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BEYOND THE NORM OF MONOGAMY – CONSENSUAL NON-MONOGAMY AS AN EXAMPLE OF A ‘POST-MODERN’ RELATIONSHIP?¹

Postmodern society is a society in the process of changing value systems and norms, increasing diversity, and individualisation, also in the area of intimate relationships. Contemporary consensual non-monogamy seems to be one example of this changing outlook. The article seeks to answer the questions as to how non-monogamous people identify themselves, what the motivations for entering such relationships they have, and what features of a new approach to relationships this type of relationship demonstrates. The theoretical framework of the article is based, among others, on Giddens’ and Prandini’s theoretical proposals as well as on Luhmann’s ‘semantics of love’. The text presents the results of the qualitative research consisting of 15 in-depth interviews. Its key findings are that in motivating their commitment to such relationships, respondents very often refer to self-discovery and to the choice to be consciously ‘non-normative’. They also demonstrate many features of a new approach to relationships, specifically, relational anarchy.

Key words: consensual non-monogamy; postmodernity; semantics of love; relational anarchy

Introduction

As Jean-Claude Kaufmann noted, „In the family is reflected all of society (...) and in society, as in a lens – the family” (after: Żadkowska, Banaszak 2020). Social changes, transforming norms, values, and meanings are reflected in the transformations of intimate relationships and families, and vice versa. Postmodernity, or post-industrial society, is a society in the process of changing value systems and moral norms, with increasing diversity, individualization, and autonomization (Schmidt 2015). This results in an increase in the number of morally and practically acceptable choices and lifestyles.

Contemporary relationships and families are increasingly defying the „norm,” both in terms of formalizing a relationship (the increasing importance of informal relationships – Wieteska 2018), defining it by having children (childlessness by

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choice – Gobbi 2013), living together (LAT relationships – Pasteels et al. 2017; Liefbroer et al. 2015), indissolubility (weakening of bond durability and increased divorce rates – Wang, Schofer 2018; Härkönen 2014), a relationship between a man and a woman (increased acceptance of homosexual couples – Gallup 2022), as well as going beyond one of the strongest norms in the European socio-cultural context – the norm of monogamy (Weaver, Woollard 2008; Michalczak 2014; Sandbakken et al. 2022). Relationships that go beyond the norm of monogamy in a consensual way (with the informed consent of all partners) are referred to in the scientific literature as „consensual non-monogamy.”

Consensual non-monogamy is widely researched around the world, as evidenced also by the rich English-language scientific literature on this issue. There is a growing interest in the topic of non-monogamy worldwide and in Poland (Barker, Langdridge 2010; Moors et al. 2017; Rubel, Burleigh 2020). Worth adding is that consensually non-monogamous relationships are not something new in history, and various forms have already been known and described in scientific literature. Non-monogamy has appeared in various cultures, subcultures, and religions, among others, in various forms of polygamy (marriages with multiple partners) e.g., polygyny allowed in Islam or polyandry in Nepal. Bronisław Malinowski wrote about forms of non-monogamy in the cultures of Trobriand Island (cf. Malinowski 2001). In the 1960s or 1970s, „group marriages” or communes were also noted in the scientific literature. Yet, the 21st century is characterized by a great increase in interest in such topics in European monogamous cultures and describing them as “one of the possible models” (Barker, Langdridge 2010).

In this article, I will present the results of qualitative research on non-monogamy in Poland in an attempt to answer the following questions: How is non-monogamy described in Poland through the eyes of respondents? What is the motivation for entering into this type of relationship? To what extent are these motivations socially determined and is the experience of stigmatization relevant? The main hypothesis I propose in the article is that modern non-monogamy is one of the manifestations of a changing view of relationships and presents many characteristics indicative of a new pattern of intimate relationships.

Consensual non-monogamy – definitions and scale of the phenomenon

Consensual non-monogamy (sometimes: ethical or responsible non-monogamy) is a so-called umbrella term (cf. Conley et al. 2013) including sexual and/or romantic non-exclusivity. Importantly, this non-exclusivity is always accompanied by the informed consent of all parties involved. Consensual

non-monogamy strongly emphasizes the issue of ethics and separates it from infidelity and cheating on one's partner. Non-monogamy is fundamentally based on consent and honesty (Klesse 2011; Anapol 2013). It is also worth making a clear distinction here between polygamy and non-monogamy: polygamy relates only to marriages, in the context of non-monogamy, where we are most often dealing with informal relationships or with the main couple (who may be married) and other partners.

Consensual non-monogamy is most often divided into three types: swinging (usually sexual activity outside the relationship between couples), open relationships (temporary additional sexual and romantic relationships outside the main relationship), and polyamory (multiple romantic and often sexual long-term relationships) (Barker 2011; Conley et al. 2013; Balzarini et al. 2019; Baczkowska 2020; Senthilmurugan, Joel 2022). Margaret Hauptert (et al. 2017) adds to these concepts „monogamish” (which is understood as joint, i.e., group engagement in sexual activity) and an open category of other combinations of consensual non-monogamy that escape the previous definitions.

Katarzyna Grunt-Mejer (2014) points out the huge conceptual diversity of consensual non-monogamy and adds polyfidelity, cuckoldry (controlled infidelity, often with a kink or fetish background, still with consent), ménage à trois (triangle, triolism) and relational anarchy in addition to the mentioned concepts. Other terms such as „don't ask, don't tell” (D.A.D.T), solo poly (a person who is polyamorous but lives a very independent life or is single), or mono-poly (where one partner identifies as polyamorous, and the other partner identifies as monogamous). It is not always clear in the literature whether this concept refers only to the relationship status or also to individual identity (identifying oneself as non-monogamous, even when single, e.g., solo-poly).

Authors describing polyamory point out that the concept can be understood as: (1) an identity (Ritchie, Barker 2006; Jordan et al. 2016; Rubel, Burleigh 2020), (2) relationship beliefs/preferences/orientation (Jordan et al. 2016; Rubel, Burleigh 2020), (3) relationship status/structure (Jordan et al. 2016; Rubel, Burleigh 2020), and (4) relationship agreements (Rubel, Burleigh 2020). Rarely, but occasionally, polyamory is indicated as a sexual orientation (Tweedy 2011). Additionally, a distinction is made between hierarchical polyamory and anarchic polyamory. In hierarchical polyamory, we have a primary and secondary partner, while in relationship anarchy, there is no hierarchy between partners (Balzarini et al. 2019).

Ewelina Baczkowska (2020) rightly notes that different types of consensually non-monogamous relationships often intersect and form hybrids, which we can further place closer or further on the scale (continuum) between monogamy and non-monogamy. According to Jorge Ferrer (2018), many people may avoid defining themselves at all in terms of the binary division between „monogamy” and „non-monogamy.”

In particular, it is likely that many individuals will live relational identities beyond the mono/poly binary – for example, through fluidly moving between monogamy and nonmonogamy, hybridising essential values of these relational styles or enacting novel relational selves that may or may not be named or categorised (Ferrer 2018).

According to available data, living in a non-monogamous relationship concerns (at some time in their lives) about 5–7% of people (Conley et al. 2013; Rubin et al. 2014), including, depending on the study, from about 10% to as many as 21% of people (Hauptert 2017; Fairbrother et al. 2019; Cardoso, Pascoal, Maiochi 2021). Country-specific studies and/or estimates are most commonly available. Rubel, Burleigh (2020), for example, estimate the population of polyamorous people in the United States at 1.44 million adult citizens. In Canada, a survey of a representative sample indicated that 2.4% of people are currently in an open relationship, and 20% were previously in such a relationship (Fairbrother et al. 2019). Research in Norway indicates 3% of people are consensually non-monogamous (Træen, Thuen 2021). The report „Hoeveel polyamoristen zijn er in Nederland en Vlaanderen?” indicates that 3.3% of the people are currently in non-monogamous relationships in the Netherlands and Flanders, with 22% of respondents indicating that they have never been in such a relationship (Hoorsten, De Liefde 2017).

In the case of Poland (the study population), there is no nationally representative data available on consensual non-monogamy. Research presented by Grunt-Mejer (2014) indicates that non-monogamy is mentioned as an attractive form of relationship for between 10.1% and 20.4% of young adults (19–25).

Globally, a great number of research studies concerning non-monogamous relationships relate to the good quality of non-monogamous relationships and the unique benefits of such relationships (Mitchell, Bartholomew, Cobb 2014; Rubel, Burleigh 2015; Moors et al. 2017; Séguin et al. 2017; Balzarini et al. 2019), although some studies indicate less satisfaction than in monogamous relationships (Levine et al. 2018). At the same time, there are studies on the controversial social perception of these relationships, including the halo effect towards monogamy and the potential stigmatization of people in non-monogamous relationships (Conley et al. 2013; Grunt-Mejer 2014; Jordan et al. 2016; Cardoso, Pascoal, Maiochi 2021).

Toward a new pattern of love and intimate relationships?

Katarzyna Michalczak (2014) points out that the topics of non-monogamy and polyamory are beginning to function in public discourse as possible strategies for entering into relationships (rather than „otherness” or „weirdness”), and a superficial review of recent media articles on the topic also supports this

conclusion. The popularity and current discourse on the topic of consensual non-monogamy (in monogamous cultures) seem to be symptoms of the already mentioned increase in morally and practically acceptable choices and lifestyles but also contemporary changes in the area of intimate relationships.

Various authors have pointed to (post)modern changes in the area of intimate relationships and different aspects of this new pattern, for example: 1. the importance of individualization („everything (or nearly everything) is a matter for decision”) (Beck, Beck-Gersheim 2002: 48); 2. the shift away from normativity, where no one defines the boundaries between the norm and the non-norm anymore (Bauman 2003); 3. temporariness, where long-term commitments are seen as limiting one’s possibilities and opportunities (Bauman 2003, p. 106); 4. forming relationships purely for the benefits they provide, for what each partner can get out of the emotional bond with the other person, and the relationship continues as long as both parties derive satisfaction from it (Giddens 2006).

Anthony Giddens (2006) in his „pure relationship” theory also points to elements such as reliance on gender equality, clearly demarcated boundaries, and the great importance of open and clear communication, as it is a forum for negotiation and discussion based on pluralism and diverse possibilities for constructing one’s life, including in the sphere of plastic sexuality. Although Giddens’ pure relationship theory has been criticized as an oversimplification resulting from basing his theory on the discourse of experts and therapists, which may not necessarily correspond to everyday relational practices, this type of approach to relationships is also part of the discourse on intimate relationships.

Niklas Luhmann’s *Semantics of Love* (2003) is an interesting perspective in this context, which considers love as a code that has changed over the centuries. This code determines the „ideals of love,” including the requirement of exclusivity. Luhmann introduces a very important issue regarding the link between code and structure, positing that the prevailing semantics of love in a given society can therefore open up access to understanding the relationship between the medium of communication and social structures (Luhmann 2003, p. 22), which undoubtedly raises further interesting questions regarding the relationship between code change (meaning and therefore the discourse) and structural change.

Luhmann points to a shift away from the old ideals of love. Ideals are being replaced by new rationality, and idealization and paradoxicality as a code are disappearing. Lovers also are no longer striving for totality and are recognizing the peculiarity of their worlds. In addition, love and relationships become part of our identity, and we seek in them confirmation of our vision. Luhmann draws attention to the issue of the changing relationship between love and sexuality. Currently, explicit references to sexuality do not have to exclude love, and

sexuality alone can be its origin. However, he notes that it is currently „much harder than ever before to reduce [it] to some single dominant formula. The rejection of traditional representations and their stealthy continuation offset each other” (Luhmann 2003, p. 192).

Riccardo Prandini (2019), in referring to Luhmann, points out ten differences between the patterns of love, basing this on three levels: social, material, and temporal. The new pattern is, among other things, on the social level means intimacy based on the identity of the self, the separation of worlds, the construction of a story about the self (a story confirmed by us, not by others), fluidity, and change. On the material level, it concerns realism and rejection of ideals, the indeterminacy of statuses, non-monogamy, and egoism (focus on the self). On the temporal level, it includes temporariness and episodicity, uncertainty, and instability. Prandini believes that, paradoxically, a new pattern that goes against ideals becomes a new ideal based on realism, defining by not defining, the uniqueness of the relationship rather than the person, stability through instability, being authentic by recognizing one’s in authenticity, love that begins with loving oneself, „pure” love that does not involve expectations, a bond that does not take away freedom, etc.

The literature on non-monogamy also refers to two patterns, including an important publication on polyamory by Deborah Anapol, who points out that the freedom to surrender to love and allow love – not just sexual passion, not just social norms and religious restrictions and not just emotional reactions and subconscious conditioning –is to give form to our intimate relationships: this is the essence of polyamory (Anapol 2013). The basis of polyamory is not the number of partners at all, but the „values” adopted by the participants in the relationship, including the great importance of „choice” as the motivation (Anapol 2013, p. 28). Other characteristics of the new pattern according to Anapol are readiness to change the form of the relationship, acceptance and unconditional love, and openness. The traditional pattern can apply to both traditional polygamy and monogamy when relationships „will fulfill the needs of the community instead of individual desires.”

Anapol (2013) underlines the importance of motivation and distinguishes various motivations for entering into the “new” polyamory: 1) biological arguments, i.e., the belief that monogamy is not in the nature of humans and most animals; 2) social arguments, i.e., appeal to the liberalization of social life, as well as feminist and gender arguments (moving away from monogamy as opening up to otherness and going beyond the heteronorm); 3) psychological arguments, i.e., seeking to fulfill one’s emotional and sexual needs (at the same time, however, she notes negative motivations in this area, e.g., related to the fact that polyamory can be a way to „mask” problems in building long-term relationships or sex addiction); 4) religious and spiritual arguments, i.e., non-monogamy

seen as spiritual fulfillment; 5) personality arguments, i.e., pointing to the fact that some people are „predisposed” to form non-monogamous relationships.

Jessica Wood et al. (2019), based on research conducted in the US and Canada, point to reasons related to autonomy (self and partner freedom), beliefs and value systems (monogamy seen as self-limiting and the belief that one partner cannot guarantee that all our needs are met), relationality (being part of a larger group, the benefits of full honesty without taboos), sexuality (expressing and accepting one’s sexuality), growth and expansion (personal growth and development in a relationship), and pragmatism (choosing non-monogamy as more fitting to one’s current lifestyle/distance relationship, etc.). In addition, some more specific justifications for entering non-monogamous relationships can be found in the literature, including referring to sexual/relational orientation (which more often in the case of polyamorous individuals is fluid and context-dependent) (Manley, Diamond, Anders 2015) and sociosexuality (Morrison et al. 2013) or motivations in correlation with the realization of fetishes and kinks (Vilkin, Sprott 2021).

Both the fluidity and the motivations identified in the literature point quite clearly to similarities between consensual non-monogamy and the ‚new pattern’ such as, i.e., the relevance of meeting the needs of an individual, references to autonomy, open communication, expressing one’s sexuality, the search for identity, pragmatism (realism), diversity, and rejecting the norm (old ideals). However, the existence of these two patterns should not, in my opinion, be considered as a linear transition from one end of the scale to the other (that would be a gross oversimplification), but rather as „ideal types” coexisting with each other.

Methodology

To fill the still present research breach on non-monogamy, especially from the point of sociological research in Poland, a qualitative study was conducted among people declaring themselves non-monogamous or living in a non-monogamous relationship. Given the aims of the study, the focus was not only on sexual non-exclusivity but also on polyamorous relationships (romantic involvement).

A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted among people between the ages of 27 and 49. The vast majority of the interviews (12) were conducted online, which was often justified by the preference of the respondents. The „snowball” method was used in part to search for respondents. The research was conducted in the form of in-depth individual semi-structured interviews between May and September 2022. Despite a specific interview scenario, some parts

were introduced in a different order depending on the course of the interview. Respondents were informed of the privacy of their data, and the interviews were also anonymized (all names were replaced with the terms Partner 1/Partner 2).

Most of the respondents (12) did not have or plan to have children. If the respondent(s) had children, they were not involved in this type of relationship (this applies mainly to open relationships and swingers). The majority of respondents declared themselves non-religious (13), including one person who described themselves as „spiritual,” and two people declaring themselves as religious (in both cases, respondents indicated tensions between the principles of their religion and their lifestyle). All respondents live in a city. Most have professional careers, including technical professions (10 people), the humanities, and social professions (2 people), or are running businesses (2 people). One person was unemployed. Almost all respondents had a university degree (12).

Table 1. List of interviews

No.	Sex	Age	(Self-)identification	Status of the relationship
1.	F	37	Polyamory	Closed triad (6 years) with two men
2.	F	33	Polyamory	Open relationship, two long-term partners
3.	M	27	Polyamory	Hierarchical relationship – wife and additional partner
4.	M	35	Polyamory	Hierarchical relationship – wife and three additional partners (two FwB)
5.	M	49	Open relationship	Marriage, in a semi-open relationship, the wife has no additional partners
6.	M	25	Relationship anarchy	Difficulty in specifying the number of partners due to undefinability and variability
7.	F	27	Relationship anarchy	One main partner
8.	M	34	Mono-poly	Mono-poly (respondent’s main partner is monogamous)
9.	M	45	Polyamory	One main partner
10.	M	29	Relationship anarchy	One main partner and one at a distance
11.	M	35	Solo-poly	Currently single
12.	F	27	Relationship anarchy	Two partners, one main partner
13.	M	45	Swing	One main partner
14.	M	34	Swing	In a marriage
15.	F	40	Swing	In a long-term marriage (18 years)

The data from the interviews were transcribed, then analyzed in several areas including:

- identification
- motivation for entering a consensual non-monogamous relationship and how it happened

- experienced stigmatization
- relationship principles (boundaries, rules) and approach (understanding of selected words: relationship, love/sexuality, cheating, security, romantic ideals, etc.) and possible conflict issues.

The data analysis was based in the first phase on analyzing the above-listed themes and attempting to group answers into categories. Since a great deal of research material has been collected, this would be followed by an additional analysis that identified eight areas of the ‘new pattern’ present in respondents’ statements. The areas were partly predicted (based on theoretical framework) but entirely identified during the analysis of the results. An example of coding is shown in Table 2 in the results.

Results

Identification

All respondents spontaneously identified themselves in four main categories, i.e., swing, open relationship, polyamory, and relational anarchy, with some minor exceptions. The surprising difference was the clear separation of relational anarchy. The understanding of these terms was similar to that in the literature, and there were no major differences here, although there were some inaccuracies, especially when it came to the category of swinging and the category of polyamory.

In the case of polyamory, respondents defined it as the ability to love more than one person (Interview 1), having more than one relationship (Interview 2), or having multiple relationships (Interview 3). It is worth noting here that relational anarchists, who additionally do not value any relationship as more or less important, stand out very clearly from polyamory. In this group, too, there also appeared a fundamental opposition to any kind of definition, not only of one’s identification but of relationships in general:

For me, it’s this approach to relationships, where it’s like they’re at the start... there’s no need to define them somehow, this will turn out in the course of that relationship and the course of communication. And that you don’t value them, in the sense that society does. If I’m in a relationship with someone, that person will be more important than my friend, for example (Interview 7).

Difficulties with definitions are also indicated by some people involved in swinging, and sometimes the very concept of swinging was extended to an open relationship, especially if the two forms of activity were intertwined (Interview 13).

Also, some people involved in polyamory indicated difficulty in identifying themselves as “polyamorous” due to various negative phenomena associated

with polyamory (e.g., unicorn hunting²) or a different view of the relationship than most people in the polyamorous community.

This feeling of being different comes from the fact that the moment I tried to contribute through various groups and social media regarding polyamory and spoke from my perspective, that is, a person who yes, can live in a multi-person relationship, but a rather closed one, I was attacked. Attacked that I'm jealous, that I'm possessive, that I can't share, that I don't know how to share at all, what's my point (Interview 1).

The study confirms that non-monogamy hides many different forms, some intertwining and forming hybrids. The main dividing line seems to divide the distinction between sexual and romantic relationships, and between the hierarchy (main couple) and no hierarchy (here, a particularly interesting phenomenon is the avoidance of any naming).

Motivations

Respondents indicated various motivations. One group of motivations is related to the realization of needs, or the lack of their realization at an appropriate level in the primary relationship. We can describe them as a group of pragmatic, psychological, and sexual motivations. This was especially relevant to swingers and open relationships. Sometimes these needs were "revealed" due to the crisis of the primary relationship:

And because I felt lonely in this relationship, my wife did not care about the closeness between us, it was about twofold closeness. About emotions, but also about sex. [...] And at some point, I decided that I couldn't go on like this and that I would have to change something. And then we came to an agreement that I would be able to meet someone and do something (Interview 5).

Much more evident, however, are motivations related to the search for one's identity and self-discovery. In this category, we can distinguish the motivations of respondents who believe that "that's who they are."

From my current perspective, it seems to me that I have always been polyamorous. That is, I've always been able to feel something for more than one person at the same time. And, when I was a teenager, I thought it was completely normal, but I also believed that you have to choose one person, otherwise, you will hurt someone (Interview 4).

Some respondents referred to consensual non-monogamy as their conscious choice (the word 'choice' was strongly emphasized), based on the absence of constraints, conventions, and social coercion, and this was particularly clear

² Unicorn hunting is a situation where a couple is looking for an extra person (women) to join the relationship. It often refers to a situation in which this third person is treated unequally and objectively (the person to fulfill the fantasy of a threesome).

in the case of polyamorous people and those choosing relational anarchy. Sometimes, respondents explicitly emphasized the fact that this is also a choice, “despite” the norm prevailing in society, an element of searching for one’s identity, constructing a story about oneself, and an element related to freedom.

This is my biggest complaint, aside from a number of technical remarks, about the education I received, but the very fact that I was not informed that I could make a choice, that I could live differently. It means that studies, marriage, and credit are not the only ways to live (Interview 10).

There was also the notion in some statements that non-monogamy in the respondent’s opinion is a choice that goes hand in hand with greater self-awareness, tied to a matter of better self-knowledge or even higher self-development (Interview 15) and insight into oneself (also on a spiritual level – Interview 9). This includes a very strong rejection of traditional notions of love as “two halves of an apple” seen as limiting or even as “an expression of our inner deficits” (Interview 9).

Stigmatization

Nevertheless, choosing a non-normative relationship in the opinion of respondents also has its shadows, and one of them is the potential or experienced stigma, including potential risks such as worse relationships with family and friends, negative reactions at work, etc. Although most respondents chose to tell others about their relationship model, most often close friends, less often family (possibly not the whole family). The decision to admit involvement in non-monogamy was largely linked to the stability of one’s professional position (no threat of job loss). Most of the respondents were representatives of such professions.

Most, however, faced negative comments and reactions, so they usually choose not to flaunt their relationship and leave it partially hidden, something well illustrated by the following quote:

I don’t share it particularly. On the other hand, there are a few people who know about it. It seems to me that there are a lot of stereotypes about polyamory and non-monogamous relationships, and I feel judged negatively, while I also try to... maybe yes, if I’m afraid it will affect my relationship with others, I’m more cautious about it (Interview 8).

This also suggests that the topic of non-monogamy is not universally accepted in the surveyed population or is accepted but in selected circles.

Relationship principles and approach

Based on the theoretical framework, an attempt was made to see whether there were elements in the respondents’ approaches and principles for their

Table 2. Indicators

Indicator	Traditional pattern	New pattern	Example of a text coded as a „new pattern”
1. Defining the relationship	Defining statuses	Without defining	I try not to use terms like relationship or partner too much regarding my relationships, for the reason that I feel that there may be expectations attached to them that are not necessarily healthy or good for anyone(Interview 6).
2. Relationship rules	Clearly established and defined (e.g., veto right)	Liquid or none, full freedom	We are open, I don't have any rules that I can't do something with someone(Interview 7).
3.Understanding security in the relationship	Certainty and stability understood as security	A different understanding of security	In my case... over time, I've noticed and come to a place where that sense of security comes more from the fact that the people I'm with have complete freedom and they still choose to be with me (Interview 2).
4.The role of communication	Intimacy and secrecy	Openness and no taboos	Rejecting taboo topics, there are no topics that are not discussed, such as sex, sexually transmitted diseases, or fetishes or... I don't know, well I don't have such topics (Interview 10).
5.Romantic ideal	Idealism and belief in „two halves of the apple” (even if only with the main partner)	Realism	What bothers me the most is the myth of the one person who is written to us and a little bit of a related myth of such magic that it all comes by itself, magically happening with the right person (Interview 8).
6. The link between love and sexuality	Related	Separated, sexuality „released”	For me, as much as possible, there can be a sexual relationship without love (Interview 2).
7. Hierarchy/ equality	Hierarchy – the other person is „unique”	No hierarchy – equality, no uniqueness	As I meet, that's how it is at the moment, some new people, I look at what's possible with them whether it's mateship or friendship or something deeper emotionally, and I simply match what I can have from that relationship and what I can give from myself on occasion to what can be created within that relationship (Interview 10).
8. Me/us	Focus on „us” and shared benefits	Focus on “me” and my benefits	I am the person who decides and has the most power when it comes to my relationships. Polyamory has helped me build such a very strong and deep relationship with myself (Interview 2).

relationships that indicated a new pattern of relationships (which was the hypothesis) or a more traditional view. Eight indicators were selected: 1. Defining the relationship; 2. Relationship rules; 3. Understanding security in the relationship; 4. The role of communication; 5. Romantic ideals; 6. The link between love and sexuality; 7. Hierarchy/ equality; 8. Me/we (see Table 2).

Based on the following indicators, the interviews were analyzed and coded based on categorization ('traditional'/'new' pattern). This provided a more general view of the interview data.

The analysis showed that, for all fifteen cases analyzed, the features of the new approach were identified and coded. However, only five of them had all (or almost all) of the features (four interviews with relational anarchists and one polyamorous person). Another five cases showed more features of the traditional pattern, while the other five were in the middle. There was a very clear distinction between the triad, or permanently closed relationship, more similar in nature to a traditional polygamous relationship, even though it assumed a certain degree of readiness for a potential opening. Also, some of the polyamorous hierarchical/open relationships and two cases of swingers' relationships manifested more characteristics of the "traditional" pattern, with a particularly visible separation of the world of the "couple" and additional people who were treated as acquaintances, temporary or additional relationships (conditioned only by the positive consent of the primary partner).

Discussion of the results

Our analysis confirmed the hypothesis that non-monogamous relationships present characteristics indicative of a new pattern but to varying degrees. All respondents indicated the very high importance of open and frank communication, which is not surprising since consensually non-monogamous individuals/couples must have already broken taboos in their communication. On the other hand, openness and communication without taboos were indicated as a very important features of non-monogamous relationships.

Only a few respondents also shared a belief in traditional ideals of love, which is also not surprising as far as they refer to the concept of a monogamous relationship in European culture. Sometimes there were also some inconsistencies in the approach to this topic, when the respondent on the one hand rejected the ideals of monogamous love, but at the same time expressed a romantic belief that the relationship with the main partner would last "forever." In some interviews, a clash between two completely different perspectives can be seen directly:

You also have this awareness that you are also the most important person for this person (Interview 3).

[...] I wouldn't want to build a relationship on that, nor would I want someone to build a relationship with me on that, that I am most important to them (Interview 11).

Hierarchical relationships were also characterized by a clear definition of a partner (partner, boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife) and set rules (what you can, what you can't, a "veto" right: the need to end a relationship with someone if the primary partner doesn't agree).

Relational anarchy and people driving their identification to such a relationship model differed very much. Very characteristic of those identifying themselves as anarchic was the avoidance of defining their relationships, valuing them, and the absence of rules or restrictions on their partner (or minimal restrictions, for example, on safe sex only). From this perspective, it is also hard to speak of a "shared world" for the couple, as the primary couple cannot be distinguished, and each relationship has its separate world. Consequently, intimacy and a sense of security are based on a different foundation as well (based on individuals being in a relationship because they want to, not because they have to).

Respondents also indicated that the discovery of non-monogamy changed their view of the world, including in the areas of identity, lifestyle or values, and their approach to sexuality.

I completely changed my approach to sexuality; I discovered something like positive sexuality. These are small things, but their amalgam is such a holistic life change. I, when I was in these monogamous relationships, had right-wing views. [...] Without polyamory, I would be a much sadder person. Not even in the context of being able to have more people. But in the context of this very positive atmosphere of communication, talking about my needs, the absence of certain taboos, the absence of certain inhibitions. [...] Everything is oriented to minimize suffering and maximize pleasure, understanding, and positive emotions (Interview 10).

It seems that the new pattern perfectly reflects the belief that the appearance of a relationship or the rules in it should not be determined by the norms imposed by society, but by how the people involved in the relationship determine it, which is a matter of negotiation. In this sense, the following quote perfectly illustrates this:

People rarely think about how to build these relationships, they just often take what they hear, what they think it should be because everyone does it, that way. Any relationship will be cool if it's based on the rules set by the people involved and not because that is "what is done" (Interview 7).

Conclusions

Intimate relationships and families are very personal spheres, and, at the same time, spheres hitherto regulated by social norms. As the literature has shown, the biggest change that is taking place is the privatization and autonomization of relationships. An increasing variety of permissible choices is emerging, while at the same time, these models are increasingly presented as equivalent, depending solely on the preferences of the people involved. The discourse on intimate relationships is also changing, including what is presented by experts and therapists. Consensual non-monogamy is one example, going directly against the strong norm of monogamy, in its various forms.

“Consensual non-monogamy” accommodates very different concepts. It can include multiple relationships that are open or closed, hierarchical or non-hierarchical, relationships based on love or exclusively on sexuality and realized as a couple or separately. The most important four categories appearing in our study are swing, open relationships, hierarchical polyamory, and relational anarchy. It is also worth noting that these terms are not always sharply delineated, and their understanding can vary from person to person. Relationship anarchy stood out particularly strongly.

In justifying and motivating their involvement in such relationships, respondents very often referred to self-discovery and the choice to consciously be a “non-normative” choice, attributing to it a significance at least equivalent to the choice of monogamy, sometimes considering it a more conscious choice and related to their development and maturity (perhaps even the courage to follow their model despite society). In some cases, the discovery of non-monogamy/polyamory and the redefinition of concepts (such as relationships, love, ties between love and sexuality, and understanding boundaries) were the basis for changing the form of the relationship (in this sense, changing the code changed the structure). This sometimes led to a change in one’s self-image and world-image, and redefining what is considered to be the norm (since the norm is already the result of negotiations within the couple/group, not what is considered the norm in wider society). At the same time, respondents also bore the “cost” of this choice by experiencing negative reactions from the social environment and often choosing to partially hide their relationship.

In addition to exploring motivation and identification, the research identified eight other distinctive features of the ‘new pattern’ that emerged in the respondents’ statements. In each of the relationships studied, features attributable to the ‘new pattern’ were manifested, but their intensity varied. Where there was a core couple, and the relationship was limited to sexual contact, these elements were lower. Wherever additional relationships were romantically involved, the number of these elements increased. They appeared most strongly

in the relational anarchy model. Only in one situation (Interview 6) were all indicators coded as a 'new pattern.' Undoubtedly, however, the difference between relational anarchy and other forms of non-monogamy was significant.

In relationship anarchy, a great many features of the new pattern emerged, namely the negotiability of rules, the rejection of traditional ideals, the indeterminacy of statuses (very clear references to not naming the relationship, not differentiating relationships into more important and less important), fluidity and change (and opening up to the fact that relationships evolve), defining security separately from stability, and focusing on "me" rather than "us" (no central "couple"), and identification as constructing a story about oneself.

If we were to construct a scale of traditional and new patterns, then relational anarchy seems the closest thing to this new 'ideal'. Here, however, we reach the limitations of the results. First, it is the fact that the survey was conducted in one population, a group of 15 people. Second, it was based on the declarations and opinions of the respondents, who did not have to share the full picture with the researcher. Third, it was done at a specific point in time, and we need to be aware that relationships may subsequently become more rigid, disintegrate or change their form again.

In his book, Giddens (1992, p.12) asks, "How much can we glean about generic social changes from such a piece of research, carried out with limited numbers of people, in a single country? We can learn, I think, essentially what we need to know for the purposes of this study." Although we can in no way apply the results of this research to the wider population, additional and interesting topics for broader research and further reflection are emerging.

First, there is the question of to what extent we are dealing with a change in understanding (and the semantic meaning of) love and relationships. Non-monogamous relationships were chosen for the study precisely because they seem to lie "as far from the norm as possible" in the context of the sample population and at the same time are examples of postmodern relationships. Yet are there also many elements of the "new pattern" emerging in monogamous couples? To what extent can the rise in popularity of non-monogamy also be a symptom of a broader social change in the area of intimacy (or perhaps not just intimacy, but in general in the broader sphere of normativity and reevaluation of meanings and senses)? Does it nevertheless remain a niche issue and a sphere "outside the norm"? Finally, we repeat Luhmann's questions: "To what extent can a change in the code (and the meanings transmitted) affect a change in structure in a broader context? Do changes in senses and discourse change the structure (of relationships) or are they the result of changes?" These questions seem to be a very interesting prelude to further research in this direction, also in the context of Poland's population.

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