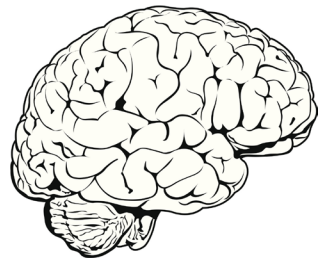


THE PROBLEM WITH POLY- NORMATIVITY

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THE PROBLEM WITH POLYNORMATIVITY

Polyamory is getting a lot of airtime in the media these days. It's quite remarkable, really, and it represents a major shift over the last five to ten years.

The problem—and it's hardly surprising—is that the form of poly that's getting by far the most airtime is the one that's as similar to traditional monogamy as possible, because that's the least threatening to the dominant social order.

Ten years ago, I think my position was a lot more live-and-let-live. You know, different strokes for different folks. I do poly my way, you do it your way, and we're all doing something non-monogamous so we can consider ourselves to have something in common that's different from the norm. We share a certain kind of oppression, in that the world doesn't appreciate or value non-monogamy. We share relationship concerns, like logistics challenges and time management and jealousy. So we're all in this together, right?

Today, though, I've come to the conclusion that I have much stronger feelings

about this. I mean Feelings of serious squick, not just of YKINMKBYKIOK [1]. Feelings of genuine offense, not of comradeship. Fundamentally, I think we're doing radically different things. The poly movement—if it can even be called that, which is debatable for a number of reasons—is beginning to fracture along precisely the same lines as the gay/lesbian/queer one has. (You could argue it has been fractured along this fault line forever, but it hasn't always seemed quite as crystal-clear to me as it does right now.)

At its most basic, I'd say some people's poly looks good to the mainstream, and some people's doesn't. The mainstream loves to think of itself as edgy, sexy and cool. The mainstream likes to co-opt whatever fresh trendy thing it can in order to convince itself that it's doing something new and exciting, because that sells magazines, event tickets, whatever. The mainstream likes to do all this while erecting as many barriers as it can against real, fundamental value shifts that might topple the structure of How the World Works. In this case, that structure is the primacy of the couple.

The media presents a clear set of poly norms, and overwhelmingly showcases people who speak about and practice polyamory within those norms. I'll refer to this as polynormativity. (I don't think I'm quite coining a term here, but not far off, as most of the paltry seven hundred-ish Google hits I can find for the term are about obscure legalese I don't understand. I kinda wish it was already a thing, frankly. So, uh, my gift to you.)

Here are the four norms that make up polynormativity as I see it.

1 – POLYAMORY STARTS WITH A COUPLE

The first time I came across the term “poly couple” I laughed out loud. It seemed to me the most evident of oxymorons—jumbo shrimp, friendly fire, firm estimate, poly couple. But lo and behold, it's really taken root, and nobody seems to be blinking. Polyamory is presented as a thing that a couple does, as opposed to a relationship philosophy and approach that individual people ascribe to, as a result of which they may end up as part of a couple but—because *poly!*—may just as well be partnered with six people, or part of a triad, or single, or what have you. With this norm, the whole premise of multiple relationships is narrowed down to what sounds, essentially, like a hobby that

[1] Stands for “your kink is not my kink but your kink is okay,” a common phrase used among perverts to basically say we don't all have to like doing a thing in order for that thing to be acceptable.

a traditionally committed pair of people decide to do together, like taking up ballroom dancing or learning to ski. So much for a radical re-thinking of human relationships. So much for anyone who doesn't come pre-paired.

2 – POLYAMORY IS HIERARCHICAL

Following from the norm that poly begins (and presumably ends) with two, we must of course impose a hierarchy on whatever else happens. Else, how would we know who the actual *real* couple is in all this? If you add more people, it might get blurry and confusing! Thus, the idea of primary relationships and secondary relationships emerges. This is what I call hierarchical poly.

“Primary” implies top-level importance. “Secondary” implies less importance. Within this model, it's completely normal to put one person's feelings ahead of another's as a matter of course. Let me say this again. It's completely normal, even expected, that one person's feelings, desires and opinions will matter more than another's. It is normal for one person to be flown in first class and the other in economy as a matter of course, based on their respective status alone. And we think this is progressive?

Of course this plays out differently in different situations. This model is more likely to work out relatively well if the people involved are super kind, considerate, consistent, emotionally secure and generous, and less likely to work out happily if the people involved are mean, inconsiderate, inconsistent, insecure or selfish. It's sort of like how you're more likely to keep your job in a recession if your boss is a really nice person than if they really are mostly interested in the bottom line. Either way, this structure ensures that secondaries are dependent on the goodwill of primaries, and that they don't have much say.

This is precisely what gives rise to things like Franklin Veaux's controversial (?!) proposed secondary bill of rights [2] or a recent post that went viral outlining how to treat non-primary partners well [3] (note how these are *not* mainstream media articles). These posts make me sick to my stomach. Not because there's anything wrong with what they're saying, but because—according to secondaries, who are exactly the people we should be listening to here—it

[2] “Successful secondary relationships. Secondary partners have rights too...”, April 2013. See morethantwo.com/polyforsecondaries.html#bor

[3] “Non-primary partners tell: How to treat us well”, November 2012.

See solopoly.net/2012/11/27/non-primary-partners-tell-how-to-treat-us-well/

means that a lot of polynormative people actually need to be told how not to treat other people like complete garbage. These posts are a crash course in *basic human decency*. That they are even remotely necessary, to say nothing of extremely popular, is really fucking disturbing.

I'm going to digress into a note about terminology for a moment here. I take serious issue with definitions of "primary" that go something like "the primary relationship is when you live together, have kids, share finances, etc." No. Wrong. Disagree. This is a deeply flawed definition. Any of the elements that go into this type of definition of "primary" can just as easily be had in a relationship that isn't "primary," or, for that matter, that isn't even romantic or sexual. People can live with a roommate, share finances with a platonic life partner, have kids with an ex they never speak to; and on the flip side, a person can consider another person to be a "primary" partner even without living together, sharing finances or reproducing. "Primary" and "secondary" are about a hierarchy-based relationship model, not about specific life circumstances.

"Primary" and "secondary" are not especially ambiguous as far as terms go. With that in mind, I will add a plea here directed at poly people: if you don't mean to create or imply a hierarchy, don't use "primary" and "secondary" as shorthand. Many of you are geeks, so accuracy must be important to you, right? Think of this as sort of like not mixing up *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* or Mac and PC. Instead of "primary," talk about your domestic partner, your long-term partner, the person you spend most of your time with, your husband or wife—whatever applies. Instead of "secondary," talk about your occasional date, your casual lover, your boyfriend or girlfriend or secret agent lover man, your annual long-distance affair, your new squeeze with whom you're just figuring things out, or whatever other terms explain what you're up to. None of these are about hierarchy. They're just relationship descriptors. (I'll postpone my rant about how some people think "husband" and "wife" are more *real* than "partner" or "boyfriend" and "girlfriend.") On the flip side, don't just drop using the words "primary" and "secondary" in order to *look* less hierarchical while still making relationship decisions in a very firmly hierarchy-based manner. No false advertising in either direction, okay?

Let me clarify my position here just in case. There is nothing wrong with serious, long-term, committed domestic partnership. There is also nothing wrong with dating casually, and feeling just fine about hanging out with a sweetie way less often than that sweetie hangs out with their spouse, say. Sometimes, a relationship is just not destined to be long-term, or domestic,

or local, or involve meeting each other's parents. This is not a bad thing. It's just a thing. It's also not the same thing as being "secondary." I am not playing with semantics here. I'm talking about frameworks for viewing relationships, making decisions, coming up with rules—more on that in the next point—and treating real, live human beings.

3 – POLYAMORY REQUIRES A LOT OF RULES

If we start out with a couple, and we want to keep that couple firmly in its place as "primary" with all others as "secondary," well, of course we need to come up with a bunch of rules to make sure it all goes according to plan, right? Right. (And there is most certainly a plan [4].)

This is a control-based approach to polyamory that, while not exclusive to couple-based primary-secondary models, is almost inevitable within them. Rules are implicitly set by the "primaries," the "poly couple"—at least that's how most discussions of rules are presented. Some books and websites will tell you ("you" presumably being someone who's part of a currently-mono-gamous, about-to-be-poly couple) that it's really super important not only to have rules, but also to set them out before you go out and do this polyamory thing. If ever you wanted confirmation of the very clearly secondary status of "secondary" partners, this is it: the rules get set before they even show up, and they have no say in 'em. Again... we think this is progressive?

Here's the thing. Rules have an inverse relationship to trust. They are intended to bind someone to someone else's preferences. They are aimed at constraint. I will limit you, and you will limit me, and then we'll both be safe.

When two people are well matched in their values, and have strong mutual trust, they don't need a rule to know how they'll each behave. I mean, how many times do you hear "I'll agree not to kill anyone if you agree not to kill anyone, okay? That'll be our rule. No killing." Of course not. Psychopaths aside, this kind of thing need not be said; we can assume that everyone shares the value of "killing people is bad and I will not do it."

But it's not the least bit uncommon for "poly couples" to create elaborate sets of rules to keep each other strictly bound to only behave in ways that are not scary, not dangerous, and not threatening to the primary bond. We won't kiss

[4] "Death, love and the illusion of control", May 2009.

See sexgeek.wordpress.com/2009/05/22/death-love-and-the-illusion-of-control/

anyone without asking each other first. No overnight dates. If you want to see her more than three times, I have to meet her. If you want to see her more than three times, don't tell me about it, it's too much for me to handle. No falling in love (this one cracks me up in its sheer absurdity). Love is okay, but only if you love him less than me. Anal sex only with me. Anal sex only with others. You have to date exactly the same number of people as I date. No going to our favourite restaurant together. No sleeping in our bed. You have to text me by eleven. I have to call you when I'm leaving her place. And the crowning glory, the holy grail of poly rules: we have veto power! (I've got a whole other post about this one, called "Against the veto" [5], in which I lay out exactly why veto rights are a rotten idea.) The crux: secondaries are secondary, so very secondary that *a person they're not even partnered with can decide if and when they'll get dumped.*

You know, when true danger is involved, I'm all for rules. Rules like, say, you must be at least five feet tall to board this ride... you cannot perform neurosurgery without a medical license... no unprotected anal sex with strangers (note that this kind of rule isn't about a couple, it's about protecting your own precious health!)... no fire play at this event as the ceilings are low and hung with paper streamers. But extensive rules around polyamory are essentially the equivalent of saying that love (or sex, or dating) is dangerous and must be severely regulated so as not to harm anyone. To my mind this is a very strange way of approaching the possibility of great joy and human connection—as though it were a bomb that might detonate if not handled by strict protocol. The more rules you put into place, the more you are indicating that you don't trust the person subject to those rules to operate in a considerate fashion with your shared values at heart. Or, on the reverse, you are indicating that you need to be under strict supervision, failing which you will shit all over your partner's well-being. If you have to legislate something, it's because you don't expect it to happen sans legislation. This is a sad state of affairs in what are ostensibly supposed to be loving, possibly long-term relationships.

Are rules never a good thing? I wouldn't go that far. They can be a necessary evil, a temporary measure to get you through a rough time during which you are presumably working on a better solution. Which you are. Like, *right now*. Right? From a completely different angle, rules can be pleasurable, or erotically (etc.) charged, like in a D/s or M/s relationship—although those too, when

[5] "Against the veto (or, fear by any other name...)", June 2010.
See sexgeek.wordpress.com/2010/06/21/against-the-veto-or-fear-by-any-other-name%E2%80%A6/

imposed from a place of fear or agreed to as a way to avoid penalty, can be a form of unethical binding designed to shore up one person's insecurities at another person's expense. But aside from these very specific and circumscribed instances, rules are best when they are used quite sparingly, and even then, only when other solutions are unavailable.

What other solutions am I talking about? Trust. Plain and simple. Trust is the soil in which polyamory should grow, much like any other kind of love. Say what you mean, always, and all of it. Follow through on your commitments. Don't make promises you can't keep. Assume positive intent. Ask questions. Listen, listen, listen. Ask more questions and listen some more. Soothe fears. Work on your own insecurities at the location from which they spring—inside yourself. Be kind. Be consistent. Be generous. Ask explicitly for what you want. State clearly what you need. Apologize when you fuck up, and try to fix it [6]. Find strategies to compensate for your shortcomings, such as forgetfulness or anxiety or lack of emotional vocabulary or whatever else gets in the way of you being able to do all this stuff skilfully. Yes, this is going to be a lot of work. Do it anyway. Better yet, do it because the work itself brings you joy and makes you feel like you are moving through the world in a way that is profoundly right. If you've messed up on one of these counts, or any other, and it has hurt your partner(s), heal it. Do the work together. Get couples therapy. Practice new communication skills together. Invest your time, energy and effort to make the soil healthy and nourishing rather than in building fences around the garden.

From there, you can request all kinds of behaviours without needing them to be rules. You know, like "I'm really keen to meet your new lover! Can we have tea next week?" or "Hey, will you text when you're on your way home so I know what time to get dinner ready for?" or "It would make me feel cherished and special if we had a brand of wine we drink only with each other" or even "I'm terrified I'm going to lose you and I need some reassurance." Again, this isn't just semantics. These other ways of relating aren't "just like rules." They are about generosity and joy and care, not control and limits and fear. Intent counts here.

[6] "Five steps for fixing a fuck-up", March 2009.
See sexgeek.wordpress.com/2009/03/02/five-steps-for-fixing-a-fuck-up/

4 – POLYAMORY IS HETEROSEXUAL(-ISH). ALSO, CUTE AND YOUNG AND WHITE. ALSO NEW AND EXCITING AND SEXY!

This element of polynormativity doesn't relate directly to the other three, but since we are talking about media representation here, it's well worth mentioning. Polyamory is resolutely presented in the media as a thing heterosexuals do, except sometimes for bisexual women who have a primary male partner and secondary female partners. It is exceedingly rare for lesbian, gay or queer poly configurations to be included in mainstream representations of polyamory, even though LGBTQ circles are absolute hotbeds of polyamorous activity, and LGBTQ people have a long and illustrious history of non-monogamy, recent enthusiasm about marriage notwithstanding. Go to just about any LGBTQ gathering—even the most mainstream—and you can't swing a cat without hitting at least half a dozen people who are doing some sort of non-monogamy, from regular "monogamish" bathhouse adventures to full-on poly families. It's so common that it feels (gasp!) normal.

But if the mainstream media were to give too many column inches to LGBTQ polyamory, then people might think poly is a gay thing, and that wouldn't sell nearly as many magazines. So the typical polynormative hype article goes something like, "Meet Bob and Sue. They're a poly couple. They're primary partners and they date women together." Or "they each date women on the side" or "they have sex parties in their basement" or sometimes, though more rarely, "Bob dates women and Sue dates men." Mainstream representations rarely break the "one penis per party" rule, which is exactly as offensive as it sounds. You don't get Bob dating Dave, or Sue dating Tim and Jim and John while Bob stays home with a movie. Because whoa! That's just going too far. I mean, playing around with women is one thing, but if you bring a second man into the picture, don't the two guys need to, like, duke it out? Prove who's manlier? Because evolutionary psychology! Because nature! Because when there is a penis (and only one penis) involved it is *real* sex and that means a *real* relationship and we must have a *real* relationship to have a primary-secondary structure and we must have a primary-secondary structure to be a poly couple! (Hmm. So maybe this part does relate to my other three points after all.)

All of this creates a situation where polyamory is presented as a hip new trend that edgy straight folks are trying out, and boy, are they ever proud of it. Needless to say this whole framing varies from clueless about queers to downright offensive.

Add the mainstream media's desire to show images of poly people who are cute, young and white and we are getting a very narrow picture indeed. The magazines want to showcase people who are as conventionally attractive as possible, aged between 20 and 40, and almost never anything other than Caucasian (unless they're people of colour who are really, y'know, exotic and sexy, like smoldering black men or gorgeous Asian women). It's a crying shame, because the stories of poly people who are in their sixties and seventies would be amazing to hear. And no, not all poly people are white, but when white is the only image people see of poly, it sure does create a barrier discouraging people of colour from understanding themselves as potentially poly.

The media is also mostly interested in the sexy factor. The deep impact that a given person's camera-friendliness has on the media's willingness to showcase them cannot be underestimated. And with that comes the push to sexualize as much as possible. I will never forget, for instance, what happened when I was featured in *Châtelaine* magazine with a partner about ten years ago. The photographer pushed hard for me to take my top off for the shoot, assuring me it would be tasteful. When I asked him why he wanted to take the showing-skin angle, he said "because you're not ugly. It's really hard to photograph people who are ugly." Um, thanks? My blouse stayed on, but apparently young, white and cute were still the order of the day, because they still had my picture take up way more space than the other people who were featured in the article. You know, the "ugly" ones. Yechh.

Don't get me wrong. Sex and attraction are significant forces in poly relationships. This isn't a bad thing, and I feel no need to get all "it's not about the sex" [7] on you. It is about the sex, at least for most of us. But it's not *only* about the sex. If it were only about the sex, it wouldn't be polyamory—it would be sleeping around, which is awesome, but not usually committed and romantic. If it were never about the sex, it also wouldn't be polyamory—we'd just be a bunch of friends, which is also awesome, but also not usually romantic, though possibly committed. But the media is really bad at striking that balance. The mainstream is really interested in orgies, and who sleeps with who, and how often, and wow threesomes! And did I mention young, cute and white?

These articles are looking to present a fantasy of conventionally good-looking people having delightful transgressive (but not scary transgressive) sex while

[7] "It's not about sex and other lies", August 2010.

See sexgeek.wordpress.com/2010/08/23/its-not-about-sex-and-other-lies/

remaining as firmly within the boundaries of conventional couple-based relationship-building as humanly possible under the circumstances. That fantasy sells things. It does the rest of us no favours.

* * *

— I'm adding this section now (a week after the original post) because a few people have now raised the question of why I am using the acronym LGBQ without including the T for transgender/transsexual. In trying to keep a tight focus on the topic of polynormativity as being about media representation of a certain relationship model, and the problems with both the representation and the model – with “tight” already being a bit of a stretch given the length of this post – I didn't go into the broader list of ways in which polynormativity supports other kinds of omissions and normativities. In making that editorial choice, I may have perpetuated several of those omissions myself. So, clarification is of course warranted. (Some of the following appears in the comments section, so you will see it repeated if you read through that too.)

So here it is: I am increasingly uncomfortable with the acronym LGBTQ, as the inclusion of a T for “transgender” (a gender identity) at the end of a list of letters standing for sexual orientations (not genders) bears some implicit inaccuracy. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer people may be trans or non-trans; and transgender people may of course be gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or straight (and beyond) in orientation. Not all trans people feel an affiliation with gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer politics or communities, and not all people with a history of transition feel a need to overtly identify as transgendered, even if they do identify as gay, lesbian, bi or queer. I don't take any issue with using LGBTQ to describe, for instance, a magazine or a group or a committee or what have you, provided the entity actually serves the people represented by that entire acronym and isn't just trying to look extra-progressive. In this post, I'm talking about orientation, not gender identity, so it felt (and still feels) inaccurate to throw the T into that specific list.

But that doesn't mean trans people have no place in this discussion. Quite the opposite. The polynormative model also perpetuates cishnormativity, in two ways. (Cishnormativity is the idea that all people who are assigned a given sex at birth still identify with that sex and express an “appropriate” gender identity as a result, and that anything else is weird or bad.) One is the media representation element – trans people rarely show up in mainstream media representations of polyamory. So this is cishnormativity by omission. The other, more complex piece becomes evident when we dig a little deeper into the “one penis per party” rule, and into how we understand sexual orientation. “One penis per party” relies on the idea that “penis” can be used as shorthand for “man,” because men always have penises, and only men have penises. This, of course, erases the experiences

of a lot of trans folks for whom genitals and gender don't match up, whether because they are men who weren't born with penises or because they're women who were (regardless of what a person's genitals look like at this point in their life, or what words they use for them).

"One penis per party," more broadly, also relies on the idea that men and women are naturally different in some sort of essentialist, fundamental, biology-based way, such that having a (in this case secondary) relationship with a man is going to be substantively different because man than it would be with a woman because woman. This idea ends up pre-determining how people think a relationship is going to go – how "real" the sex is going to be, how intense the emotions are likely to get, and therefore how "safe" it is to "allow" one's primary partner to engage in that relationship. This doesn't account for the possible presence of trans people in the equation. But even if that's a non-existent possibility in a given situation for whatever reason, it speaks to a viewpoint in which women and men are naturally like this or like that because of their anatomy. This, as a conceptual model, keeps trans people – even if you don't know any (to your knowledge!) and don't have any occasion to meet any – in the boxes they were assigned to at birth. It implies that the gender they have moved into is somehow less real or valid. It also keeps the vast spectrum of people who are not trans – whether cisgendered, or, like myself, gender-fluid or somewhere else in the non-binary range – tethered to the boxes they were assigned at birth, insisting that those boxes determine who we are, who we can be, how we can fuck, and what it's like to be romantically involved with us. Ultimately, cisnormativity hurts everyone. The people most egregiously damaged end up being the people who are the most visibly different, which often means trans women. But cisnormativity isn't "just" a trans issue. This is about creating space for all of us to exist as we wish.

Like with any normative model, polynormativity works in concert with a range of other normative models to create a full, if rarely explicit, picture in people's minds about How the World Works, about who counts and who doesn't, about what's real and what's not worth considering. As such, in addition to questions of race and age and orientation, as I mentioned earlier, and of gender, as I've fleshed out here, it holds hands with other problematic ideas. Ideas of what family is or should be, and of how kids can or should work into the equation; questions of illness/health and ability/disability, including STI status; questions of class and economic position; and a range of others. But, as a commenter pointed out, this is a blog post, it isn't a book. Yet...

End of new section! —

* * *

In sum, I have three key problems with polynormativity.

FIRST PROBLEM: THE POLYNORMATIVE MODEL IS KINDA SUCKY.

Perhaps it might work well, maayyybe, for some people—I won't go so far as to say it never does. But it comes with a host of problems for everyone involved, most notably for those who are in the least empowered place within the relationship structure, but also in more subtle and insidious ways for those who are in the more privileged place within the structure. Gee, whaddaya know, that's a lot like pretty much every other privilege/oppression system, ever! I'm going to stop short of saying to polynormative folks, "hey, you're doing it wrong," but, well, honestly? Not far off. Maybe closer to "you're missing the point."

Because of this stance I suspect I may get irate or defensive comments here from a lot of polynormative folks who feel just great about their model. To them, I will say the following. If you are a member of a "primary" pair in a polynormative model, and your "secondary" partner(s) can provide just as spirited a defense of your model as you do, or even more so—not a defense of you as individuals, nor of your relationship, but of the polynormative model itself—without leaving anything out or fibbing even a little bit so they don't risk creating conflict or possibly losing you as a partner, then you fall within the minority of polynormative folks for whom the model works really, super well for *all* concerned. (And I do mean all. If it's only working really great for the primary couple, the *model* isn't working.) If you're one such bunch, there's no need to get defensive—I'm not really criticizing you anyway. If, however, that's not the case for you, please hold off on your defensiveness and think really seriously about the critiques I'm raising instead.

When I start seeing a plethora of mainstream media testimonials from happy, fulfilled secondary partners about how awesome the primary-secondary model is... when these secondaries start writing the latest hit poly books, giving the advice, having the lead roles in the reality TV shows, and doing all this *as secondaries* (not as people who happen to be secondary to someone but it's all okay and balanced and fair because they're also primary to someone else)... when they show their faces in photos, use their full and real names in articles, and just generally feel not the least bit weird about their position in these poly structures right alongside the primary partners who are showcased this way...

when this is not an occasional exception, but the main kind of representation I see by and of secondary partners... then maybe I will amend my stance here. I'm not holding my breath.

SECOND PROBLEM: THE MEDIA PRESENTS THESE POLY NORMS AS, WELL, NORMS. AS THE WAY TO DO POLY.

At best, there's a brief mention that some people do some other sorts of poly, over there, and we don't really understand them, or maybe those forms are way too complicated for us to summarize in a 1,000-word article. (Triads! Quads! Families! Ws and Xs and Greek alphabets and constellations and ecosystems! It's all so scary. Also, math is hard.)

But most of the time, "other" (ooh, look at that construction!) kinds of poly aren't mentioned at all. There is this one way, and here it is! Isn't it grand? So brave! So unusual! Really quite cutting-edge, don't you think? ... Well, whether intentionally or otherwise, this approach ends up flattening the picture of poly, depicting it in its simplest, most dumbed-down terms. It's no coincidence that this version of poly is the one that most closely resembles the one-man, one-woman, marriage-based, nuclear-family kind of relationship we're all told we're supposed to aspire to. All we've done is relax the rules around sex a bit, and unlike (but not *that* unlike) swingers' ethics, we're also "allowing" the emotional end of things to actually exist, in the sense that we have relationships and are not "just" schtupping. But not the kind of relationships that actually "threaten" (?!) the "primary" couple. Not with people who, God forbid, make demands on one or both of us, or challenge us, or want to have a say in how things go. Then, well, they get the boot, because primary comes first! We can all agree on that, can't we? Of course. That's the essence of primary relationships. It's pretty clear in the terminology. One person comes first, the others do not. This is why the mainstream can wrap its head around poly at all: because understood this way, it's really not that fundamentally different from monogamy.

THIRD PROBLEM: THIS WHOLE STATE OF AFFAIRS SCREWS OVER THE NEWBIES.

Because of this overwhelming slant in media representation, a lot of folks who are new to poly are operating at a great disadvantage.

I'm not really much one to idealize the past, but boy, was it different ten or fifteen years ago. Back in my day (ha!), if you wanted to learn about poly, there was one source: *The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt (as Janet Hardy was known at the time). It was all right. Not perfect. Heavily slanted toward sex-party-attending Bay Area granola types, and written at such a basic language level that it wouldn't go over anyone's head, but overall pretty solid, and nicely thought-provoking. Deborah Anapol's *Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits* was never nearly as popular or sexy, but it did become a quiet classic, and provided another angle. And, well, that was it. Beyond that, there were a few online discussion forums and potentially, if you lived in a big city, real-life local poly groups. This meant that if you wanted to learn about how to "do" polyamory, you pretty much had to make it up by yourself (which can be a good thing, though extra-challenging); talk to people in your local community, which was probably relatively small but also probably pretty warm and supportive; or attend a conference somewhere far away that brought together a bunch of people. And those people might be doing poly in any number of ways, primary-secondary being just one. (Even then, it was a pretty darned common one, so I'm not saying that polynormativity is entirely a new problem—it's just worse now than ever.)

Right now, though, you can google "polyamory" and get a whole lot of nearly-identical polynormative hype articles, and you can meet up with locals who've read the same articles you just did, and you can all get together and do polynormative poly exactly the way the media told you to. And if that's all you ever bother to do then essentially you are selling yourself short. You are trading in the monogamous norm for polynormativity, which relatively speaking isn't all that much of a stretch, and stopping there because you may very well think that's all there is (and you already racked up a whole bunch of cool points anyway). You aren't encouraged to really think about this stuff without any imposed models at all, which means you never get to figure out what actually might work best for you. As such, the most fundamental element of polyamory—that of rejecting the monogamous standard, and radically rethinking how you understand, make meaning of and practice love, sex, relationships, commitment, communication, and so forth—is lost in favour of a cookie-cutter model that's as easy as one, two, three. The deepest and most significant benefit of polyamory has become increasingly obscured by media representation, and as a result, is getting farther and farther out of reach for anyone who's just starting out.

* * *

I feel the need to reiterate, one last time, that my problem here is with the polynormative model and the mainstream media's insistence on it—not with a specific relationship structure or with any people who happen to practice it. Yes, the polynormative model and the primary-secondary relationship structure do happen to overlap often, but I can't tell by looking at you what process, values or circumstances brought you to your current structure, or why you chose your terminology, so I can't and won't criticize or judge individual people or poly groupings on the sole basis of having a primary-secondary structure. If this post provokes a sense of defensiveness in you, I invite you to sit with that and think about why.

The key distinction here is between philosophy and current situation or practice. This is similar to how sexual orientation and current sexual practice are not one and the same. You can, for instance, be gay and currently celibate; or bisexual, but these days having sex with only women; or fundamentally straight, but involved with someone of the same sex (though I know some folks would debate that last one). When it comes to polyamory, sometimes, regardless of your philosophy, you may end up being in one big significant live-together kind of relationship and have one or more less-serious or less-committed or less-intense relationships as well. It's the polynormative mindset I have a problem with, and its prevalence—not the form a given poly relationship constellation may actually take.

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If you'd like to expand outside the polynormative model, I have some recommended reading for you. First, read Wendy-O-Matik's *Redefining Our Relationships*. Then, check out Deborah Anapol's new *Polyamory in the 21st Century: Love and Intimacy with Multiple Partners*. (I haven't read it in full yet myself, but the excerpts I've seen lead me to believe Dr. Anapol has a lot of really wise shit to say about non-polynormative models, though I don't think she uses that term specifically.) Spend some time reading Franklin Veaux [8]. Read my 10 Rules for Happy Non-Monogamy [9]. If you're doing D/s or M/s relationships, read Raven Kaldera's *Power Circuits: Polyamory in a Power Dynamic* (full disclosure: I contributed an essay to it). Look for information, ideas, works that

[8] See morethantwo.com

[9] "10 realistic rules for good non-monogamous relationships", June 2007.

See sexgeek.wordpress.com/2007/06/10/10-realistic-rules-for-good-non-monogamous-relationships/

challenge you to think hard, build your skills and stretch your heart. It's out there. Your move.

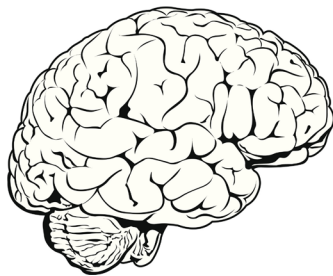
Andrea Zanin,
January 2013

Also available in English:

- *Bouteldja, her «sisters» and us*, by Mélusine (2016)
- *Bouteldja, «a sister» who wishing you well*, by Lala Mliha (2017)

Éditions *Tout mais pas l'indifférence*
<https://infokiosques.net/tmpli>

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TOUT MAIS PAS L'INDIFFÉRENCE