

Why (not) simply loving? Polyamorous reflections

by Marion Herbert and Erik Zika

This short reflective piece was offered at the 12th International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference, in Adelaide, Australia in November 2014.

We are from Austria, working as psychotherapists in Vienna. We want to speak about an option for intimate relationships that is today known as polyamory. In a psychotherapeutic setting, we have been exploring this concept for four years. As private individuals, however, polyamory is a concept that has been with us for quite some time. This is one of the reasons why we want to make a contribution to sensitise the field of psychotherapy to the effects of dominant normative ideas about relationships. We also want to shine a light on marginalised forms of life and love outside of these norms.

Polyamory is a concept of relationship in which it is possible for the involved individuals to enter sexual and/or love relationships with more than one male and/or female partners in a transparent way and at the same time.

Some time ago we have started to interview individuals who live polyamorous relationships. Using a questionnaire that we developed, we have asked them about their experiences, their values, as well as their hopes or requests towards psychotherapy and psychotherapists. Let us give you a brief overview on the results of this questionnaire as well as our personal insights from our work as psychotherapists. The results have revealed a number of key themes.

Equality of relationship forms

The main message from our research is that polyamorous forms of relationships should be seen as equal to other forms of relationships, such as leading a single life, romantic love in the classic couple setting, open partnerships, and so on and so forth. To make this equality possible in psychotherapeutic settings, it is first necessary that therapists are aware of the fact that this concept of polyamory exists. Some of the participants we interviewed pointed out that they do not want to have to start to explain polyamory to their therapist.

Reflecting on our own convictions

On top of this, as therapists it seems important to reflect upon our own convictions and assumptions regarding diverse forms of intimate relationships. Perhaps the following questions can be a starting point:

- Have I consciously reflected on my beliefs and assumptions about different forms of relationships? (e.g. polyamory, romantic monogamous couple relationship, open partnership, deliberate living single, living in an as-if-monogamy but one or more of the partners having sexual contact outside of this, living in a loveless marriage for another purpose, etc.)
- Do I have a personal preference regarding these different forms of relationships?
- Which of my personal ideas could interfere with the therapeutic process at hand if I am counselling someone with similar or different relationship beliefs and practices?
- Which opportunities/challenges arise from that?
- Is it okay to hold on to my personal ideas or will these ideas limit my potential as a therapist?
- Which of my ideas do I want to stick with and why?
- Are there ideas I personally would like to say goodbye to? If so, in which way would this increase my therapeutic options?
- Would I like to acquire new ideas? If so, which ones?

How we use language makes a difference

There are a number of ways that we can make our language as a therapist more sensitive to this new concept: For example, both our clients and ourselves think that it is advisable to ask: 'Do you live in a relationship or in relationships?' Another participant said, 'Couple therapy ... Does anyone here feel recognised by the word "couple"? If not, could there be a different term?' And a third client said similarly, 'I never felt the need to go to couple therapy, especially because I do not see myself involved in a couple.'

Other ways in which psychotherapy can offer support

The people who answered our questionnaire had many ideas about how psychotherapy could assist those in polyamorous relationships:

- Therapists could create a safe and confidential setting to speak about experiences which up until now are only ever mentioned a little or not at all. This can turn an inside story into an external, shared language. Just as life for many gay, lesbian, bi, trans people involves a 'coming out', this is also true for those living poly relationships. Therapists could assist with this.

- Therapists could offer support for discussing questions such as: 'When should I tell and who should I tell about my concept of relationship?' or 'How do I tell my family that 'we' no longer means 'the two of us?' or 'How many lovers am I allowed to bring to my family party?'
- Therapists could offer support in dealing with discrimination and exclusion. Some of those we interviewed reported repeated judgment by monogamous norms: 'You cannot love two', 'You are not really capable of entering a real relationship', 'Loving more than one is destructive, it is not compatible with a family', 'The children will become psychotic' and so on. One of the participants put it this way: 'Want to have your own baby? Want a foster child? Want to adopt a child as a poly lesbian? Congratulations, you can really forget it all!'
- Therapists could provide a context to support the process of decision-making and negotiations within poly relationships, especially regarding rules and limits of all people involved, as well as checking whether everyone involved is speaking of the same thing and relating under the same understandings.

Recognise the courage of the search

If therapists support clients in their search for a form of relationship that fits for them, then this search could be seen as a resource - and not as a source of problems. There is a courage involved in living a form of relationship that is far from social norms. Many participants pointed out that it was important to them not to be seen as pathological: 'confused', 'twisted', 'not normal' or even 'incapable of relationships'. If therapists could recognise the courage of the search this would make a difference.

Creating poly friendly therapeutic teams

Many people we interviewed expressed their desire for an experienced therapist, 'I do not want to be a guinea pig!' And yet, we also know this is a new area for many therapists. As a way forward, some poly participants offered to work as members of a therapeutic team and then make it transparent that this team is poly sensitive. This could make it easier for potential clients to find the right therapist. One participant reported: 'In the first contact with a potential therapist I point out that I am a lesbian and that I live in a polyamorous relationship. If a therapist has a problem with that, we do not have to start therapy. I expect an appreciative approach regarding the form of relationship I have chosen to live in and I am very sensitive when it comes to that.' We also consider that it's important to have current information on the polycommunity, in your local area/country and online, in order to be able to pass on contact opportunities or literature when the need arises.

Making poly lives visible

And last but not least, we would like to make visible that this option for relationships exists in psychosocial contexts. This presentation is our contribution towards making poly lives visible. Thank you very much!