also, the gynecologist is perfectly fine with all three of us being involved in everything. Most of the medical people are very understanding, fortunately.

In this way, the triad expressed assertiveness through their will and ability to make arrangements beyond what seems possible. Their assertiveness and unconventionality reflected specific material environments and discursive contexts in their everyday realities. First, the family that emerges from a combination of emotional closeness, intimacy, and material conditions of a shared home looks a lot like an extended monogamous unit. It differs in its number of partners, but shares much in common concerning emotional and financial security. Within this secure sphere, pushing boundaries becomes possible without taking considerable risks. All three individuals had a university education and a high level of articulacy. Brenda was the most financially dependent partner as she was currently finishing her master’s and had no income beside a student grant. Sophie had a well-paid job and a permanent contract, providing financial security, including for Rik who ran a start-up providing a slightly less reliable source of money. “We don’t care about who brings in money and how much. We just share everything equally,” Sophie said.

They also sought and found alliance with Dutch queer communities to champion the cause of multi-parenthood in the Netherlands. “I’m not so sure about their activism and identity politics, but we share some concerns about the legal right to form a family with more than two parents,” explained Rik. They had participated in co-writing a letter on this issue to the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security, which has not yet resulted in new legislation ([State Commission Recalibration Parenthood, 2016](#)). Creating selective alliance with the queer movement signaled their expansion of political community, resourcefulness, and access to a political discourse that imagines change based on privatized needs rather than collective solidarity.

Laura

I interviewed Laura at the hair salon she owns in a mid-size city. She is 32, and combines managing the salon with another job as a bookkeeper in a large international company, since after obtaining her bachelor’s in history, she could not find a job in her own field of expertise. She lived with her three-year-old daughter, Tina, and was involved in four

romantic relationships. At 18, she had married her high school sweetheart, a relationship that lasted 8 years. She and her now ex-husband tried having an open marriage for a few years, but he fell in love with another partner and decided to have a monogamous life with that person a few months after Laura got pregnant. Laura said: "I was willing to find a way for us to stay together, but he was determined about the divorce. The open marriage never worked for us. He was very jealous and lied to me about dating other women." After the divorce, Laura learned about polyamory online and was immediately intrigued: "In retrospect, it was like homecoming. Suddenly everything made sense. [...] I thought: this is me, this is how I've been feeling all this time. I just didn't have a word for it."

Impressed by Laura managing two jobs, single motherhood, and four relationships, I asked how she experienced being both a mother and polyamorous. She replied:

I have been reflecting extensively on this and how I want to balance all that. At this point, only Peter [one of her partners] has met Tina. I've known him the longest. And he is okay with children. He knows and accepts that Tina is part of my life. So, if my kid gets sick and we have a date, he understands that I have to prioritize my child. He gets that. He also might want a kid himself at some point. That really matters.

Similar to the triad, Laura reflected on how to work out non/monogamous parenthood in detail, yet her decisions hinged on understanding and acceptance from her partners. Whereas the triad discussed parenthood as a united family, Laura needed to consider the position of a unit outside her own when constructing and sharing parenthood. For the triad, parenthood was a joint decision and responsibility. For Laura, it entailed constant negotiations and reflections. Moreover, what she decided with one partner regarding parenthood could affect other relationships.

After introducing Tina to Peter, I had to tell my ex[-husband, Tom] about Peter. Tina might've talked about Peter, and I knew that Tom could make this into a big thing. He immediately wanted to know whether we are going to live together. I said no. So now he knows about Peter, but I haven't told him about the other three [partners]. He could use this against me. As a mother, I'm an easy target. It's easy for him to use my lifestyle against me.

As Tina's biological father, Tom played an important role in Laura's parental decision-making. The power relations Laura referred to illustrate how biological parents occupy a higher position than the non-biological when separate households are involved. Laura's space to maneuver as a polyamorous single parent was limited by gendered mononormative assumptions. She was careful not to disclose too much information about her non/monogamy in order to not jeopardize her status as a good mother. However, this limited space did not prevent her from considering taking risks.

This doesn't mean that Tina could or should not meet my other partners. In fact, I see that happening in the near future. I hope I can teach her about possibilities beyond the monogamous fairytale that everybody grows up with. And that is exactly what I'm very much

concerned with at the moment. The more people involved in the child's upbringing, the more perspectives the child will learn. [...]. Furthermore, I want to teach Tina how engaging in different relationships can work or not. She is only three, so it's a bit soon. But, it doesn't have to be a complicated talk. [...]. I'd rather teach her as soon as possible about polyamory, precisely because she is still very young. "My mom has several boyfriends." It's as simple as that.

Laura considered an alternative model of family-making in which non-biological parents could be involved in the child's life to enable passing on a conception of love ascribed to polyamory. This conception was based on a difference-oriented self-open to different perspectives, which are embodied by partners who might come along welcoming non-natalist care relations. While in the triad, a monogamous notion of family extended beyond the binary yet remained intact by reproducing the principles of a single privatized household, in Laura's alternative model, family became denaturalized by refusing natalist boundaries and rejecting the fear of difference when teaching her child about love. This model of love resisted closure and opened the category of family. Simultaneously, the openness was restrained by the ideal of coupledness and excludes unexpected off-category care relations.

Hugo

Hugo was involved in another type of household construction. I interviewed the 61-year-old at a café near his workplace, a tech company in a cosmopolitan city. He apologized for having to keep his phone nearby as he was expecting to hear from his teenage daughter, who was on a sailing trip and could seldom call him. Hugo was in an 18-year marriage, which ended in 2006. He has since shared child custody with his ex-wife and lived with his daughter for half the week. The rest of the week, his daughter lived with her mother and he lived with his girlfriend, Carla, and her three young children at their home in a small town. Reflecting on his love life, he said: "I identify as polyamorous, but right now, I only have one romantic relationship. However, this could change very soon." Asked if he was actively looking for another partner, he said:

It's funny because I was thinking about this yesterday. But, you know, I don't know where to find the time. I am involved in two households: a daughter here, a family there. Carla is chronically ill and disabled. She can't take care of the house on her own. I'm doing most of the work. I have a fulltime job. And we are planning to build a house. Now you tell me how I'm supposed to find and maintain another relationship [smiling].

Hugo spoke very affectionately about Carla, calling her a "very beautiful and kind woman" and "a very attractive and caring person." He noted how men would stop and admire her all the time. "I, on the other hand," he joked, "could take off all my clothes and still nobody would pay attention." Twice Carla's age, Hugo sometimes worried how long he could remain Carla's main partner. "I might be able to keep up until I'm 70, if I'm

lucky. But at some point, someone else is going to enter the picture.” Their previous experiences with non/monogamy had at times caused anxiety, particularly for him. “She is a young woman and popular among men. It wasn’t always easy. Especially in the beginning, she wanted to have adventure, and although I really wanted her to have that, it also made me very jealous and insecure,” he said. Hugo mentioned participating in personal development workshops to deal with his “fear of abandonment.”

Author: Have those workshops been helpful?

Hugo: Yes, I think so. I have learned to stay calm and put things into perspective. It has helped me become more confident.

Author: How does that work in your relationship with Carla?

Hugo: Well, look, I help Carla with everything, financially and with the household. She can’t just send me away. Of course, she could, but she wouldn’t take it lightly. When I realized that, truly realized that I thought: Okay, Hugo, you are important to Carla. It’s not just financial and practical, it’s also emotional. She really loves me. I cook every day when we are together. I prepare lunch for her and the kids before I leave the house for work in the morning. Her income is by far not enough to manage a household with three kids, and I help with that, substantially. I clean the house whenever I’m around. Of course, she can find a young partner with a great body, but will he do the same for her? Not just for one or two days, or weeks or months, but year after year? I don’t think so. I’m more of a father to her children than their biological father ever has been. Together we are a family, and that’s something I can offer her. So now I know that when, because it’s only a matter of time, someone else comes along, it doesn’t necessarily mean that she will leave me.

Hugo’s commitment to Carla and her children was organized and materialized around a mutual need for emotional, practical, and financial security, combining conventional and nonconventional gender roles. Non-biological fatherhood and family formation emerged from mutual relational dependencies including love, an age gap, commitment, physical disability, money, and cooking and cleaning. Within this multimodal constellation, queering potentials arose to undo mononormative biology- and couple-based family structures and assumptions of entitlement and possession. Simultaneously, the same potentials were enabled and accompanied by a seemingly precarious balance between asymmetrical relationships. It remained to be seen how their current configuration of family would evolve if new partners arrived or as Hugo aged. He feared the prospect of difference caused by that arrival, which he accepted after self-scrutiny about his enduring worth in his relationship with Carla. Unlike Laura in the case before, Hugo hesitated to incorporate his daughter into his life with Carla and her children. “I think she is too young, and I don’t want to be a preacher of polyamory. She will find out about love on her own.” In this way, non-natalist care relations were practiced to serve specific, notably temporal, needs and concerns without being fully integrated into every aspect of one’s life.

Loes

Loes, a woman in her late 30s, shared a household with her 25-year-old wife, Linda, and three young children. Linda and Loes were married for 12 years. Loes was simultaneously in a relationship with 40-year-old Sam, whom Loes knew for over a decade, but only got involved with romantically 4 years prior to our interview. Loes had two children with Linda, whose custody they shared with a gay couple, one member of whom was the biological father of both children. Sam, the biological father of the youngest child, lived in a separate home. Loes owned a clothes boutique, Linda ran a theater company, and Sam was a cook, all working and living in one of the country's most populous cities. According to Loes, while Sam and Linda were not sexually active with each other, "the three of us have a love relationship." However, when I first met Loes, she and Linda had recently emerged from what they called a "relationship crisis" caused by a new relationship Linda began with another woman, which Loes said "started to become a parallel monogamous relationship."

To me, it was really important for her [Linda's new partner] to truly become part of our family. For me to know her and that accept me and the children. But she wanted Linda for herself. She didn't want to have anything to do with us. So, I said: this is not going to work. It felt very unsafe. Linda was having two monogamous relationships at the same time. It felt unsafe because it was happening outside our family. I wasn't involved in any of that. I was willing to open my heart for her, and even suggested that she could eventually come and live with us. She could become part of our family, if she wanted. But, in the end, she believed in a monogamous relationship, and that wasn't reconcilable with our way of life.

So for Loes, polyamory meant an expansion of the family, not having multiple relationships. Furthermore, a sense of control was important for maintaining a safe family space. However, while Loes' position would suggest she was critical of monogamy, by objecting to Linda's new relationship, she seemed to be promoting monogamy through a notion of primary relationship; it is the new partner that must fit the existing order, not the other way around. Loes was inclined to protect "our family" against difference, represented by a new partner claiming a separate emotional and physical intimate space beyond Loes' grasp. This assumption manifested again when Loes described Sam's position.

He totally gets it. From the start, he knew that our marriage and family are priority number one. He visits us regularly, and we consider him part of our family, but he would never expect or do anything to jeopardize my relationship with Linda and the kids. That gives us so much freedom and space to breathe.

The extended family portrayed here was organized around a primary relationship between Loes, Linda, and the children, which suggests lack of openness toward difference. Sam was welcomed as an addition provided that his primary relationship was respected. This hierarchy-within-unity also emerged spatially as Sam would sleep in the

guest house whenever he stayed over, while Linda, Loes, and the children slept in the main house.

Loes shared another point of anxiety in her intimate life. The third pregnancy had caused tension inside and outside their household in three distinct ways. First, according to Loes, Linda feared that Sam, as the baby's biological father, would threaten Linda's position within the family. Moreover, Linda's hope to also experience pregnancy at some point was taken away, as Loes has already given birth to the first two children and having more seemed unrealistic. Loes said: "It felt like competition to her [Linda]. Maybe the biggest frustration for two women in a relationship is that they can't become pregnant by one another." Second, the fathers of the first two children were infuriated to be forced into accepting something that would substantially influence their children's lives through the arrival of a sibling and Sam's involvement as a fifth parent. According to Loes: "They were so angry that they didn't ask any questions and just made several assumptions about me being reckless." Lastly, Loes was surprised by reactions from outside their intimate circle, particularly concerning the skin color of her child with Sam, as the only Black parent.

People felt sorry for Linda, as if something bad happened to her. As if I had cheated on her. No one asked how *I* was doing. It was shocking how strong the monogamy norm is in the Netherlands. No understanding at all, and a lot of negative assumptions. [...] Things remained bad until even long after the child was born. Even now sometimes people ask me if he is adopted. The oldest two are white and the youngest one is brown. People assume that he cannot be mine. I have to explain that I actually gave birth to him. It's unbelievable how narrow-minded people can be.

These experiences of anxiety concerned occasions in which reproduction, parenthood, and family were essentialized through gender, race, and biology, and yet resisted and destabilized at the same time. Loes and Sam's biological parenthood threatened the stability of the primary relationship between Linda and Loes, pointing at heterosexist dominant structures of the family in broader society. Reaction by the fathers of the first two children revealed the relative rigidity of the boundaries of guardianship even within a multi-parent constellation. In exchanges with others, mononormative assumptions and racialized boundaries of the nuclear family manifested, making skin color and biology signifiers of "parent" and "child." Nevertheless, these stigmatizations and anxieties as manifestations of tension revealed the queering potential of this configuration of polyamory regardless of the subjects' political consciousness or intentions. Within their intimate circle and in the outside world, boundaries of family, parent, and child were being sorted out while also revealing their constructedness.

Discussion

In the four cases of polyamorous constructions presented in this article, queering practices appeared limited with respect to a *difference-oriented self*. Embracing difference is a step toward a more generous conception of love and overcoming fear of the unknown (Nash,

2013). Laura embraced difference by welcoming perspectives on love beyond monogamy into her child's life. Hugo came to embrace difference in the form of possible future competition as Carla's mate, but this happened in his anticipation of loss of sexual capital. The triad and Loes were pulled toward preserving the primary relationship, orienting them away from difference as embodied by a new partner who could disturb the harmony and intimacy of the family. In short, a difference-oriented self either occurred sporadically or due to nature-bound necessity.

Only the triad initiated *expansion of the political community*, directed at fulfilling certain privatized and temporal needs concerning parental rights in concert with Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Intersex (LGBTQI) communities. Perpetuated by the patriarchal system and strengthened by capitalism, emotional, and material over-investment in the nuclear family discourages women from engaging in political work (Rich, 1980); meanwhile, seeking political alliance is deemed important for dismantling patriarchy and compulsory monogamy (Willey, 2015). The queering potentials of polyamory partially depend on explicit linking of intimacy with political work and pursuing collaborations with likeminded movements, something that did not emerge as a serious concern for my interlocutors.

As for queering through the *deconstruction of gender* by disrupting binaries of man/woman, femininity/masculinity, and homosexual/heterosexual (Valocchi, 2005), the triad showed how fixed gendered parental roles can be rejected and redistributed. This depended on individual preferences, and was enabled because more than two parents were involved and a space opened for negotiating shifting gendered roles. Yet, these negotiations emerged in a relatively small, uncomplicated household unit, a seemingly prosperous life, and articulacy. Moreover, notions of man/woman and femininity/masculinity still dictated the redistribution of parental roles. Hugo's care responsibilities were untraditional for his gender, simultaneously giving him claim to exceptional masculinity. This exceptionality hinged on and thus reified gendered understandings of care and commitment. Laura needed to carefully consider how much to disclose and to whom about her multiple relationships without losing her credibility as a mother. Loes was burdened to explain racial boundary-crossing within their family and debunk stigmas of promiscuity as the childbearing parent. Binary notions of gender were either reproduced or diffused rather than deconstructed.

The queering potential of polyamory, furthermore, entailed *enduring and unexpected care*. All four cases involved enduring care beyond the nuclear family, although not in an unexpected or off-category way. Nevertheless, these practices of non-natalist care sometimes did cause societal tensions revealing racialized and heteronormative structures of family and parenthood. The tensions attest to polyamory's potential to shake and expose constructedness of kinship. They raise questions, but do not necessarily lead to the construction of alternative models of care beyond the nuclear family. The category of family is rather expanded and includes non-biological ties, without escaping the intimate bond.

Lastly, an awareness of *existence with people we do not know* was remarkably absent in my interlocutors' articulations and negotiations of gender, parenthood, and family. Choices in the intimate sphere, as TallBear and Willey (2019) note, are always imbricated

in “the distribution of harms and benefits.” Being aware of this is necessary for queering intimacy and care beyond privatized notions of relationality. The ethics guiding the interlocutors’ negotiations focused mainly on intimate, individual priorities, and privileged sex and romance, diminishing possibilities for queering through awareness of existence with people we do not know.

Conclusion

The structures of polyamory as practiced by my interlocutors did not inherently advance a theory of justice, a goal set by the queer feminist project. This article revealed how gender relations, parenthood, and family were mainly stretched and diffused rather than fundamentally disrupted. The multiplicity and unconventionality entailed by polyamorous parenting broadened the range of available subjectivities and relationships, turning gender, family, and parenthood into diffused or stretched categories. Simultaneously, however, the resistance against gender binaries and disruption of family beyond the intimate circle appeared limited. For more fundamental change, it is worthwhile to consider alternative sociopolitical conditions—in which unexpected relations of care outside intimate bonds and the idea that we are always in relation with people we do not know—become intelligible.

Alongside developing and employing a framework of queering to study polyamory, this article aimed to contribute to research on non/monogamies by analyzing difference as both “real” in terms of its effects in everyday life and as emerging in specific contexts and relationships (M’charek, 2010; Willey, 2016b). My findings show that socioeconomic, pregnancy, single parenthood, able-bodiedness, race, and age impact the extent to which polyamorous practices of gender, family, and parenthood become queering. Rather than fixed characteristics with predictable consequences, the analyses showed that these axes of difference become significant in certain contexts and specific relationships with one another. For instance, pregnancy in the closed triad arrangement between highly educated, economically well-off individuals provided necessary and safe circumstances for shifting parental gender roles with a queering potential, albeit to a limited extent. Similarly, race was an important category of difference in stigmas faced by Loes concerning her children’s skin color. As one child was darker than the others, she was pushed to correct assumptions about adoption. Here, race and monogamy intersected as people expected one white father for all children, and the presence of a brown child could only be comprehended in terms of adoption or cheating. While echoing the call for an intersectional perspective by polyamory and parenting scholars (Pallotta-Chiarolli et al., 2020), I would therefore urge examination of the specificities and contextualities of axes of difference as well as their dependence on one another in order to avoid assuming their a priori existence in the world.

Following up on my reference in this article’s introduction to the emancipatory potentials of contemporary practices of sexuality and intimacy versus their co-option with neoliberalism (Illouz 2019), my interlocutors’ polyamorous practices pointed to an ambiguous position. Although all four cases clearly indicated emancipatory moves beyond the institutional structures of monogamy, these moves were simultaneously

oriented towards individual needs and concerns of intimacy and safety. Perceptions of a closed intimate family limit emancipatory possibilities of polyamory beyond the personal level. Inevitably, polyamory requires flexibility from practitioners—in practice, in outlook, and in self-definition—because it involves creating new ethical and material space to navigate non-normative intimacies. Further research into this flexibility’s entanglement with the imperative of self-optimization, therapeutic trends, and commercialization of the intimate self is needed to delve into the extent to which polyamory resists being hijacked by neoliberal systems of subjectivity.

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