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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Discursive Construction of Polyamory: Legitimising an Alternative to Monogamy

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Abstract

Polyamory is an umbrella term denoting the practice of having multiple romantic and intimate relationships with the consent of everyone involved. Within a mononormative culture, becoming polyamorous may be associated with uncertainty and a feeling of being suspended. Moreover, the preferential attitude towards monogamy marginalises polyamory as indecent and corrupt, creating feelings of shame and social isolation. Our research explored the discursive construction of polyamory in Italy by identifying the strategies used to deal with such identity construction and social recognition issues. We conducted 15 semistructured interviews with people who defined themselves as polyamorous. Our discourse analysis identified a narrative that overturns the dominant hegemonic perspective; this narrative presented monogamy as a practice generating difficulties and problems and polyamory as a thoroughly satisfying and adequate relational modality. This narrative was constructed using six discursive strategies, allowing participants to achieve three discursive purposes. By naturalising polyamory and constructing it as a stable trait, participants essentialised polyamory; by providing a normative definition of polyamory and identifying with the polyamorous community, they set up the boundaries of polyamory; finally, by moralising polyamory and attributing transformative power to it, they valorised polyamory. Overall, the definition of a polyamorous order allows for the integration of polyamory into one's life, even if polyamorists remain a minority group trapped in the public liminality brought about by a mononormative culture.

Keywords Polyamory · Liminality · Stigma · Discourse analysis · Italy

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Introduction

Polyamory is an umbrella term denoting "the practice of consensually and with mutual interest negotiating desire for more than one relationship" (Brunning, 2018, p. 2). Along with open relationships and swinging, polyamory is a form of consensual nonmonogamy (CNM; Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2019), which is based on principles such as nonexclusivity in romantic relationships and sex, mutual transparency and honesty, deep appreciation of intimacy, partner focus, equality, and communication (Klesse, 2011). Compared to other CNMs, polyamory emphasises emotional intimacy among multiple partners (Sheff, 2020).

The intimate and counternormative nature of polyamory makes it difficult to obtain reliable estimates of its prevalence. Nevertheless, research using nationally representative samples of people from the USA and Canada has indicated that 4 to 6% of individuals declare being in a CNM relationship (Wilt et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2018) and that approximately 20% have made attempts at or had experiences in creating CNM relationships (Haupert et al., 2017). In an Italian survey conducted in 2018 (n=7000), 3 % of the respondents stated they identified with the polyamorous community, either in the present or the past (Statista, 2020). Although being a minority in the general population, the demographic characteristics of individuals in CNM relationships seem similar to those in monogamous relationships (Balzarini, et al., 2019b).

The roots of polyamory can be found in the feminist critique of the monogamous and heterosexual dominant relationship model and of marriage as a means of institutionalising monogamy (Haritaworn et al., 2006) that nurtured the free love movement of the 1960s and its countercultural critiques of social repression (Obadia, 2020). Polyamory was recognised as a form of relationship in the 1990s (World Heritage Encyclopedia, 2016) and has grown in popularity through media coverage and representation in the last ten years (Moors, 2017). Since the mid-2000s, there has been an increasing interest in polyamory and other CNMs from the scientific community (Grunt-Mejer & Chańska, 2020), but many aspects of this alternative approach have remained underexplored, especially in Southern Europe (Santos et al., 2019). Through interviews with 15 polyamorists, our study investigated the discursive construction of polyamory in Italy, a context characterised by a mononormative culture and a high stigma towards relational models other than the traditional ones.

Polyamory as a Liminal Object

Even though the diversity of families and relationships has increased in Western societies (Wilt et al., 2018), monogamy remains the dominant discourse about relationships (Anderson, 2010). It constitutes the basis of mononormativity, which is a powerful cultural and normative ideal (Katz & Graham, 2020). Mononormativity prescribes that love relationships are normal, right, and natural when they are heterosexual, marital, reproductive, not lucrative, and monogamous (O'Byrne & Haines,

2019). Several actors have contributed to the construction of the monogamous norm: religious, political and cultural institutions and professional organisations in the field of mental health, education, and law. This construction is "an implicit premise underlying both formal theories of relationship functioning and laypeople's implicit theories about how relationships work" (Conley et al., 2017, p. 205). The representation of marriage as a normal part of the life course, the spontaneity attributed to jealousy, the idealised constructions of the family, and the artistic and cultural productions that romanticise the vision of love with a single ideal partner are all cultural and discursive constructions that contribute to reproducing and reinforcing the monogamous norm (Emens, 2004).

According to some authors, one of the consequences of mononormativity is that polyamory lacks a clear interactional framework guiding narratives of the self and relational commitments (Domínguez et al., 2017) since it exists outside of normatively structured everyday reality (Carlström, & Andersson, 2019). There is no single way to be polyamorous; therefore, polyamory has been described as a personal identity, a sexual orientation, a relationship structure, and a relational orientation (Jordan et al., 2017). Moreover, various configurations of polyamorous relationships exist, and they are characterised by different styles of intimate involvement (Balzarini et al., 2019a). Even if many polyamorists categorise relationship structures as limiting (Heckert, 2010), in most of them, individuals have two concurrent partners and distinguish between primary and secondary partnerships (Balzarini et al., 2017). The primary/secondary model is that of an already formed couple in which a third person is added to the relationship as a lover of one or both partners (Weitzman et al., 2009). The definition of a partner as "primary" is the result of numerous elements: cohabitation, marriage, sharing of expenses, and sharing of children (Balzarini & Muise, 2020). This model also includes another type of relationship: the poly/mono model, in which a partner is polyamorous while the other is exclusively monogamous (Taormino, 2008). The multiple primary partner model is instead described as three or more partners in a primary relationship in which all members are equal partners (Labriola, 1999). Relationships that involve different partners can be closed or open. Closed relationships entail members having relationships with group members, indicating polyfidelity, and open relationships allow sexual activities even with members outside the group (Jordan et al., 2017).

In our perspective, polyamory may be conceptualised as a liminal relational structure (Gusmano, 2018) between two positions that are usually conceived in terms of mutual exclusivity (loyal/cheater; heterosexual/homosexual; jealous/not jealous), and this liminality is associated with uncertainty, ambivalence, and a feeling of being suspended (O'Byrne & Haines, 2019). Therefore, characterised by the absence of any legitimised order, polyamory may create a paradox that hinders public understanding and impedes social acknowledgement (Greco & Stenner, 2017; Zulato et al., 2021). From this perspective, polyamorists are thus engaged in the construction of a new order, which is made of values, norms, and practices and allows them to overcome the paradoxes associated with a liminal condition (Domínguez et al., 2017). This new order constitutes a direct challenge to the monogamous norm. It offers an alternative language for describing relationships (Veaux & Rickert, 2014) that revises the gender stereotypes according to which men are driven to have

multiple partners while women are inclined to monogamy; it disputes the association between jealousy and love and denaturalises monogamy, legitimising the existence of different and multiple forms of love relationships (Klesse, 2018). Ritchie and Barker (2006) explored language construction within a polyamorous online community, highlighting the negotiations taking place in three fundamental areas: identity, relationships, and emotions. Regarding identity, polyamorous people have refused the term betrayal to describe the practice of having more than one romantic and/or sexual relationship simultaneously; they have emphasised the importance of ethics and morality in polyamory. Second, concerning relationships, polyamorous people have created an alternative to the dominant discourse, in which conventional language is confined to the couple (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). The relationship with the partner(s) has required the creation of new terms to avoid negatively connoted expressions (e.g., "the other woman"). The terms "metamour" and "compersion" were formulated to indicate one's partner's partner and a positive feeling related to the love between the partner and another person. Third, concerning emotions, the term "jealousy" has been reconceptualised as "wibble" or "wibbly" to indicate a feeling of insecurity about one's partner's other relationships.

The Social Stigmatisation of Polyamorous Identities and Practices

The construction of polyamorous identities also meets tension between the dominant norm and the desire for recognition of one's specificity, as evidenced by the presence of two interrelated discourses (Barker, 2005). The first relates to comparing polyamory and monogamy: some polyamorous people emphasise the difference; for others, polyamory is normal as an extension of the monogamous model applied to more than one person. The second discourse highlights the contrast between those who describe polyamory as innate, natural, and spontaneous and those who present it as a conscious choice. More generally, Klesse (2014) identified different stages of polyamorous identity construction: unawareness of polyamory, attempt to conform to monogamy, failure of the monogamous model, introduction to polyamory, acceptance of polyamory, establishment of a polyamorous relationship, participation in the polyamorous community, and self-definition as "polyamorous".

Practising polyamory can result in the loss of family ties, friendships or support from communities that do not understand or approve of this relational style (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2022). Indeed, monogamism, the preferential attitude towards monogamy, stems from mononormativity and marginalises other relational orientations, such as polyamory and other forms of CNM that are deemed indecent, deviant and corrupt, creating feelings of shame and isolation among those who practise them (Sheff, 2020). As found by numerous authors (Haupert et al., 2017; McLean, 2004; Sheff, 2005), polyamory has often been conceived as betrayal and, for this reason, has been subjected to stigma and rejection from family, friends, therapists, and employers. Moreover, polyamorous people are often seen as having greater sexual freedom and are therefore considered promiscuous and more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases (Weitzman, 2007). Polyamory has also been a practice subject to discrimination by institutions, as polyamorous people currently have no legal

protection concerning work, housing, childcare and marriage (Pérez Navarro, 2017). One of the most severe risks concerns the possible loss of child custody for polyamorous parents, as polyamory has often been considered harmful to children (Emens, 2004). In addition, discrimination can occur in the workplace, so many polyamorous people prefer to hide this aspect of their lives (Hutzler et al., 2016) even from their therapists (Katz & Graham, 2020). Research has shown that several adverse effects are associated with this stigmatisation, such as chronic stress (Link & Phelan, 2006), lower self-esteem, and poorer self-reported health condition (Lehmiller, 2012).

Stigmatisation can be stronger in social contexts characterised by traditional values, where people endorse conventional relationship structures, where the legal recognition for partnering outside the monogamous borders of heterosexual marriage is lacking, and where a high level of transphobia and homophobia exists across different levels of society (Gusmano, 2018). This has been the case in the Italian context in which this research was conducted and, more generally, in southern European countries (Santos et al., 2019). The Italian legislative situation is emblematic of this situation. After forty years of battles by the LGBTQ + movement, in 2016, a law was approved in Italy that grants gay couples the possibility of contracting a civil union but denies them the right to marry or adopt. In 2020, a law against homotransphobia was also rejected by the parliament. In addition to the centre-right parties, which voted against both bills, the Catholic Church played an active role in the public debates concerning these legislative initiatives. In particular, they spoke out to limit the rights of same-sex couples and opposed the law against homotransphobia in the name of freedom of expression. The Italian Church often plays a relevant role in the Italian public debate, especially for matters relating to the moral sphere, with conservative positions in defence of what it calls the "natural family", which is always the monogamous and heterosexual family (Frigerio et al., 2021).

Research Aims and Theoretical Perspective

The literature shows that the prescriptive character of hegemonic mononormativity poses two challenges to polyamorous people. With respect to the liminal character of polyamory, the first challenge is to elaborate a system of meanings that accounts for one's feelings, behaviours, and relational choices. The second challenge is to legitimise this order as opposed to the prevailing stigma, for which polyamory represents a negative phenomenon on the moral level or a phenomenon with relational repercussions. Our study aims to investigate how the discursive construction of polyamory enables polyamorous people to address these two challenges.

Following Potter, discourse is characterised by three core features: its constructive character, its situated nature and its action orientation (2003). Regarding the constructive character, beliefs and cognitions are not considered something given and internal to be expressed externally; instead, they result from a construction process achieved through language (Howitt, 2010). On the one hand, available discourses of sexuality constitute forms of knowledge constructed through words, categories and representations that influence perceptions and experiences and shape self-identities (Burr, 1995); conversely, the use of discourse makes it possible to create, maintain,

and change meanings. As meanings are elaborated from communicative exchanges between people who pursue specific goals, language enables the construction of different versions of social reality (Wetherell et al., 2001). Indeed, much literature has asserted that people belonging to sexual minorities have developed their own language to express their identities and experiences and to ask for rights and recognition (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). The situated nature of discourse refers to two aspects. First, discourse is sequentially situated: what is said at a given moment depends on what was said before and affects what will be said later. Second, language is rhetorically situated because it is inserted into a set of symbolic negotiation processes that, through discourses, pursue social, ideological and political interests. Finally, language is action-oriented, as it constitutes the primary context for action and interaction between individuals. Language exchanges occur within a network of power relations, revealing the role of discourses in building, maintaining or deconstructing specific power structures.

In this socioconstructivist perspective, the discursive construction of polyamory is framed as a rhetorical tool constructed and used to oppose hegemonic discourses on erotic intimacy and sexuality, which are still gendered and heteronormative (Tunariu & Reavey, 2007), proposing a version of the world of romantic relationships capable of competing in social and cultural confrontation with other versions (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Methods

Participants: Recruitment and Characteristics

With the administrators' permission, we posted a message on the Italian Facebook group "Polyamory and other ethical nonmonogamies", describing the research aim and soliciting participants who defined themselves as polyamorous for an interview. "Polyamory and other ethical nonmonogamies" was the first and largest online Italian community dedicated to polyamory: it started in 2009 and included up to 3800 members until it closed in October 2019 as a result of irreconcilable disagreements within the association that had created it. In addition to its online activity, the group regularly organised meetings to favour members' socialisation and educational activities on topics relevant to the community (Paccagnella, 2020). Similar to other studies on the topic (O'Byrne & Haines, 2019; Valadez et al., 2020), fifteen participants were recruited (Table 1).

The participants were all cisgender (8 men, 7 women), and their ages varied from 20 to 49. Their education level was relatively high: five had a bachelor's or master's degree, eight had completed secondary education, and two had primary education. Eight participants worked (six as professionals, two as employees), four were students and three were unemployed. Only one participant had a child. Eight of the respondents declared themselves heterosexual, three bisexual, and four pansexual. Seven participants were engaged in romantic relationships, six were single, and two were married.

Table 1 Participants' sociodemographic characteristics

ID	Age	Gender	Education	Work or school status	Sexual orientation	Relationship situation	Children
M1	18	M	High school degree	Student	Heterosexual	Single	No
M2	49	M	Master's degree	Employee	Pansexual	Noncohabiting relationship	Yes, 3
M3	28	M	Master's degree	Professional	Heterosexual	Single	No
M4	28	M	High school degree	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Single	No
M5	29	M	High school degree	Professional	Heterosexual	Noncohabiting relationship	No
M6	34	M	Master's degree	Employee	Bisexual	Noncohabiting relationship	No
M7	20	M	High school degree	Student	Heterosexual	Married	No
M8	26	M	High school degree	Student	Heterosexual	Noncohabiting relationship	No
W1	27	F	High school degree	Student	Bisessuale	Noncohabiting relationship	No
W2	36	F	Master's degree	Unemployed	Pansexual	Noncohabiting relationship	No
W3	31	F	High school degree	Professional	Bisexual	Noncohabiting relationship	No
W4	31	W	Master's degree	Professional	Pansexual	Single	No
W5	32	W	Secondary school diploma	Unemployed	Heterosexual	Single	No
W6	35	M	Secondary school diploma	Professional	Heterosexual	Married	No
W7	30	F	High school degree	Professional	Pansexual	Single	No

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Milan-Bicocca. Before the interview, all participants received by email the consent form approved by the Ethical Committee, and they sent it back signed by email. All the forms and the participants' data were stored on a computer accessible only to a researcher.

Data Collection

Data were collected with semi-structured interviews. The interview topic guide was developed based on the research objectives, previous literature, and one-year participant observation in the Facebook group, which allowed us to identify topics relevant to this community. The interview guide explored three main areas. The first one aimed to understand which elements characterised the philosophy and practice of polyamory (e.g., "If you had to explain what polyamory is to a person who knows nothing about it, what would you say?"). The second area aimed to reconstruct the individual path that led from discovery to adherence to polyamory (e.g., "Please, tell me your story and the path you followed to discover and understand polyamory."). The third part aimed to understand how the participants came to relate to the polyamorous community, the role of online and offline groups, and the experiences with other polyamorous people (e.g., "What is the most positive aspect of the Facebook group "Polyamory and other ethical nonmonogamies?"). The interview guide was validated through a test interview. All the interviews were conducted via Skype or telephone in 2018 over three months.

Interviews lasted an average of 65 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in separate files only accessible by the research group. All transcripts were proofread and offered to participants to be reviewed if they so desired. Participants who chose to review their transcript were emailed a copy of it and encouraged to make any amendments they felt necessary.

Data Analysis

In agreement with the definition of discourse analysis as "the study of how talk and texts are used to perform actions" (Potter, 2003, p. 59), our approach aimed at identifying the discursive strategies used by individuals to achieve specific purposes, focusing on the mutual influence between individuals within the context of interpersonal exchanges.

In discourse analysis, researchers begin by identifying the "conversational environment" (Potter, 2003, p. 80) to build data sets in which the participants' discursive practices can be studied. In our case, the two settings were partly different because, in the telephone interviews, the interaction was only verbal. In contrast, body language and appearance played a role in the Skype interviews, and the interaction between participant and researcher was richer. We were aware of this difference, but the use of the telephone was necessary to interview some participants who were otherwise unreachable. The material collection was followed by the transcription phase, which was fundamental to familiarise ourselves with the research material and

conduct the analysis. The analysis phase implied generating hypotheses and ideas about the argumentative processes characterising the language exchanges addressed. The analysis focused on identifying the texts' rhetorical, lexical and structural elements to understand how socially relevant objects were constructed in conversations and how these constructions were located across time and in relation to other phenomena.

The validation of the analysis was based on several principles: the consistency with the outcomes found in previous studies, the evaluation provided by the readers on the basis of the sample extracts provided, and the significance of the interpretations the researcher provided the participants (Howitt, 2010).

Results

Our analysis shows that our participants converge in constructing a narrative that overturns the dominant hegemonic discourse on intimate relationships. Indeed, it presents monogamy as a relational practice intrinsically generating difficulties and problems for the couple and, on the contrary, polyamory as a thoroughly satisfying and adequate relational modality. This narrative is constructed using different discursive strategies that allow participants to achieve specific discursive purposes, which are summarised in Table 2. In the following pages, we present how each strategy allows us to achieve these purposes.

Essentialising Polyamory Versus Cultural Monogamy

Essentialising polyamory allows it to be constructed as a natural and spontaneous element of identity and to present monogamy as a cultural construction. To essentialise polyamory thus makes it possible to construct a polyamorous identity according to specific dimensions (e.g., stability, authenticity, correspondence between dispositional traits and relational behaviour) and, simultaneously, counteract the stigmatising representation offered by the hegemonic monogamous discourse. This discursive purpose is achieved through two discursive strategies: the naturalisation of polyamory and the construction of a coherent self.

Naturalisation consists of presenting an element resulting from historical and social processes as natural or characterising it using its natural features. Barker (2005) found that this strategy is widespread in Western cultures where biological origins are considered more "real" than cultural heritage. The naturalisation of polyamory is enhanced by contrasting it with the cultural character attributed to monogamy, as participants argue that polyamory already existed before the social institution of the monogamous norm:

> Polyamory has to do with human relations, which are vital for the human being, who is a social animal. Therefore, polyamory has to do with something primitive and ancestral, which concerns us and existed before monogamy. Monogamy has existed for 3000 years, since private property and civilisations

Table 2 Discursive aims and strategies

Discursive aim	Discursive strategy	Quotes
Essentialising polyamory	Naturalisation	"Polyamory has to do with human relations, which are vital for the human being, who is a social animal. Therefore, polyamory has to do with something primitive and ancestral, which concerns us and existed before monogamy."
	Construction of a stable trait	"Consider that in retrospect, I think I have always felt polyamorous. For example, when I was 16 years old, I liked to build models of houses, and I remember the model of a house I built. There was an architectural structure to accommodate my five partners and me."
Setting up the boundaries of polyamory	Providing a normative definition of polyamory	"Like many people, I think, I need to have a definition of what I do, the sensations, the feelings I have. Somehow they need to be translated into a form that is explicable to others."
	Identifying with the polyamorous community	"Discussing it and confronting myself with people who live the same experiences, talk about the same things I talk about, have the same problems I have, has helped me to see polyamory as a slightly more social structure and not just a personal one."
Valorising polyamory	Moralisation of polyamory	"I get irritated by those who use this kind of group to pick up people, which is the opposite of polyamory because we are not "easy people" at all. Polyamory probably takes slightly more effort than a monogamous relationship."
	Attribution of transformative power to polyamory	"The way I live it, polyamory is perhaps the only possible way to change something, radically, from the bottom up, since it has to do with the family, with a system that has been guiding us since we were children and that determines everything, what we see and what we have around us, at least in the Western world."

> have been established and people went from being nomads and savages to those people about which Engels writes so well. (M4, 28)

In this quote, the participant proposes a comparison between two histories: the long history of polyamory, which is placed at the origins of humanity to symbolise its authentic spontaneous nature, and the short history of monogamy, which began thanks to the invention of private property. The reference to private property is meant in a critical sense, as demonstrated by the reference to Engels, whose authority as a scholar also contributes to legitimising the discourse. Thus, this strategy allows the participants to define polyamory as a natural tendency diverted by the cultural practices and economic interests that have facilitated the establishment of monogamous forms of relationships. The emergence of monogamy is thus presented as unrelated to the dynamics of affection in which polyamory is placed.

The second strategy to essentialize polyamory consists of identifying it as a stable trait and a spontaneous tendency. Research has indicated that within the polyamorous community, there are different positions on this issue. Some propose an essentialist reading of polyamory that claims the universality of rights; others value more the possibility of choice and fluidity without establishing obligatory paths in the discovery of one's polyamorous identity (Klesse, 2014). Our participants converge on the first of the two positions, as shown both by the example above and by this participant who refers to polyamory as a relational orientation:

> I think people have a predisposition towards polyamory so that I would call it more of an orientation, comparable in some ways to a sexual orientation. (W4, 31)

Polyamory is presented as spontaneous and independent of the subject's choices, appearing to derive from biological imperative. In this same logic, another participant proposes a comparison between the discrimination suffered by gay people and that affecting polyamorous people. Just as the former have long seen their sexual orientation denied any status, polyamorous people have been denied recognition as people with a specific relational orientation:

> On a societal level, monogamous relationship orientation is seen as obligatory; nothing else is accepted other than monogamy. If anything else exists, it is seen as a perversion, exactly like what happened 70 years ago with homosexuality. (W5, 32)

This historical anchoring frames the stigma towards polyamorous people in a long tradition of rejecting what does not fit into the dominant heteronormative model, which appears today as no longer tenable. This argument implicitly suggests that the stigma towards polyamory will be overcome, as the stigma towards homosexuality has been. At the same time, this rapprochement also assimilates homosexuality and polyamory as being predispositions rather than choices.

Participants trace this stable trait in their biographies through narratives about past life experiences giving order and coherence to their polyamorous orientation. In this excerpt, as in others of the same type, the participant describes his adherence to polyamory as a spontaneous orientation that originates in adolescence.

> Consider that in retrospect, I think I have always felt polyamorous. For example, when I was 16 years old, I liked to build models of houses, and I remember the model of a house I built. There was an architectural structure to accommodate my five partners and me. So already on a teenage fantasy level, there was this idea of cohabiting with multiple partners. (M2, 49)

This discursive strategy legitimise personal paths in the name of something that "has always been there". The rereading of one's past in search of foundational and revealing episodes of one's current positions has been highlighted by other authors who have dealt with stigmatised sexual minorities such as transgender people (Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Setting the Borders of Polyamory

The second discursive purpose is to establish the boundaries of polyamory, positioning what is "inside this world" and what is not. This positioning serves to construct an identity for polyamory and to distinguish it from other types of CNMs that might be associated with it due to the commonality of practices or philosophical principles identifying its specificity. This purpose is accomplished using two discursive strategies: searching a normative definition of polyamory and identifying with the polyamorous community.

The first issue is addressed in the interviews in different ways. Some participants explicitly refer to their own necessity of establishing an order in their relationship system, which also involves a clear definition of what polyamory is:

> Like many people, I think, I need to have a definition of what I do, the sensations, the feelings I have. Somehow they need to be translated into a form that is explicable to others. (W5, 32).

In this case, therefore, the participant claims an identity work that conveys a meaning to her experience and makes it communicable. On the one hand, she generalises this need by attributing it to many people to normalise it; on the other hand, she traces it back to a personal need, which makes it indisputable.

In other cases, participants report that discussing the polyamorous norm is a relevant issue for those who have recently approached the polyamorous community trying to give meaning to their feelings and relational practices:

> So many new people come to the forum and start by asking "By the way, is doing this polyamorous?". Like to say, is this okay? Is this the right way to do it? Or "I fell in love with this person, but I am jealous; so am I polyamorous?" The recurring theme is always to try to create a norm and define what polyamory means. (M5, 29)

Unlike the previous quotation, in this case, the participant seems to distance himself from this definitory pressure since he perceives it as an element of rigidity in a context where one would like to be completely free, although he acknowledges that it is a need that newcomers in particular have. Although opposed, these two

strategies still refer to an identity construction process. In one case, it manifests itself as the need to define oneself; in the other, it manifests itself as a work of deconstruction of this need. Indeed, the two positions expressed by these quotations seem to reflect a difference and a debate in the polyamorous community concerning the greater or lesser degree of structuring in a relational norm. The first is justified with the need to construct an alternative to the monogamous discourse that corresponds to the experiences of polyamorous people, and the other is more oriented towards valuing the variability and fluidity of individual paths.

Constructing a definitory framework also provides the ability to identify those who do not fit into the polyamorous community. For example, several participants talked about so-called slimy people, who present themselves as polyamorous without truly being so. Their real purpose is to enter the polyamorous community where they think they will find people who are willing to have new sexual relationships:

> Many people misunderstood the meaning of the forum, thinking it was a way to hook up easily. Obviously, they are not polyamorous. They are people who have misunderstood polyamory. (M3, 28)

In this excerpt, the participant refers to the stigma of hypersexualisation of polyamorous people to counter it, calling it a clear sign of a nonpolyamorous identity. In other cases, the definition of the identity characteristics of polyamory allows it to be distinguished from practices of other sexual minorities:

> Swinging is basically about recreational sexual relationships, without emotional and romantic involvement. However, in polyamory, the relationships can also imply an emotional, romantic side. (M6, 34)

These comparisons are never neutral but always tend to favour the polyamorous point of view and identity over the others, as in this case where polyamory appears to be a richer relational form than swinging. As is well known, the definition of the identity of one category over another follows an ego-centred dynamic.

A second strategy to establish boundaries is to identify oneself in the polyamorous community conceived as a place where the path to discovering polyamory is strengthened and can find legitimacy:

> Discussing it and confronting myself with people who live the same experiences, talk about the same things I talk about, have the same problems I have, has helped me to see polyamory as a slightly more social structure and not just a personal one. (W1, 27)

In this excerpt, the community is constructed primarily through mirroring, i.e., the tendency of participants to describe themselves in terms of their similarity to other group members (Montali et al., 2022). This strategy sets boundaries because it constructs the community as the space of like-minded people, characterised by a common experience of problems and solutions, implicitly contrasting it with an external world in which people simply cannot recognise themselves. When the identity dimension is emphasised in this way, the polyamorous community is

represented as fundamentally homogeneous, and the differences between its participants are relegated to the background. Therefore, the risk is that identity construction be accompanied by dynamics of conformism or the request to adopt the prevailing point of view within the community.

Within the community, people experience for the first time the public recognition of their private experience, which the outside world had hitherto denied them:

> The most positive aspect of the group and the community, and the meetings we have, is that people can say "this thing exists!", "this thing can be talked about", "this thing is accepted". (W3, 31)

The boundary between the inside (the community) and the outside (the rest of the world) thus also marks the distinction between legitimisation and negation, between the authentic and the false, and between existence and repression. Within this contrast, the group is positioned as a supportive community that provides help in dealing with life's many difficulties caused by a stigmatising external context:

> Sometimes people come to the meetings literally in tears, destroyed, talking about situations of psychological violence, and they need immediate feedback. A large group offers this kind of service, and the possibility to confront so many points of view is a plus. (W6, 35)

In the community, people find refuge from the evil that the outside world imposes on them, and the community mobilises to offer resources for psychological well-being precisely because people have in common that they have experienced similar difficult situations.

Valorising Polyamory

The last discursive aim is to assign a positive value to polyamorous identities and practices contrasting the stigma associated with them. Here, too, therefore, a twofold purpose can be identified. On the one hand, the goal is to give polyamory an identity characterisation according to specific dimensions, which are ethical and progressive in this case. On the other hand, the goal is to counter a negative representation of polyamory as an immoral relational practice. Two discursive strategies have been identified to accomplish this aim: the moralisation of polyamory and the attribution of transformative power to it.

Moralisation is achieved by deconstructing and overturning the mainstream conception that nonmonogamous relational practices are immoral and promiscuous:

> I get irritated by those who use this kind of group to pick up people, which is the opposite of polyamory because we are not "easy people" at all. Polyamory probably takes slightly more effort than a monogamous relationship. (W1, 27)

In this excerpt, one can notice the participants' overturning of the dominant perspective and, simultaneously, the limits of this overturning. The stigmatising characterisation of polyamorous people is directly challenged, and it is argued that polyamory proves to be a relational model that requires more commitment

than monogamous relational models. Thus, the hegemonic moral principle that being easy people and having sex with different people are problematic is not contested. Nevertheless, it is denied that this is the case for polyamory, which is considered more moral than monogamous relationships on the basis of a performance criterion rather than on the basis of the pursuit of well-being or freedom. In their narratives, all participants mention the importance of ethics, referring to honesty and transparency towards the partner and acceptance of differences in relational and sexual orientations:

> I think it is a choice that one makes starting from principles, primarily that polyamory cannot exist without sharing and communication between partners. (W4, 31)

The importance assigned to the ethical dimension constitutes a central identity element for polyamory (Anderson, 2022), which can also be used as a counter-argument in response to the stigma of polyamory's immorality:

> We accept all the possible and imaginable forms of relationships because we could not do otherwise without shooting ourselves in the foot if we did not, since we have to be the first ones to accept if we want to be accepted (W2, 36).

In this excerpt, for example, the participant makes explicit the connection between the principle of openness to diversity that she claims characterises polyamory and the demand that a similar tenet is applied to polyamory by those who do not practise it.

The second discursive strategy is the valorisation of polyamory on the basis of its transformative potential at different levels. At the individual level, polyamory is characterised as a practice by which even the most deeply rooted feelings and behaviours can evolve in a positive direction. For example, in this quotation, the participant tells how he managed to transform his jealousy from an inappropriate reaction into a problem to reflect on in search of the reasons behind it:

> I know that since I started polyamorous relationships, I became a better version of myself. I had my severe jealousy crises, I looked inside myself, and I said, "Oh look, there is an insecurity on this issue, what is its origin? Can I do something about it?". I still have moments when I am jealous, but I now see it as an opportunity, as a wake-up call to look inside myself better and try to face the hidden me. (M2, 49)

This excerpt shows that jealousy, which stems from the monogamous imperative and is typically evoked in that framework to explain the impossibility of polyamorous practice, can also be an experience for polyamorous people. Rather than being treated as an ineliminable fact, it is addressed as symptomatic of a problem to be solved. At this level, polyamory therefore favours recognising one's weaknesses and fears through personal empowerment, opening to reflection and paving the way to improvement.

At the broader societal level, polyamory is presented as a revolutionary and systemic change:

> The way I live it, polyamory is perhaps the only possible way to change something, radically, from the bottom up, since it has to do with the family, with a system that has been guiding us since we were children and that determines everything, what we see and what we have around us, at least in the Western world. (W7, 30)

Polyamory is presented here as a utopian ideal and a way to concretely foster the realisation of this utopia through a process that stems from modifying relational orders. The challenge of this change is represented through the proposed contrast between a movement that comes from the grassroots—typically nonorganised and struggling to assert its influence—and the dominant hegemonic model, which is portrayed as a powerful system capable of conditioning every aspect of human existence. Polyamory is thus configured as a heroic alternative that can favour an overturning of what has hitherto been considered true and right.

Discussion

This article adds to the current literature by identifying the discursive goals and strategies used in the construction of polyamory by polyamorous people, who are engaged in a daily challenge against the social stigma arising from mononormativity and in the effort to provide a new and alternative dialect to describe relationships (Valadez et al., 2020). These different discursive strategies are employed to realise three discursive goals: essentialising polyamory, establishing the boundaries of polyamory, and valorising polyamory.

First, our analysis shows an overall narrative that positions monogamy as a problematic and limited universe and polyamory as a relational practice offering a solution to the problems attributed to monogamous relationships. Hence, our participants overthrow the dominant perspective that holds monogamy's optimality by offering an alternative discourse that inverts cultural hierarchies more than working towards their abolition (Willis, 2019). This result is consistent with studies showing that those engaged in CNM experience significant increases in sexual satisfaction (Conley et al., 2018) and higher relationship intimacy levels than monogamous people (Morrison et al., 2013). A potential risk inherent in such construction is that presenting one's relational option as better than others risks replicating the same psychosocial dynamic of "us versus them" that has built stigma and prejudice against polyamory (Ferrer, 2018). It may also be interesting to note that even the scientific literature has tended to polarise monogamy and CNMs as either overtly positive or negative, depending on the authors' different preferences (Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2019). As the literature has shown, one way to solve the ambiguities posed by liminality is precisely by polarising it, which means that, to solve a dilemma, a solution is forced towards one of the two orders at stake (Greco & Stenner, 2017). In this case, by defining monogamy as a problem and polyamory as the solution, our participants take a clear position about what system should orient the dilemmatic universe of love relationships. This evidence sheds further light on the literature on

liminality by unveiling the forms that the polarisation process may take (i.e., troubling the hegemonic order).

Essentialising polyamory legitimises it as spontaneous and "natural" (Barker, 2005), as opposed to monogamy, which is positioned as a historically and culturally situated social construction. These results confirm the literature, as several authors (Anapol, 2010; Barker, 2005; Klesse, 2006) have highlighted the "naturalness" attributed to nonmonogamous practices by polyamorists. A further element that reinforces the definition of polyamory as natural is the exhibition of a coherent self by our participants, who considered that they had been aware of their relational orientation since adolescence. This discursive strategy has also been detected in other studies (Currie et al., 2007; Mason-Schrock, 1996). Although not directly dealing with polyamory, these studies found that people in groups and communities tend to offer narratives characterised by logical and temporal continuity regarding their identity to create a coherent biography. Overall, naturalisation and coherence show how polyamory constitutes a relevant identity component, constructed by reversing the dominant ideological perspective (Klesse, 2006). Discursive strategies such as the naturalisation and construction of a coherent self can be traced back to the polyamorists' necessity of fighting social stigma and achieving social acceptance (Aviram & Leachman, 2015) by presenting polyamory as something innate and immutable (Rubel & Burleigh, 2020). However, some authors have shown that essentialising and normalising polyamory leads to proposing that love be reduced to its biological datum again, just as the monogamous discourse has done, ignoring that love is a cultural and social construction (Obadia, 2020).

The second discursive aim—to establish boundaries—sets the group's norm and it positions such norm in relation to other practices equally not legitimated in the dominant relational culture from which polyamory differs. The process of defining polyamory implies the specification of inclusion and exclusion criteria based on certain fundamental principles. For many participants, polyamory constitutes a specific style of nonmonogamy, as its ethical value differentiates it from other forms of relationships. This result corresponds to what Klesse (2006) asserted: on the one hand, polyamory promotes a vision that challenges a hegemonic perspective, but on the other hand, like monogamy, polyamory is also based on a normative ideal. The need to set boundaries can be better understood in relation to the liminal character of polyamory (Domínguez et al., 2017). The definition of an order allows integrating polyamory into one's daily life, reducing the unfinished destructive potential attributed to polyamorous relationships (Willis, 2019). The relevance of normative and definitional aspects and the self-help role attributed to the community can also be explained by referring to the relative novelty of polyamory in the Italian context (Gusmano, 2018). Since the phenomenon has not yet been consolidated in Italy and is not significantly present in the public discourse, the need to precisely define its nature and contours prevails, unlike in other contexts, primarily in the USA, where the focus is instead on the practice of polyamory. For these reasons, the community is the only concrete place where the process of construction and validation of polyamorous identities takes place, unlike in the US, where other practices of normalisation and inclusion prevail (Paccagnella, 2020).

The third discursive aim, valorisation, positions polyamory as an orientation that promotes personal and social improvements. On the individual level, the challenges of managing polyamorous relationships also constitute functional elements for self-improvement. This result confirms a previous qualitative study conducted among polyamorous women by Sheff (2005). The expectation of social transformation represents an element not yet found in other qualitative research on polyamorous people. In contrast to the widespread idea that polyamory is about sex rather than love (Katz & Graham, 2020), polyamorists use a discursive strategy that emphasises its moral character. Characterising polyamory in moral terms can also be seen as the attempt to pave the way to social change. In other words, after having defined what polyamory is and having resolved its dilemmas, the polyamorous community still faces the issue of social and legal recognition that would better integrate polyamory into everyday life. In this sense, while the liminal character of polyamory might be resolved by its insiders, these people still have to solve liminality at a sociopsychological level (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2017).

Limits

The first limitation of our study is that we investigated the topic of polyamory in only one national context and involved a limited number of participants. This limit lessens the possibility of generalising our results. Whether our results can be confirmed could only be known through new studies. A second limitation concerns the combined use of telephone and Skype interviews. The latter are preferable, as they allow for a richer interaction between researchers and participants. Nevertheless, telephone interviews were necessary to include some participants we would otherwise not have been able to reach. A further limitation is that the study was based only on individual interviews. The contents of the Polyamory Italia Facebook discussion group could not be analysed for privacy reasons, as the group has been closed. Nevertheless, the forum content was valuable to identify the areas to be investigated in the interviews and to inform the data analysis process.

Conclusion

Considered as a whole, the polyamorists' discursive aims—essentialising polyamory, defining boundaries, and valorising polyamory—may be seen as an attempt to assign a precise position to polyamorous identities and practices within the complex and varied universe of social relationships. Not only do our participants propose a legitimisation for their relational orientation, but they also reconceptualise the taken-for-granted system of beliefs, values, and norms of monogamy. In other words, polyamorists propose a theory of intimate relationships using specific discursive strategies to challenge the status quo of mononormativity and managing the liminality of polyamory. It is precisely within the grammatic of monormativity that polyamorists

become liminal; therefore, social recognition will be made possible only through the construction of new normativities at a social level (Greco & Stenner, 2017).

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Data Availability The data of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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