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LOOKING AT POLYAMORY THROUGH QUEER LENSES. NOTES FROM A LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The article analyses the main results of a longitudinal study on relational forms inspired by the theory and practice of polyamory in Italy. Adopting a queer epistemological perspective, I highlight how the polyamorous discourse aligns and can partly contribute to the denaturalization of certain binarisms (Homosexual/Heterosexual; Man/Woman) that are foundational to sexual identity in the dominant order and of normativities that regulate the social recognition of meaningful relationships. While acknowledging its political limitations, the article also highlights the contribution of other activisms to polyamorous discourse, steering it toward a more critical and (self)reflective direction.

Keywords

Polyamory, Queer Epistemologies, Binary Thought, Longitudinal Study

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1. INTRODUCTION

Polyamory is usually defined as the practice or possibility to have multiple relationships at the same time and with the consent of all the people involved. At first, the definition focused on intimate, romantic or sexual partnerships, but I will discuss how the term is increasingly used – specially in some activist contexts – as an umbrella term to encompass a wide range of relationships, without defining a priori the nature of these relationships.

In the last decades polyamory gained increasing attention as perhaps the most popular model of Consensual Non-Monogamy, arousing growing interest also in academic literature (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; En-Griffiths *et al.*, 2018; Hamilton *et al.*, 2021; Klesse *et al.*, 2024).

Although the term was coined in the early '90s, when the community developed its own values and vocabulary, its roots can be traced back to the geeky, sci-fi/fantasy, alternative spirituality and technology community of the San Francisco Bay area of the '60s (Anapol, 2010).

More recently, the polyamorous theories and practices have spread in different geographical areas. It is especially in the last decade that polyamory has become more popular in Italy as well, mainly due to encounters through social networks of people who are uncomfortable with the ideal of monogamous romantic love (Paccagnella, 2020). The origins of what we can call Italian "polyamorous community" can be traced back to the creation of the first national Facebook group[1] that achieved a certain popularity, and the creation of local groups in different cities, which began to organise moments of conviviality (the so-called "poliaperitivi") and circles for discussion and support on the management of polyamorous relationships ("polimeriggi").

This article starts from the results of a longitudinal qualitative study conducted in Italy that spanned two waves (2017-18; 2023). The reflections I try to articulate apply queer lenses to the study of polyamorous practices. The term "queer" is understood here as critical theory and as epistemological foundation for those movements that combine a non-normative approach to sexuality with a radical contestation of the *status quo* (Bernini, 2017). More specifically, its anti-normative, anti-binary, anti-essentialist and anti-assimilationist dimensions are considered. Nevertheless, we can not ignore that the term is nowadays used in a variety of contexts and meanings that go beyond its political meaning (e.g., its use as an umbrella term for all non-hetero and/or non-cisgender subjectivities). We can say that queer is “a contested and locationally contingent term” (Browne, Nash, 2010: p. 2).

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[1] The group was created in 2009 and was archived in 2019. Meanwhile, another group was created in 2013 with a large overlap of members from the first one. This second group is still active, with more than 6300 members. In recent years, polyamorous outreach has also expanded to Instagram, where some micro-influencer pages have reached around 15000/20000 followers.

Within the sociological tradition, my approach is indebted to symbolic interactionism. Continuities from an epistemological perspective between symbolic interactionism and more recent developments in queer theory have already been identified. Romania (2013) summarises them as follows:

> [T]he shared definition of identities as non-categorizable; a shared emphasis on individual subjectivity; the rejection of scientific paradigms as truth structures in favour of a performative understanding of them; the impossibility of clearly distinguishing the relationship between nature and culture, in a world already socially and symbolically constructed and transformed, to the point of preventing a pre-conceptual – in Kantian terms – perception of reality (Ivi: p. 22, my translation).

Various studies have highlighted how people who experience consensual multiple-partners relationships show greater tendency to identify their sexuality in non-dichotomous and non-heteronormative ways (Manley *et al.*, 2015), greater flexibility and greater adaptability to changes within the relationship (for example, from sexual relationship to non-sexual relationship) (Sheff, 2013) or greater acceptance of the end of romantic relationships (Sheff, 2015). These trends were also confirmed by the first wave of the study, conducted during my PhD. Sheff interprets these trends through the lens of the psychological theory of resilience (Hooper, 2008; Becvar, 2013; Walsh, 2016), underlining how polyamorous families display some of the skills that resilience scholars highlighted as important to manage crisis, such as “positive communication skills and the cohesion of family network connections” (Sheff, 2016: p. 262). These results inspired the idea of a longitudinal study with a specific focus on sexual identity and relationship transformations. This focus allows me to track changes in the interviewees’ affective network and determine whether the trends identified in the first wave are confirmed after five years, despite the (potential) transformations that may have occurred in their relationships or relational orientation/style. Through the interviews, I also sought to consider how the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic (which lasted almost two months in Italy in its most restrictive form) impacted the interviewees’ intimate network.

In other contributions (Braida, 2023; Braida, forthcoming), I have already highlighted how a wide range of political positions exists within the polyamorous community: from complete depoliticization – which, as feminist reflections on positionality have shown, effectively amounts to tacit support of the *status quo* – to what might be called "liberal assimilationist" stances – which endorse feminist, anti-racist, and anti-fascist values, but whose political demands aim at inclusion within the hegemonic model rather than its radical transformation – to positions that advocate for a radical overturning and rethinking of how intimacy, care, and family are practiced. This heterogeneity of political stances, combined with certain individualistic tendencies and a focus on the "search for the true self" that have characterized the polyamorous approach since its early days, hinders its transformative potential. Moreover, various studies – including my own research – have shown that polyamorous communities are predominantly composed of white, middle-class individuals with medium to high levels of cultural capital (Sheff, Hammers, 2011; Klesse, 2013).

Despite these critical aspects – which must be taken into account if we are to adopt a queer anti-assimilationist approach – my research has brought to light elements that seem to point toward an undoing and broadening of the concepts of love and relationship, moving beyond the mere reproduction of the heterosexual couple. At the same time, it appears that more recent forms of polyamorous activism have increased reflexivity around the dimension of power in relationships (and how it interacts with gender and class dimensions), as well as taken a more radical stance on the need for a fundamental transformation of society, beginning with its material aspects. In this article, I will therefore focus on elements of my research that align with this direction, aiming to highlight how polyamorous discourse can be employed as a tool for radical social transformation.

2. QUEER(ING) EPISTEMOLOGIES AND METHODS

The study moves from an insider perspective. Indeed, I was active in the Italian polyamorous community from 2012 to 2017 (at different levels, both online and in the local group). As I have argued elsewhere (Braida, 2023), the insider position presents both arguments for and against, which I will go briefly to recall here. On the positive side, the possibility to overcome the community's gatekeeping (Hermann, 1989); the fact that I was already socialised to the languages of the community, which allowed me to have more direct access to the meanings that people attach to their practices and to look at those practices from an at least partially shared point of view (Geertz, 1983); and the fact that I was already socialised to group dynamics, which made it easier for me to understand the different positioning and conflicts within the community, and to know who was best to turn to for information of different kind (Smyth, Holian, 2008). On the negative side, I can mention the community's expectations towards the insider researcher and the perception of the researcher's expectations from part of the people interviewed, who can consequently adapt their narrative to offer an exclusively celebratory narrative.

Moreover, I reflected on how some personal traits might have shaped my research. First, I considered how my social perception as a woman may have positively influenced the interviewees' comfort in opening up to me, which was generally true for people of all genders. However, this may also result from a greater predisposition to self-reflexivity among polyamorous people, as well as a habit of discussing their intimate relationships. Additionally, being perceived as an "expert" (and as someone with a high level of cultural capital on the topic), combined with the power imbalance during the interview, may have prevented some people from speaking freely about their concerns, especially when they did not feel fluent enough in polyamorous vocabulary. On the other hand, my (trans)feminist stance may have discouraged some participants from expressing sexist views or, especially among heterosexual men, from acknowledging power imbalances in their relationships with women. Although I did not explicitly discuss my activist identity with all interviewees, it was easily inferred from my Facebook profile, which I used frequently for recruitment.

These reflections fit within feminist and queer epistemological approaches who have amplified the concept of "situated knowledge" (Haraway, 1988). These analyses brought forth a critique of the idea of objectivity in research, highlighting how what has long been presented as a "neutral gaze" concealed the situated point of view of those speaking from a position of power (Jagose, 1996; Law, 2004; Browne, Nash, 2010). Concerning the "subject" of research, they moved away from the conceptualisation of a stable, coherent, and unified subject, reframing it as multiple, unstable, blurred (Browne and Nash, 2010). With these epistemological premises the insider perspective is reframed as a specific position with respect to the subject of study, which gives rise to a specific knowledge. It is from my incorporated relational experiences and from my path within the polyamorous community that I started the research journey. At the same time, my relations with queer activism and theory contributed to look at polyamory from a specific point of view. This situated gaze has inevitably contributed to privileging some interpretations over others and to framing narratives within conceptualisations that leave room for nuance, plurality, and continuous redefinitions.

Concerning the methods, the study combines different qualitative tools. In the first wave, I articulated the work in three work packages, not rigidly ordered in chronological order: 1) study of public discourses on Consensual Non-Monogamies (self-help manuals; sites, blogs and articles of international and national activism); 2) study of online discourses and participant observation (both online – in the two main Italian Facebook groups dedicated to polyamory – and offline – participating in local polyamorous events in different cities); 3) semi-structured interviews: 60 people of different ages, geographical areas, gender identity and sexual/affective orientation having experience of Consensual Non-Monogamy. The research started officially in October 2016, while the actual fieldwork lasted from October 2017 to July 2018. I chose to spend a period (which varied from a week to a month) in almost every Italian city where there was a local group dedicated to organising poly events; in total I visited 10 different cities, through north, centre and south of Italy. This choice was important to expand the possibility of recruiting people for interviews, but also to establish informal relationships with people in the local group and/or people who had experienced poly relationships. The informal relationships and exchanges built before and during the ethnographic work greatly contributed to its interpretation and can thus be considered an integral part of it, although it is difficult to account for formally.

In the second wave (February-June 2023) I interviewed again (five years later) ten of the people previously interviewed, trying to maintain some heterogeneity in age, geographic area, gender identity, education, and sexual/affective orientation. Their characteristics are summarised in Table 1, except for the geographical area (in the attempt to not to make them too easily identifiable). I had initially contacted two other people, one of whom declined the interview, while the other did not respond. All the other people contacted eagerly agreed. While the interviews in the first wave were all conducted live, in this case seven interviews were conducted online. The interviews in the second wave focused mainly on the transformations that the interviewees experienced in their relationships, the way they conceptualise love and relationships, their sexual/affective orientation, and their gender identity. To jog the memory of my respondents, I sent the transcript of the previous interview to the participants a few days prior to the interview. This allowed them to rely on the actual snapshot of their responses from five years earlier, rather than on their own memory reconstruction, which would inevitably be fragmented and inaccurate. Moreover, consistent with my advancement of perspective that I will articulate better in the concluding paragraph, in this second wave I tried to broaden the focus on the affective network. In this regard, I also proposed to the interviewees to draw an affective map by including the people they believe are part of their affective network. Six people responded positively to this stimulus, drawing the map that we commented during the interview.

The study of the relationships and of the affective networks follows a performative approach, looking at intimate/affective relationships as something that people do, and in doing they construct the meaning of these relationships, beyond essentialist and reified interpretations of intimate or family relationships (West, Zimmermann, 1987; Butler, 1990; Morgan, 2011). Concretely, I never started from my own definition of "relationship" but asked them to define it and to describe the characteristics of the relationship with the different people included in their affective map.

Table 1. Socio-demographics characteristics of interviewees

Pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Education**	**Orientation**
Ettore	NB	34	BA	asexual, bisexual
Adele	NB	33	high school	bisexual
Serena	Woman	33	MA	bisexual
Paolo	NB	46	MA	pansexual
Michele	Man	33	PhD	gay
Carlo	Man	53	MA	heterosexual
Giada	NB	34	MA	pansexual
Fiore	Woman	28	high school	bisexual
Fede	NB	32	BA	bisexual
Sergio	Man	39	MA	heteroflexible

In this article I will focus mainly on the second wave of interviews, highlighting the longitudinal changes in the respondents' conceptualisations and practices.

3. BEYOND BINARISMS

Many respondents emphasised already in the first wave how the encounter with polyamory marked a passage from definitions that were rigid and with solid boundaries to definitions that are more nuanced, pluralised, multifaceted. This distinction recalls the passage from modern stories to what Plummer (1995) calls "postmodern stories". In the following subsections I will analyse how these changes applied in three areas: the first two regards their sexual identities (sexual/affective orientation and gender identity), the third their conceptualisations regarding relationships.

3.1 Homosexuality/Heterosexuality and Woman/Man

The interconnection between nonmonogamous relational practices and/or preferences and plurisexual orientations have been highlighted by different researchers (Rust, 1996; Page, 2004; Klesse, 2007; Robinson, 2013). In the first wave of my study more than half of the people in my sample (32/60) defined their sexual/affective orientation differently than homosexual or heterosexual (Braida, 2020). For many, the "exploration" of their plurisexual orientation moved in parallel with the "exploration" of polyamory, or in some cases the "discovery" of polyamory sparked further inquiry into other aspects of their sexual identity or behaviours, including their patterns of attraction.

Nevertheless, the definition of their orientation remained fairly stable between the two waves. Thus, the possibility of being attracted to people of different genders does not seem to be "a phase" for my respondents (although five years is not a long time, this relative stability occurs in the totality of respondents).

It is also worth noting that Carlo, the only person in the sub-sample who identifies as heterosexual, in terms of sexual behaviours he reports having had sex with men, although he remains attracted solely to women.

Regarding gender identity as well, the number of polyamorous people who do not fit into gender binary is significantly higher than that (although probably underestimated) in the general population (see Braida *et al.*, 2023). With the term "nonbinary" I (and in many cases, my respondents) encompass a range of gender experiences, ranging from not feeling that they belong to any gender, to feeling somewhere between woman and man, or feeling something entirely different.

Among the people selected for the sub-sample of the second wave, two people register changes in the experience of their gender identity. Giada highlighted already in the first interview how the polyamorous spaces represented a safer space were to experiment also with gender expression: "[M]y first dress I put it here, my first time I said [to be genderqueer] openly to a person who was not in the group was here[2]" (April 2018). By the time of the second interview, Giada[3] has better define her identity: "I now call myself a nonbinary trans person, which is also oxymoronic, but I like It that way. With all the difficulties of the case, which are now getting bigger and bigger and giant, difficulties of the case of a person who is not out in all circumstances" (April 2023). In the case of Fede at the time of the first interview they defined as a cis woman, but during the second interview they express a more complicated relationship with their gender identity:

> [A]t some point I started thinking differently, feeling differently, and... I felt and still feel a major impostor syndrome with respect to not defining myself as cisgender, I have a very hard time finding a definition that I can actually feel is... right, for me. I think that... I mean, I feel that being a cisgender woman doesn't even begin to describe who I am. I have a… lately the words that are in my head are "plural" and "expanding". I think my gender identity is plural and expanding. I need… I want, and I need to imagine to expand the possibilities of my gender, and this is something that gives me a lot to think about, that makes me reflect every day, that makes me look in the mirror every day and ask what it sees, and what I see, and what others see, and how what others see impacts how I feel (May 2023).

The adjectives by which Fede describes their gender identity – "plural" and "expanding" – are clearly in the direction of deconstructing a definition that remains within the stakes of rigid binarism.

As in the case of sexual orientation, in this case as well people who already defined themselves as nonbinary during the first interview have not changed the definition but, in some cases, they add some nuances. Paolo, for example, comments in this way their changes in the way to conceive their gender (and that of other people):

> [T]he thing that I noticed most in rereading the old interview, is how much I

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[2] The interviewee says "here" because we were in the place where the events of the poly group were held.

[3] I chose a female name as a pseudonym on the recommendation of the interviewee, following the second interview.

> was using the masculine. And how much I was also using gendered terms to refer to other people who have a gender as well. I mean, now I wouldn't say "a girl", or "a woman", or "a man" of a person I interact with, I would say "a person" because I don't feel the need to gender people. […] The idea of not having a gender I already had [...] it's more of a masking thing, that is, over time I have both gained more explicit awareness of this and gained awareness that it's something I can express.

In Paolo's case, therefore, the tendency to eschew gender categorisation has strengthened over the past five years, and this has been reflected first and foremost in the use of language.

3.2 Love/Not-Love

Approaching polyamory also seems to blur the definitions of love and relationship. In particular, three tendencies have been identified: the difficulty in drawing a clear line between love and friendship; the acceptance of non-linear transformations in their relationships; and the acceptance of the end of romantic phases/relationships. From respondents' narratives, it seems that the "nonmonogamous turn" helped them to develop a conceptualisation of relationships as paths that can undergo different phases and forms, not necessarily on a regular basis.

Among the respondents of the second wave, first of all there are some differences between people who define relationship anarchists and the others. Indeed, Ettore, Adele and Paolo – who use the label of relationship anarchy[4] – are less inclined to use label to define people included in their affective network. Ettore, reflecting on the fact that compared to the previous interview, only the relationships that had been less "formalised" with a label survived, comments the following:

> [I]f there's one conclusion I can draw over the years is that, perhaps, I'm more inclined to... relationships of this kind, much less formalised and also based on a... let's say, a long-term approach where you're not looking for something specific in the other person but... there's mutual interest, you keep in touch and this thing. Then, if it works, in the long run this sustains the relationship.

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[4] Relationship anarchy can be defined as the philosophy or practice in which people are seen to be free to engage in relationships that are not bound by rules, aside from those mutually agreed by the people involved; essentially, it can be distinguished from polyamory in that it is more radically non-hierarchical and refuses to define relationships with labels such as "just friends", "in a relationship", and so on (Anapol, 2010). The term – coined by Nordgren (2006) – and the concept originate from and align with anarchist thought but have also spread in the polyamorous communities with a depoliticised meaning.

Ettore, in short, prefers to cultivate relationships that do not carry with them specific romantic or sexual expectations but, at the same time, are based on the continuity of the relationship, mutual interest and support, even if in some cases at a distance. Paolo's approach presents some differences. Indeed, it includes in their network a variety of relationships:

> [F]rom people with whom there is a very strong emotional but not necessarily sexual connection [...], to people with whom there is more of a body connection, [...] people who are like family of choice […], [with] Agata we are seeing each other regularly, it can be called a relationship from the most classical point of view, as far as she is married and living with her husband [...]. So [there are] relationships sometimes called friendly, sometimes sexual, sometimes not. There are various levels of connection, they're recurrent people in my life, they're people I have direct, personal relationships with, instead of people I only see in group settings.

So, Paolo includes relationships with different levels of continuity, different levels of emotional connection and different level of sexual connection.

People who do not define relationship anarchists draw a sharper line between relationships with a romantic component and relationships where there is no such component. However, when we go deeper into delving the nature of different relationships, the boundaries often waver. For example, Fede at first expresses difficulty in avoiding distinguishing between people with whom they have a romantic relationship and others. By the end of the interview, however, they reflect that probably the biggest change in these five years has been precisely that they have learned to conceptualise relationships in a more "hybrid" way:

> [P]recisely comes to mind the fact that the relationship that I have with Zoe I'm not able to define it at all, okay? Because there are some components of one type and other components of another […]. [W]ithout any kind of handbook, totally randomly, we are exploring, and we are trying to find a dimension that is somehow right for us. And so… it's okay, I gladly keep the uncertainty as well. I don't know how to say… it's a phase where you explore. And that's okay, but here it is. I mean, it's confusing. However, I would say that if I had to think about what is the thing that has changed the most, it is this, that is, the possibility of imagining other relational forms as well.

Michele's narrative is somewhat similar. Although the respondent identifies one partner as primary, he currently cohabits with another person with whom he has entered into a civil union to enable him to obtain Italian citizenship more easily. Speaking of plans to end the civil union – now that Francesco has been granted citizenship – and move in with his primary partner, Michele comments:

> This thing of shutting down [the civil union] will be like shutting down a part of my identity that has been with me for the last six years so much, and also the idea then of going to live with Marco and then not having Francesco in the house anymore and losing that part there puts me very... very much afraid, because Francesco is a reference point for me, we don't have a relationship neither sexual nor sentimental, however... he is my sister Francesco, practically. He is someone I love very much and [it is hard] to imagine not having him in my everyday life.

Although Michele's future plans seem to follow a more "traditional" model, Michele experiences the change in the configuration of the relationship with Francesco as significant and he does not approach it lightly.

Another element that has been confirmed in the second wave is the decentralisation of the sexual component. This is not so much because sexuality is not important for the respondents – for many of them it is – but because I have often registered a misalignment between sharing sexuality and hierarchy of relationships. Adele and Ettore – who also describes himself as asexual – do not currently have relationships with a sexual component. In other cases, sharing sexuality In some relationships is not determinative in deeming those relationships more important, as in Paolo's case. Carlo, then, explicitly states that polyamory has helped him to accept the fact that the sexual component in his primary relationship has become less important. These tendencies go in the direction of challenging allonormativity, understood in the sense of the definition provided by Brandley and Spencer (2022), as a term that describes "the constitutive practices whereby social structures expect and privilege sexual and romantic attraction and relationships" (p. 1).

Other elements emerging from the field challenge other relational normativities, such as the relationship escalator, defined by Gahran (2017) as "the standard by which most people gauge whether an intimate relationship is significant, serious, good, healthy, committed or worthy of effort" (p. 19) and that it is manifested in the recognition of a set of steps that the relationship must go through, more or less chronologically ordered and that may have slight variations depending on the society of reference (in our society Gahran recognised eight steps: making contact, initiation, claiming and defining, establishment, commitment, merging, conclusion, legacy). For example, Fiore and Giada cohabited for a time with one of their partners and then decided – for different reasons – to interrupt the cohabitation, without affecting the importance of the relationship. In Giada's case, not only with Dorian did they decide not to cohabitate anymore, but they also decided to exclude the sexual component from their relationship. Giada comments that "the sentiment has remained the same. Actually, it is probably more because we realised that nothing can beat us". Similarly, Sergio – despite the birth of a son – imagines that in the future, when his son is older, his ideal living configuration would be not to continue cohabiting with the mother of his child.

These relational paths are also a challenge for chrononormativity, defined by Freeman as "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (p. 3). In this sense, the relational temporality described are similar to queer temporalities, because they do not follow the timing imposed on relationships (and productivity) by social norms: they stall, skip steps, or go backwards, sabotaging the escalator.

Even when the end of the romantic relationship coincides with the end of the relationship altogether (as opposed to transformation) – and although the respondents admit that this can sometimes be very painful – often the "exes" remain within the affective network. This is the case, for example, of Serena, who cites her three most important ex-partners as people she continues to refer to in the case of emotional emergencies; or of Fiore, who has included several of her ex-partners in the drawing of her affective map, even in the case where they are no longer in contact, because "were very important people who I still think are very important".

4. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

From March 22 to May 3, 2020, the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic was adopted in its most stringent form in Italy: it was forbidden for all individuals to relocate or move by public or private means of transportation to municipalities other than the one in which they were located, except for proven business needs, absolute urgency, or health reasons. These emergency measures, then followed by other phases in which measures were alternately tightened and relaxed until the following April, clearly had an impact for people who had a non-normative relational configuration.

During the second round of interviews, I investigated the impact that pandemic containment measures had on the relational lives of respondents. Some people took the time to redefine their own priorities and redefine their relational boundaries. This was especially true for Ettore, who was the only person who spent the lockdown alone: for him it was a time to recharge their social battery and to rethink the way to connect with other people.

For many other people it represented a forced monogamisation because they had to choose a person to live with. While Carlo read it as an opportunity to strengthen his relationship that was already defined as primary, for others this situation severely compromised relationships and, for some, even mental health. For Adele, the pandemic time was a time of severe suffering. Due to logistical issues, she spent the lockdown with her partner Andrea and his mother, with whom she previously – and afterward – cohabited only part-time. She commented:

> [T]he period of Covid I was going through quite a negative period at the level of... health... mental health as well, because I had this fever that lasted me for six months, […] which was then also related a bit to a... a depressive phase. […] [C]ertainly, there was a very strong connection between the physical part and the mental part, and the fact that I only had to choose one place to live really led me to... to shut down, in the sense that I live by the fact of... not having a fixed place to return to. […] For me, it is crucial to have a space and time for all relationships [...], including the relationship with myself.

For Serena as well, living in a small, dimly-lit space with her (former) partner was also an element of relationship fatigue, which contributed to the breakdown. In Paolo's case, living together during the lockdown in another country led to the end of cohabitation and of the relationship. This experience also led Paolo to make the decision not to share living space anymore, except for short-term hospitality.

Instead, Michele shared living space during the lockdown with his roommate and "husband"[5] Francesco; then, later joined – circumventing restrictions – his primary partner Marco and two other friends. Michele reports that this experience was also a bit of a trial run for his relationship with Marco, because of which they realised they could move in together. The lockdown was also a test case (with a negative outcome, in this case) for Michele's other relationship. Even though during the lockdown he would go "the long way around" after the grocery shopping to see him, not feeling the same commitment to pursue the relationship on the other side led the relationship to dissipate.

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[5] They have a civil union, as marriage is not allowed in Italy between same-gender people.

The lockdown has been a turning point for many people, who mentioned it before I asked them the explicit question of how it had affected their relationships: for some, it was a time to reaffirm their – relational, spatial, temporal – boundaries, for others a testing ground for relationships, with both positive and negative outcomes.

5. STRUCTURAL LIMITS

In the second wave of interviews structural limits emerge more clearly than five years before, also due to the greater experience accumulated by the people interviewed. With the expression "structural limits" I am referring to that set of cultural, institutional, and legislative norms that prioritise the monogamous couple and the nuclear family over all other forms of relationship. In particular, regarding the Italian context, it is crucial to emphasise the significant Catholic influence and the family-oriented welfare state, which views the family as the primary source of support and care for its members. These factors help to reinforce a conservative stance on family values and structure, marked by both heteronormativity and mononormativity.

What seems to emerge with more clarity in the second wave is also a differentiation between the limits identified between those who have more "traditional" life plans and those who instead identify as relationship anarchists. For example, Serena – who desires one or more relationships with whom to share a long-term relationship project – asks herself many questions about how she can reconcile this desire with the nonmonogamous approach in this society:

> How will I get out of this? Will I get out of it? Will I find a person, or several people, with whom to share projects while sharing a vision of this type, or is it a vision of this type and therefore must be content with extemporaneousness, with the temporariness of relationships? It bothers me, this... this thing. So, I will seek a mediation...

On the other hand, Ettore became more aware of the difference in desires and positionings even within the nonmonogamous approach. He concludes that his relational preferences are probably not compatible with those who need to draw strict relational boundaries:

> What I see – after these five years – is that there has been – always referring back to my feeling of communicative failure in explaining how I live relationships, in a way that I can approximate by saying that [I am]

> relationship anarchist – by many people who identify themselves more as polyamorous, this thing in my opinion has not really... been understood, or at least if it has been understood it was not... it could not... get along with their way of living... relationships.

Thus, a more pronounced differentiation seems to be emerging within the nonmonogamous positionings. While there are those who question whether it is possible to cultivate long-term relationship projects within nonmonogamous relationships, there are also those who feel that they are a minority within the minority for wanting to more radically undo the way relationships are done. Structural limits affect both positionings: as long as the monogamous model is the only one with social and institutional legitimacy and recognition, imaginaries about other types of intimacy and care remain constrained.

6. FINAL REMARKS

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), one of the books considered foundational for queer theory, Sedgwick writes:

> It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation". […] At the same time that this process of sexual specification or species formation was going on, the book will argue, less stable and identity-bound understandings of sexual choice also persisted and developed, often among the same people or interwoven in the same systems of thought. Again, the book will not suggest (nor do I believe there currently exists) any standpoint of thought from which the rival claims of these minoritizing and universalizing understandings of sexual definition could be decisively arbitrated as to their "truth". Instead, the performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force created by their overlap will be my subject. […] [O]ne main strand of argument in this book is deconstructive, in a fairly specific sense. The analytic move it makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/ homosexual, in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation (Ivi: 8-10).

It is in this sense of deconstruction that the polyamorous discourse seems to be able to align with and to be understood. Although for some people the approach to polyamorous theory and practice has been the springboard to question their sexual identity in a broader sense, I do not want to establish a unidirectional causal relationship between the polyamorous discourse and the deconstruction of different binarisms. I simply want to underline how the polyamorous discourse seems to fit into a broader complex process of questioning naturalised norms and binarisms, starting with the heterosexual/homosexual one.

The longitudinal analysis of polyamorous narratives and practices seem to confirm that the polyamorous discourse can be a tool to open relational imaginaries alternative to the dominant scenario. Polyamorous experiences seem to go beyond a simple reproduction of the couple device. Indeed, for some people the polyamorous discourse seems to configure as a tool to challenge the binary thought – especially in terms of gender and sexuality – and to reframe post-romantic, a-romantic and a-sexual relationships.

Several authors advanced critiques of the polyamorous model from a radical perspective, noting the risk of creating a new normative model (Haritaworn *et al.*, 2006; Willey, 2010), of failing to question and instead reinforcing the hierarchy of romantic relationships over other relationships (Wilkinson, 2012), and of adhering to a neoliberal model of relational accumulation that overlooks care (Vasallo, 2018). These critiques have opened spaces for new reflections and formulations within polyamorous activism, which often arise from contamination with bisexual, aspec[6], trans and queer activisms. With these processes in mind, what Car G. Lepori and I have tried to do in the short essay *Poliamore. Riflessioni transfemministe queer per una critica al sistema monogamo [Polyamory. Queer Transfeminist Reflections for a Critique of the Monogamous System]* (2023) is to broaden the meaning of polyamory, using it as an umbrella term to define one's relational network, which is not defined a priori based on the sharing of specific practices, but can be defined by each person based on their own (ongoing) definition of relationship. Although the original polyamorous theory may reinforce individualistic aspects (for example highlighting the search for the "true self"), also because of its roots in a mainly middle-class community with high cultural resources, we find also ideals/experiences that are moving toward more collectivist and mutualistic perspectives.

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[6] Aspec is an umbrella term for anyone who identifies on the asexual and/or aromantic spectrum.

What I am arguing is not that these practices are particularly innovative – it can happen that monogamous people are friends with exes or have important relationships that are neither sexual nor romantic – but that the polyamorous discourse works for my respondents as a tool for identifying and valuing these practices. Besides, these frameworks seem to have increase the tendencies to define orientations, relationships and gender identities in non-dichotomous, multifaceted and plural ways that challenge static and monolithic identity definitions. Although acknowledging political limitations of polyamory as a movement that lacks a solid, shared base of claims (Braida, 2023), in the Italian context contamination with other counternormative activisms appears to provide interesting insights into recoding intimacies and care outside normative boundaries.

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