

# Toward a Multidimensional Approach to Researching (Non-) Monogamy in Non-Heterosexual Relationships

## ABSTRACT

Research shows that monogamy is a prevalent choice within non-heterosexual communities. However, the complexity of non-monogamous choices and practices, as well as attitudes toward non-monogamy in LGBTQ communities, remains underexplored. This article looks closely at monogamy and non-monogamy as relational choices in non-heterosexual relationships in Poland, with the aim of shedding light on the multidimensional nature of (non-)monogamy. Drawing on the family practices approach and geographies of sexualities, I closely examine the narratives and practices surrounding (non-)monogamy within the local sociocultural context. I introduce three key dimensions of (non-)monogamy in this article: (1) declarations and practices, (2) normativity and reflectiveness, and (3) consistency and variability. This investigation is based on a qualitative multimethod project, “Families of Choice in Poland”, which includes 53 individual in-depth narrative interviews with non-heterosexual individuals and an ethnographic study with 21 non-heterosexual families. The ethnographic study employs intensive participatory observation and 125 thematic narrative interviews. Through this unique perspective and comprehensive qualitative analysis, the article contributes to a nuanced understanding of (non-)monogamous choices within non-heterosexual relationships, addressing critical gaps in the literature on intimate relationships, as well as geographies of sexualities and intimacies.

**Keywords:** non-monogamy, consensual non-monogamy, intimate practices, family practices, geographies of sexualities, LGBTQ relationships

**WHILE NON-HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS** are often perceived as more inclined toward non-monogamy, research indicates that monogamy remains common among non-heterosexual individuals (Gotta et al. 2011; Mizielińska, Abramowicz & Stasińska 2015). Men, regardless of sexual orientation, engage in consensual non-monogamy (CNM) more frequently than women (Moors, Gesselman & Garcia 2021). Additionally, practicing CNM is associated with LGBTQ+ identification (Balzarini et al. 2017; Levine et al. 2018; Wood et al. 2021), with similar engagement in polyamory observed among LGBTQ+ and heterosexual individuals (Moors et al. 2021).

Drawing on data from a broader study (Mizielińska, Abramowicz & Stasińska 2015; Mizielińska 2022; Stasińska 2018; Mizielińska & Stasińska 2020), this article seeks to delve into the multidimensional aspects of (non-)monogamy within non-heterosexual communities in Poland, offering a nuanced perspective on this complex facet of intimate life. While the primary data collection focused on monogamous relationships, informants voluntarily disclosed details about their consensual non-monogamous experiences, including considerations of non-monogamy in their rationale to maintain monogamous relationships. These unsolicited disclosures underscore the significance and complexity of (non-)monogamous practices, highlighting the profound nature of these experiences among non-heterosexual individuals in our study.

Building on this analysis, the concept of multidimensional (non-)monogamy, informed by the works of Barker and Langdrige (2010), Wosick-Correa (2010), Ferrer (2017), Green, Valleriani, and Adam (2016a), and Rambukkana (2010), is employed to reconstruct the informants' emic perspectives on their intimate practices and attitudes toward "(non-)monogamy." This reconstructive approach allows for a comprehensive discussion of the complex nature of (non-)monogamy, including the diverse and evolving positionalities of the individuals involved.

In this study, (non-)monogamy denotes a fluid continuum that encompasses various relational definitions and practices, including both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships. The analysis examines three dimensions of (non-)monogamy to capture its complexity.

Firstly, it explores how *normativity and reflectiveness* influence attitudes and practices. Secondly, it investigates the *consistency and variability* of non-monogamous relational patterns. Finally, it illustrates how *declarations and practices* regarding (non-)monogamy shape family and intimate life, highlighting potential differences between the two.

The primary aim of this article is to provide a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences and sociocultural contexts of (non-)monogamous relationships among non-heterosexual individuals. Analyzing informants' statements and personal histories within the (non-)monogamy continuum offers valuable insights into the factors that shape relational choices, models, and practices. Furthermore, the research sheds light on the diverse implications of (non-)monogamy for family and intimate relationships, considering the nuanced interplay between (non-)monogamy, non-heterosexuality, and the sociopolitical context of contemporary Poland.

### **Current debates and research on non-monogamies**

Contemporary research on non-monogamies categorizes relationship models into consensual and non-consensual non-monogamy. Consensual non-monogamy (CSM) includes open relationships, which involve sexual but not necessarily romantic involvement with others, and polyamory, which involves simultaneous romantic and sexual relationships with multiple partners (Grunt-Mejer 2014).

This diversity underscores the lack of a singular approach to non-monogamy (Groß et al. 2014; Hoff et al. 2010; Parsons et al. 2012), with the term “non-monogamies” acknowledging multiple forms and differentiating various types of monogamies (Barker & Langdridge 2010). Anderson (2012) identifies four types of monogamy: sexual, emotional, desirous, and social. Sheff (2015) introduces “polyaffectivity,” which emphasizes emotional monogamy with extradyadic sexual behavior, demonstrating the mutually constituting nature of consensual non-monogamy and monogamy (Ferrer 2018; Le Cunff 2018; Robinson 2013). Monogamous tropes may persist in some polyamorous relationships, suggesting fluid boundaries between non-monogamy and

monogamy (Green, Valleriani & Adam 2016a; Sanger & Taylor 2013; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010; Rambukkana 2010; Sheff 2005, 2006).

Mainstream discourse often portrays monogamy as the norm, casting consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships in a negative light (Bergstrand & Sinski 2009; Schippers 2016), leading to stigma and perceptions that they are riskier, less satisfying, and less stable (Conley et al. 2013; Grunt-Mejer & Campbell 2016; Salmansohn 2009; Slick 2009). Conversely, polyactivists idealize polyamory as progressive compared to monogamy (Petrella 2007; Wilkinson 2010), challenging negative stereotypes of non-monogamous individuals as promiscuous and pathological (Klesse 2007). Polyamorous relationships are often framed as “queerer” than non-heterosexual monogamous relationships in sexuality studies (Barker & Langdridge 2010; Downing & Gillett 2011; Roseneil et al. 2020).

The emergence of “compulsory non-monogamy” (Sheff 2018) has led to mutual stigmatization between advocates of monogamy and polyamory, a conflict known as the “mono-poly wars” (Ferrer 2018, 817). This dynamic calls for a critical examination of attitudes toward non-monogamies, prevalent across various contexts, including LGBTQ+ communities. It is important to recognize that views on monogamy as an oppressive norm may differ depending on cultural and regional contexts (Pilão 2021). These discussions echo Gayle Rubin’s (1992) hierarchy of sexuality, where normative monogamous couples are central to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Everyday negotiations that challenge dominant norms in couple relationships prompt the emergence of new ways of conceptualizing relationships (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan 2001).

Studies consistently find no significant differences in stability and satisfaction between non-monogamous and monogamous relationships (Mogilski et al. 2017; Rodrigues et al. 2018; Rubel & Bogaert 2015). Despite attention to jealousy and challenges in CNM relationships (Barker, Heckert & Wilkinson 2013; Ritchie & Barker 2006), research indicates that individuals in CNM relationships report similar levels of satisfaction and commitment, and experience less jealousy, compared to those in monogamous relationships (Conley et al. 2013). Critical studies on intimacies and non-monogamies emphasize emotional labor (Duncombe &

Marsden 1993; Hochschild 1990), dialogical openness for trust (Heaphy et al. 2004), agentic fidelity in expressing needs and boundaries (Wosick-Correa 2010), and honesty as foundational (Barker 2005; Sheff 2005). In CNM relationships, “cheating” means violating agreed-upon rules or being dishonest, rather than merely having sexual encounters with others (Wosick-Correa 2010). Partners prioritize stability, commitment, and trust through strategies like “freedom from the contract,” self-awareness, open communication (Finn 2010), compartmentalization, and boundary affirmation (Banfield & McCabe 2001; Bonello & Cross 2009; LaSala 2002).

Existing studies often overlook geographic, sociopolitical, and cultural factors influencing non-monogamy, limiting our understanding of the intersectional aspects of relational norms and practices (Haritaworn et al. 2006; Klesse 2013; Sheff 2018). This oversight also diminishes the importance of geographies of sexualities (Hubbard 2018; Browne & Bakshi 2016). Geographies of sexualities reveal the geohistorical specificity of sexualities and intimacies, shaped by culturally specific norms and political conditions (Browne & Bakshi 2016; Hubbard 2018; Mizieleńska 2022; Stasińska 2020, Mizieleńska & Stasińska 2022). They stress the necessity of examining CNM practices and attitudes within specific cultural contexts and negotiations, demonstrating how these practices and attitudes are shaped by cultural experiments and negotiations within polyamorous communities (Deri 2015; Klesse 2018).

Recent research has broadened geographical sensitivity, revealing diverse global experiences of consensual non-monogamy. For example, Pilão’s (2021) study in Brazil challenged assumptions by uncovering a lack of consensus among LGBTQ groups on whether monogamy functions as an oppressive norm analogous to heteronormativity. This calls for a re-evaluation of prevailing narratives and raises questions about the universality of certain perspectives within non-heterosexual communities. Bennion’s (2022) French study explored close-knit groups of cisgender men, as well as cisgender and transgender women, who shared interests in kink, atypical intelligence, and sexual and gender non-conformity. While specific interests of gender groups may vary, Bennion’s emphasis on community formation and shared identities provides valu-

able insights also into how non-heterosexual individuals in Poland navigate their relationships. Although each context has its unique characteristics, the significance of this article lies in its shared exploration of non-heterosexual relationships, offering a nuanced understanding of non-monogamous dynamics beyond Anglo-American frameworks.

Studies on consensual non-monogamy often overlook the intricate intimate and family practices that shape CNM relationships (Morgan 1996; Gabb 2008). A family practices approach (FPA) is essential for understanding the complexity of (non-)monogamy within CNM relationships (Gabb 2008; Morgan 1996). The approach emphasizes the “doing” of families – which includes supporting each other, sharing goods, spending time together, and physical displays of affection (Stasińska 2020) – and highlights the disparities between declarations and practices in (non-)monogamous relationships, exploring life trajectories without predetermined norms. It examines diverse biographical scripts and relational trajectories that foster non-normative attitudes toward (non-)monogamy. Researchers analyze individual relational practices, providing a multifaceted view of family life, including narratives of monogamous relationships and non-negotiated affairs (Heaphy et al. 2004). The FPA and geographies of sexualities frameworks together offer a comprehensive understanding of (non-)monogamy, integrating diverse relational trajectories and attitudes while taking geographical and sociocultural dimensions into consideration.

### **Geographies of non-heterosexual and non-monogamous relationships in Poland**

In Poland, public discourse on gender and sexuality is heavily shaped by the Roman Catholic Church, an ultraconservative government, and ultra-Catholic organizations. These entities exert a profound influence on societal attitudes toward intimate life, fostering highly conservative views among Poles. While there has been a gradual shift toward more liberal perspectives on cohabitation and premarital sex, monogamy remains deeply ingrained in Polish society, with 79 percent of individuals valuing the concept of eternal love (Arc Rynek i Opinia 2019).

In Poland, the mono-normative social and moral order is reinforced by professionals such as psychologists and sexologists, who view polyamory as risky and incompatible with healthy love, citing its lack of security, stability, intimacy, and partner support (Grunt-Mejer & Chańska 2020). Baczkowska's research suggests that non-monogamy in Poland may be a response to increased individual mobility and relationship volatility (Baczkowska 2020), while Michalczak's work highlights the formation of countercultural, new tribal networks among Polish polyamorists seeking community and support (Michalczak 2015). These networks exist within a conservative society that often marginalizes non-heteronormative relationships and practices.

It is essential to consider the broader sociopolitical context in Poland, particularly regarding LGBTQ communities. Poland, the largest country in the European Union without legal recognition of LGBTQ rights or provisions for non-heterosexual relationships, faces significant challenges due to traditionalism and public homophobia. These factors contribute to ongoing setbacks in LGBTQ rights and hinder the development of inclusive discourses at both local and national levels (Buyantueva & Shevtsova 2020; Mizielińska 2011; Struzik 2020).

Homophobic discourse in Poland often perpetuates the stereotype of the "promiscuous homosexual," portraying men solely as sexually focused individuals (Arcimowicz, Wasiak-Radoszewski & Dębska 2014; Mizielińska & Stasińska 2014). At the same time, women's intimate relationships are frequently overlooked and rendered invisible (Stasińska 2018). These dynamics have a profound effect on how non-heterosexual individuals navigate public and semi-private spaces, as well as on how they understand and develop their sex lives (Stasińska & Mizielińska 2022; Mizielińska 2022).

The lack of acceptance of non-heteronormativity and non-mononormativity in Poland, shaped by conservative social norms and sexual policy, significantly affects the relational choices and practices of non-heterosexual individuals. Consequently, it is not surprising that quantitative research in Poland shows a higher prevalence of monogamous relationships among non-heterosexual couples. Specifically, only 4

percent of women in same-sex relationships engage in non-monogamous practices, while 32 percent of men in same-sex relationships do so (Mizielińska et al. 2015). To gain a deeper understanding of the influence of law, culture, and politics on (non-)monogamy in Poland, future research should explore the interplay of these factors and individuals' perspectives across diverse contexts.

## **Methodology**

This article draws on unsolicited narratives and practices surrounding choices of (non-)monogamy that emerged from two qualitative stages of our multimethod research project "Families of Choice in Poland." The study represents the first in-depth exploration of the diversity of new forms of non-heterosexual relationships in Poland. The research data and analysis are grounded in fifty-three individual biographical narrative interviews (Schütze 2012; Wengraf 2001) (stage 1) and an ethnographic study conducted with twenty-one non-heterosexual families. The latter included thirty days of participatory observation of each family and more than a hundred thematic (themes based on e.g., important pictures or objects) and narrative interviews (stage 2).

The research sample in all stages aimed for diversity across gender, class, place of origin, age, and education level. Stage 1 included twenty-eight women and twenty-two men, with two trans men and one trans woman. Among the women, twenty-five identified as lesbian, two as bisexual, and one as queer. Twenty-four cisgender men and two trans men identified as gay. The majority of participants (thirty-six) were aged 31 to 50, with eight under 30 and five over 55. Most lived in cities. In terms of relationship duration, twenty of the participants had been in a relationship for less than 5 years, ten for 5 to 10 years, and twenty for more than 10 years. Twenty women and eight men were raising children.

Although non-monogamous relationships were not specifically targeted during recruitment, narratives of non-monogamy emerged naturally during the interviews. All of the women were in monogamous relationships, three having had non-monogamous experiences in the



past. Most male informants were also in monogamous relationships, with six practicing various forms of non-monogamy. Stage 2 included forty-two adult participants (twelve female and nine male couples) and eight children. Ten women identified as lesbians, four as bisexual, and ten as other sexualities, while all of the men identified as gay. Most participants were under 40 years old, with half of the relationships lasting 2 to 10 years and the rest over 10 years, the longest lasting 21 years. Eighteen relationships were monogamous, while three male relationships practiced various forms of non-monogamy.

Both stages of the research involved biographical narrative interviews, initiated with an open question about relationship histories (Schütze n.d.; Wengraf 2001). In stage 1, partners were interviewed separately occasionally only one partner participating. Stage 2 began with a biographical couple interview, followed by the thirty-day ethnography. This method encouraged participants to share insights into their daily lives and facilitated the generation of diverse relationship narratives (Gabb & Fink 2015). During the ethnographic study, couples were interviewed together or separately multiple times (once a week) using various methods such as family map interviews and final individual semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for a nuanced depiction of intimacy, incorporating jointly constructed narratives from each couple while also enabling the exploration of individual perspectives on the relationships (Heaphy & Einarsdottir 2013).

The research followed an ethical review process, with all participants providing informed consent at both stages. Grounded theory principles (Charmaz 2014) guided the multistage analysis, facilitated by MaxQda software for coding. Throughout the analytical journey, I employed the *tender researcher approach* (Stasińska 2022), recognizing participants as active agents who adapt strategies to their unique circumstances. This approach embraces the nuanced and sometimes contradictory nature of social realities, particularly within queer (non-)monogamous contexts (for further details on methodology and the tender researcher approach, see Mizielińska & Stasińska 2020; Stasińska 2022).

## **Findings: Toward a multidimensional approach to non-monogamy**

The following analysis incorporates both the family practices approach (FPA) and the analytical lens provided by geographies of sexualities. It examines how sociocultural norms and individual reflexivity influence the (non-)monogamous model (dimension 1), how the relationship model may remain consistent or change over time (dimension 2), and how (non-)monogamy is influenced by both declarations and practices (dimension 3). Through this analysis, I aim to unravel the complex dynamics of (non-)monogamy and reconstruct the evolving positionalities of partners and the presence of affective inequalities (Juvonen & Kolehmainen 2018; Kolehmainen et al. 2021) within their relationships.

### **Between normativity and reflexivity – How to do (or not to do) monogamy**

Most informants in the qualitative study were monogamous and had never discussed or reflected on the topic of (non-)monogamy. For many, particularly women, monogamy was self-evident: “It was so obvious to me – one partner, one relationship” (Aneta, 50). They also adhered to a romantic vision of love (Illouz 2016; Schmidt 2016), believing that eternal, true love is founded on monogamy: “I will love Sonia forever, and I want to spend my life with her” (Przybysława, 35). These findings highlight the pervasive influence of normative perspectives on intimacy and the widely shared ideal of romantic, everlasting love within the Polish cultural context.

However, monogamy often became the subject of either casual discussions between partners or deeper reflection by one of them. These conversations were prompted by various issues, including past experiences or current and hypothetical situations involving infidelity. Discussions about potential non-monogamy revealed two distinct lines of argument, which varied depending on gender.

Men focused on the benefits of monogamy and often felt the need to “explain themselves” for choosing it. They recognized the influence of social and familial norms and believed that the traditional view of

intimate relationships dictated their choice of monogamy. Many also pointed to the relationship model they inherited from their parents, as reflected in the following quote from an interview with Damian:

Firstly, my parents were in a stable relationship with no affairs. Then there was this Oasis [Catholic movement], and this model was instilled in me, so to speak, the Catholic vision of family [...] after that, I wanted very much the relationship that I would one day establish to be a carbon copy of such a heterosexual relationship [...] Finally, I am not satisfied with sex without love, so I would be afraid complicating my life by getting involved in a relationship with someone. (Damian, 37)

It is evident from the quote that social, familial, and individual norms and reflexive needs are intertwined and shaped. Damian's current choice of monogamy. In his reflective discourse, Damian explicitly refers to "inherited" patterns of monogamy and the "model of Catholic social teaching," encapsulating the deeply ingrained influence of Polish cultural and religious norms. He emphasizes that non-monogamy would not meet his personal needs, highlighting the intersection of societal and individual factors shaping his relational choice. His preference for monogamy reflects an inheritance from a broader heteronormative context, particularly prevalent in Polish familial and cultural frameworks. Despite the normative nature of his monogamous choice, it is important to recognize the nuanced and reflective aspects embedded in this mononormative decision.

On the other hand, Paweł, an academic, demonstrates an awareness of the broader non-monogamous discourse and its link to heteronormativity. He offers a rationale for his commitment to monogamy, acknowledging the influence of "imitative, true, heterosexual family models" within the Polish society:

We have neither the time nor the inclination [toward CNM]. [...] here is a monogamous model of, say, imitative, true, heterosexual models of the family. [...] it was not connected to some imposition of a model; it just worked out that way. (Paweł, 50)

In doing so, he frames his choice of monogamy as pragmatic rather than as something imposed by societal structures. In his reflective stance, Paweł implicitly acknowledges the potential normativity of his decision, but rejects the idea that he is merely conforming to social norms.

As evident from above examples, most men were aware of expectations to be non-normative and non-traditional in their shaping of sexual relationships (Green, Valleriani & Adam 2016b; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan 2001). In choosing monogamy, they felt compelled to explain why they had not chosen CNM. They indicated that they had reflected on their decision to follow mononormative and heteronormative models.

Conversely, the women tended to emphasize the dangers of CNM relationships. Sonia believes that CNM relationships can create a significant power imbalance between partners and that one party may suffer. She suggests that the choice of non-monogamy may stem from insufficient mutual interest between partners in a monogamous relationship:

We just knew that we wanted our relationships to always be monogamous. [...] we are kind of sufficiently interested in ourselves. [...] Sometimes one person benefits from it [non-monogamous relationship] and the other does not, they suffer, and get tired, and I know that they are also like that. (Sonia, 35)

When Sonia says that she and her partner are “sufficiently interested” in each other, she is suggesting that there might be a lack of mutual interest, and consequently a lack of commitment, love, and care, in CNM relationships. Sonia’s perspective, that CNM relationships are characterized by a lack of commitment, love, and care due to insufficient emotional work, echoes public and expert normative discourses in the Polish context (Grunt-Mejer & Chańska 2020).

Some informants not only cited the risk of getting hurt but also equated non-monogamy with cheating: “This would be like legitimizing cheating, I think it would hurt her deeply, and she would not want that” (Katarzyna, 28). Some even stated that non-monogamous rela-

tionships cannot be considered legitimate families or “real relationships.” By applying strictly normative values, they excluded CNM relationships from the spectrum of respectable relationship models. Similarly, homophobic discourse in Poland uses the same rhetoric of semantic exclusion, claiming that non-heterosexual families are not real families (Arcimowicz, Wasiak-Radoszewski & Dębska 2014; Mizieleńska & Stasińska 2014). These claims by the informants demonstrate the risk of further normativization of intimate relationships and discrimination against alternatives to mononormative models. Negative beliefs about non-monogamous relationships align with common stereotypes (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell 2016; Grunt-Mejer & Chańska 2020). Living outside the heteronormative relationship model does not necessarily make non-heterosexual people more open to non-monogamy. Only in some cases was monogamy a choice based on reflexivity and the informants’ own needs, desires, or experiences. At the same time, attitudes toward CNM mirrored Polish normative discourses on gender and sexuality rather than the notions present in debates on non-monogamies and “compulsory non-monogamy” (Sheff 2018).

### **Between consistency and variability – How to do (or not to do) non-monogamy**

The second dimension – consistency and variability – focuses on the trajectories of relationships and how (non-)monogamy evolves and redefines relationship status based on the partners’ experiences.

In three of the female relationships in the study, there was a history of non-monogamy, but the partners eventually chose to stop practicing it, although one couple in theory remains “open.” The partners of this relationship are however not actively pursuing other sexual or romantic relationships. For instance, Alina and Maria met at a feminist camp and began dating. Maria expressed a desire to be in an open relationship, and while Alina agreed, it is unclear whether she did so solely to maintain her relationship with Maria. After being together for over a year, they decided to move in together. During this time, Maria became romantically and sexually involved with Agnieszka, unbeknownst to Alina. Alina

researched polyamory extensively, and the couple discussed the rules of their relationship. Alina wanted to establish a clear agreement on how their relationship should function before engaging in non-monogamy:

I needed such a clear definition of rules, and Maria probably rather needed to try and see what would happen. [...] she was so frustrated that she did not seem to know how [to practice an open relationship]. I thought she had some vision of what it would look like. [...] and that we will discuss how to arrange such a relationship. (Alina, 32)

By contrast, Maria, Alina's partner, did not have a clear idea of what kind of non-monogamous arrangement she wanted. She preferred to draw conclusions based on experience. Before moving in together, Maria disclosed her involvement with Agnieszka, which led Alina to end the relationship. However, after a few months of separation, during which they continued to meet and communicate extensively, they decided to reconcile. This time, Alina expressed her preference for a monogamous relationship and did not want to pursue non-monogamy. Currently, they both agree that if a specific person enters their lives, they may reconsider the terms of their intimate contract. However, for now, their relationship remains monogamous:

Back then, we very consciously decided that we were going to be together. [...] we decided on some rules that we would respect. At the moment, there is no such person who would like to be with Maria or me. However, I think that if such a person appeared, it would be a completely different situation. (Alina, 32)

Alina's case highlights the significance of consistency and variability in the context of positionalities and affective inequalities between partners (Juvonen & Kolehmainen 2018; Kolehmainen et al. 2021). Before entering her relationship with Maria, Alina had a consistent preference for monogamy. However, because Maria did not have a clear idea of what a non-monogamous relationship entailed, they navigated their relationship with a degree of variability and uncertainty, shaping the openness

of it based on their experiences. This continuous exploration of (non-) monogamy and the absence of predefined relationship models introduced certain affective inequalities and tensions.

The first tension stems from differing needs; while Alina theoretically agreed to an open relationship, she was reluctant to engage practically in non-monogamy. Maria wanted an open relationship and thus needed Alina's consent in order to sustain their relationship. This reflects the societal expectations of mononormativity in Poland, where deviating from such norms requires extensive negotiation.

The second tension stems from the couple's differing attitudes toward implementing non-monogamy. Alina sought a thorough analysis to establish clear principles, influenced by the conservative views ingrained in Polish society (Bonello & Cross 2009). By contrast, Maria wanted to develop a relationship model through experiential learning, reflecting a more liberal approach (Finn & Malson 2008; Finn 2010).

The third tension concerns the rules and practices of non-monogamy, particularly regarding honesty. Alina expected Maria to disclose her involvement with Agnieszka, and when it was revealed, Alina viewed it as infidelity, contributing to their temporary separation. This situation reflects dominant norms surrounding fidelity in relationships.

The dimension of variability and consistency highlights the ongoing negotiation and redefinition of relationship status based on the partners' experiences. In the case of Alina and Maria, we observe the evolution of their relationship, including periods of non-monogamy, and an eventual transition to a monogamous arrangement. Their decisions are shaped by a combination of normative expectations and individual reflexivity, influenced by the prevailing norms and values in Polish society. Within this cultural context, the informants navigate their desires, boundaries, and relationship trajectories.

### **Between declarations and practices – How to do (or not to do) polyamory**

The next two couples were closely studied and interviewed as part of a monthly ethnography. Using various research techniques and analy-

sis focused on understanding diverse family practices (FPA), the study examined the alignment and divergence between declarations and actual practices shaping the (non-)monogamous dynamics within the relationships.

One couple, Max and Adrian, agreed to engage in sexual encounters with others while maintaining emotional monogamy (exclusive romantic attachment to each other). This agreement was initially established by both partners and declared during a joint interview conducted as part of the ethnographic survey. However, it was also evident that Adrian wanted to renegotiate their relationship model:

Max: We agree that we can have [...] sex with third parties. [...] These acquaintances come and go, right? We are strongly bonded, so we do not have anything that lasts longer [...]

Adrian: Max will treat it as cheating, my emotional commitment to someone else, right?

Max: Well, I think it is crossing a certain boundaries ...

Adrian: Yes.

Max: ...which should not happen.

Adrian: But I can separate it, you know?

Max: Well, if you can, then that is good.

Adrian: I also say in the context of you that if you were emotionally involved with someone somewhere, I would not treat that as a betrayal.

(Adrian, 30; Max, 38)

Adrian and Max have a unique perspective on their relationship, as they do not identify it as polyamorous or open, despite Adrian having a long-term lover, Andrzej. Adrian acknowledges that there is jealousy between them, but believes that sex does not need to be exclusive to their relationship. Max, on the other hand, experiences jealousy when Adrian does not inform him of his whereabouts and companions. He emphasizes the importance of “healthy” jealousy in their relationship. While both partners have agreed to be in a non-monogamous relationship, their views on infidelity and the boundaries of their relational con-



tract differ significantly. Max considers having a romantic relationship with someone else to be cheating, while Adrian does not share this view.

Max revisits this issue during the final individual interview, recalling that if he discovered his partner was deeply involved in a relationship with someone else, he would consider it a betrayal. He explains, “If he were more involved in another relationship than he should be, that would also be cheating [...] I would not want to be in such a strange triangle” (Max, 38).

By contrast, Adrian views the current situation positively and believes Max fully accepts his relationship with Andrzej. During an interview about family life in the third week of the ethnographic study, Adrian focused extensively on his relationship with Andrzej, whom he considers his family. He expressed that having both partners allows him to fully appreciate his relationships with both Max and Andrzej. At the same time, he admitted that he had fallen in love with Andrzej, though he does not consider it infidelity:

My relationship with Max also affects my relationship with Andrzej. Andrzej has a very strong character, like me, because he is a little younger. Max’s calm character, meaning his emotional stability, and low aggressiveness, somehow makes me fall in love even more with Andrzej, in all his feistiness. (Adrian, 30)

Despite Adrian’s claim that their relational arrangement is negotiated and discussed, the relationship between partners appears asymmetrical and not necessarily based on honest communication or consensual non-monogamy. The ethnographer frequently observed Adrian spending time with his lover, leaving Max at home feeling anxious and unaware of Adrian’s whereabouts. This suggests that the partners have different understandings of their relationship contract and, in a sense, are functioning in two different relationships (Hoff & Beougher 2010). Max perceives their relationship as sexually open but not polyamorous, while Adrian is in love with his lover and practices a V-type polyamorous relationship model (Labriola 2003), involving romantic and sexual rela-

tionships with both partners – of which Max is unaware. Despite the somewhat idealized image presented in their joint interview, the couple ultimately parted ways shortly after the ethnographic study ended. The divergence between their practices of family and intimacy and the declarations about their relationship model proved too great for them to sustain the relationship.

In the context of Poland's conservative social norms and prevailing views on monogamy, Max and Adrian's relationship dynamics reflect the influence of societal expectations on individual choices within non-monogamous frameworks. The emphasis on emotional monogamy despite engaging in sexual encounters with others, may stem from a desire to align with the more traditional relationship models prevalent in Polish society. Additionally, the asymmetry and lack of honest communication between Max and Adrian may be influenced by the societal stigma surrounding non-monogamous relationships in Poland. The incongruence between their declarations and observed practices highlights the tension between personal desires and societal norms within this specific cultural context.

Teodor and Marcel openly stated that they had been in a completely open relationship for over twenty years. Throughout their relationship, they have engaged in sexual and romantic encounters with others, both individually and together in sexual and romantic triangles. Teodor believes that having sex with friends is a positive experience, while Marcel sees friendship as a potential gateway to sexual relationships. Both partners view the openness of their relationship as progressive and emphasize the importance of continuous emotional work, including ongoing dialogue and mutual honesty:

We are not jealous of each other sexually. I was always more excited that he could go to bed with someone [...] I did not feel as a threat to me [...] basic principle was that we talk to each other, that we do not do things behind someone's back, everything that happens is to be worked out between us. (Teodor, 47)

In their current relationship dynamics, Teodor and Marcel have developed a close sexual friendship with Igor, whom they met recently. However, there are notable differences in how each partner perceives and defines their relationship with Igor. During an interview focused on their family map, Marcel identified Igor as a family member, while Teodor did not include him on the map and did not mention him during the interview. Throughout the ethnographic study, the researcher observed Marcel actively pursuing a deeper connection with Igor, initiating physical contact and showing a stronger interest in developing their relationship. By contrast, Teodor maintained a certain distance and expressed uncertainty about how well he knew Igor. He does not view their relationship as a polyamorous triangle and is unsure if they would choose to adopt such a relationship model:

He is not a default lover or anything. [...] it is simply a friendship with an erotic dimension [...] it is not like a relationship with its very clear framework. So, we like each other. (Teodor, 47)

When analysing their relationships with their lovers, both men acknowledged that relational bonds were never symmetrical and that their bond with each other was always stronger and superior to the others:

Teodor: The triangle is not equilateral.

Marcel: I mean, we also know polyamorous stories from different friends that are very cool, but they point to the fact that this equilateral triangle does not exist every time, that these two sides are always much stronger than the third one. (Teodor, 47; Marcel, 41)

In an individual interview, Marcel also discusses a form of exploitation of the third person, which Marcel calls “cannibalism,” because many of their past relationships ended while his relationship with Teodor survived and grew stronger. However, he emphasizes that they never imposed rules in triangular relationships or in their individual relationships with lovers:

These experiences only strengthened our relationship. Maybe it is cannibalism that we absorb them (laughs). We never imposed rules or triangular relationships on others [...] At the same time, we always returned to each other. (Marcel, 41)

Teodor and Marcel's perspective on polyamory is nuanced and has evolved over time. Their experiences with love triangles and relationships with other men have highlighted the significance of their bond (Hoff et al. 2010; Whitton, Weitbrecht & Kuryluk 2015). The term "cannibalism" reflects their complex feelings, recognizing the pleasure and attraction in these relationships while also acknowledging concerns about the well-being of the third person involved. It is important to note that Teodor and Marcel approach polyamory and their relationships with a realistic mindset, understanding the inherent asymmetry and viewing these connections as a way to enrich their lives and strengthen their bond. Although they acknowledge that complete symmetry is unattainable, their relationship with Igor, for example, is characterized by honest communication and a mutual understanding of the dynamics between them. They continually reassess their declarations and practices regarding their intimate and familial connections with others to ensure alignment with their agreed-upon relationship model (Hoff et al. 2010; Whitton, Weitbrecht & Kuryluk 2015).

In the context of Poland's conservative societal norms, Teodor and Marcel's enduring open relationship challenges traditional expectations of monogamy. Their commitment to continuous emotional work, dialogue, and mutual honesty reflects a deliberate effort to navigate non-monogamous dynamics while maintaining a strong bond. The differences in how each partner perceives their relationship with Igor may highlight the individual negotiation of intimacy within a broader non-monogamous framework, especially given the societal stigma associated with such relationships in Poland. Teodor's cautious approach and Marcel's more proactive engagement with Igor illustrate the nuanced nature of non-monogamous relationships within this specific cultural context, emphasizing the need for ongoing communication and mutual understanding between partners.

## Conclusions

This research, grounded in the Family Practices Approach (FPA) and geographies of sexualities, explores the multidimensional landscape of (non-)monogamy in contemporary Poland. In the dimension of normativity and reflexivity, gendered perspectives emerge: men rationalize monogamy through inherited models, while women express concerns about power imbalances in non-monogamous relationships. The dimension of consistency and variability is illustrated through the case of Alina and Maria, revealing ambivalence and tensions between available positions, shaped by societal expectations. Discrepancies between declarations and practices, as seen in the cases of Max and Adrian, as well as Teodor and Marcel, expose challenges in maintaining honest communication and continuous emotional work, highlighting the impact of societal stigma on non-monogamous practices in Poland.

In this research study, an in-depth analysis was conducted to explore the multidimensional nature of (non-)monogamy in contemporary Poland. Examining intimate stories and maintaining continuous, close contact with families facilitated a comprehensive understanding of daily intimate practices and contributed to the advancement of the FPA paradigm (Morgan 1996; Gabb 2008). By incorporating geographies of sexualities as an analytical lens, this research further explored the nuanced interconnections between sociocultural norms, individual reflexivity, and spatial dimensions, shedding light on the complex dynamics of (non-)monogamous relationships in Poland.

The study's strengths lie in its multidimensional analysis and use of mixed methods, which allowed for a comprehensive exploration of (non-)monogamy. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. While incorporating the perspectives of informants who identified as "strictly monogamous" provided valuable insights into mononormativity and non-monogamy, the research was not exclusively focused on non-monogamous relationships. Future studies could focus specifically on non-heterosexual relationships that challenge mononormativity in diverse ways, while embracing a complex and multidimensional understanding of (non-)monogamy.

Contemporary research on consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has primarily focused on capturing the diverse range of non-monogamous relationships and the challenges they face. However, certain dimensions and aspects of (non-)monogamy have been overlooked in these studies. Firstly, most studies tend to adopt a binary or continuum approach to (non-)monogamy, often overlooking affective inequalities (Juvonen & Kolehmainen 2018; Kolehmainen et al. 2021) and the diverse positionalities that arise from a single-dimensional model. Secondly, while emotional work (Duncombe & Marsden 1993, 1995; Hochschild 1990), dialogical openness, and agentic fidelity (Wosick-Correa 2010) have been extensively explored in CNM studies, a broader analysis using the FPA is necessary to fully understand the range of possibilities in “doing” intimate relationships.

Thirdly, within debates surrounding non-monogamies, a discourse of “compulsory non-monogamy” has emerged among polyactivists and, to some extent, within queer communities, where non-heterosexual polyamorous relationships are perceived as inherently “queerer” than monogamous relationships (Downing & Gillett 2011; Barker & Langdrige 2010a). This discourse reflects the complexities of normative and transgressive forms of intimacy, as discussed by Wiegman and Wilson (2015), and highlights the need to consider both perspectives in understanding the dynamics of non-monogamous relationships. Additionally, the emphasis on community formation and shared identities, as observed by Bennion (2022), provides valuable insights into how non-heterosexual individuals in Poland may navigate their relationships within specific cultural and regional contexts. However, there is a notable research gap in understanding how the evolving norms of “compulsory non-monogamy” impact non-heterosexual individuals and their intimate relationships, particularly in the intersection of relational choices, practices, and specific geographies of sexualities and intimacies (Haritaworn et al. 2006; Klesse 2013; Sheff 2018). Addressing these gaps, this study employs the FPA framework, which emphasizes the influence of internalized social norms on intimate choices and practices, to explore how these dynamics unfold in particular cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this article has offered a multidimensional understanding of (non-)monogamy by examining the relational practices, attitudes, and trajectories of non-heterosexual individuals in Poland. The analysis underscores the importance of moving beyond binary perspectives of monogamy and non-monogamy, proposing instead that (non-)monogamy be approached as a continuum. This perspective accounts for the diverse circumstances, complexities, and evolving positionalities of partners within relational life, which continuously shape (non-)monogamous models alongside the norms and sociopolitical contexts in which these relationships are embedded.

Furthermore, this study has highlighted the interconnected nature of non-heterosexual individuals' choices, attitudes, and practices regarding (non-)monogamy with social norms, individual experiences, and the geographies of sexualities. It has revealed how the limited acceptance of non-heteronormativity and non-mononormativity, shaped by Poland's conservative social norms and sexual policies, significantly impacts relational choices, models, and practices.

By acknowledging the multidimensionality of (non-)monogamy, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary transformations in intimacy and the positioning of non-heterosexual relationships within these changes. This awareness calls for a shift away from the discourse centred on mononormativity, which often focuses solely on sexual exclusivity, as well as from the dichotomy of non-monogamy. It encourages a critical analysis of partners' positionalities in intimate relationships, reflection on their choices with an awareness of potential changes, and recognition of the diverse understandings held by all parties involved.

An analytical approach that emphasizes the significance of geographies, societal norms, and the fluidity of (non-)monogamy within the context of non-heterosexual relationships in Poland is essential. Embracing this perspective enables a deeper understanding of the complexities and dynamics of intimate life, challenges heteronormative frameworks, and fosters a more inclusive view of diverse relationship models and practices.

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