



Review of the Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies Conference (NMCI) held in Portugal, 25th - 27th September 2015

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Abstract

A review of the first Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies (NMCI) conference held in Lisbon in September 2015. This conference brought together activists, artists, academics, therapists and other practitioners working in the field to explore the lived experiences of non-monogamies, especially those considered consensual; ideological and representational changes in how intimacies are thought of; intersections with race, sex-gender, sexual orientation, kinship, kink, sex work, class, culture, religion, dis/ability, asexuality, a-romanticism; activism and community-building around non-monogamies; reproduction of normativities and resistances: polynormativity and relationship anarchy, neo-liberalism and political contestation; evolution of scientific discourses on non-monogamies; challenges to counselling, psychotherapy, (public) health and legal frameworks around non-monogamies; the roles of mass media and new technologies around transformations of intimacy.

Key words: *non-monogamies, contemporary intimacies, polyamory*

I had the good fortune of attending the first Non-Monogamies and Contemporary Intimacies (NMCI) conference held in Lisbon in September. The conference was organised by a consortium from Southern Europe conducting a five year research project called INTIMATE (www.ces.uc.pt/intimate/). The NMCI conference brought together activists, artists, academics, therapists and other practitioners working in the field to explore the following areas of interest:

- Research around the **lived experiences of non-monogamies**, especially those considered consensual;
- **Ideological and representational changes** in how intimacies are thought of;
- **Intersections** with race, sex-gender, sexual orientation, kinship, kink, sex work, class, culture, religion, dis/ability, asexuality, a-romanticism
- **Activism** and community-building around non-monogamies;
- Reproduction of **normativities and resistances**: polynormativity and relationship anarchy, neo-liberalism and political contestation;
- Evolution of **scientific discourses** on non-monogamies;
- Challenges to **counselling, psychotherapy, (public) health and legal frameworks** around non-monogamies;
- The roles of **mass media and new technologies** around transformations of intimacy.

Conference participants came from all across Southern and Northern Europe, South and North America, Africa, China, Israel and Australia. It was ten years since a previous conference on the related topic of Polyamory was held in Europe, however there are plans to hold NMCI conferences bi-annually in future with the next conference to be held in Austria in 2017.

Keynotes were delivered by Meg John Barker, Ana Cristina Santos, Brigitte Vasallo, Nathan Rambukkana, Pepper Mint and Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, and the conference program is available on the website (www.nmciconference.wordpress.com/). Presentations covered a wide range of topics, including the asexual slut; poly parenting models; pornography and psychoanalysis; intersections of contemporary intimacies and gender, race, class and disability; queer sexuality in urban Congo; creating radical financial structures to support non-monogamous relationships; a showing of the full length French polyamorous comedy 'Lutine'; practical workshops such as negotiation skills and informed consent, among many others.

Considerations Of Power And Privilege

Conference organisers placed considerations of power and privilege front and centre in the planning and development of NMCI conference themes, according insider knowledges and the lived-experience of activists, artists and practitioners, an equivalent value to academic knowledges.

As one of the keynote speakers, Brigitte Vasallo noted, universities are privileged sites of 'expert' knowledge production, developing theory and analysis across the spectrum of nature, technology and human societies. For the most part, these academic methods and knowledge production take place within a colonial frame. Colonial knowledge is 'disembodied' knowledge: Theory made by researchers claiming a 'neutral' or 'objective' positioning in relation to the objects of their studies. Disembodied knowledge erases researchers' historical, cultural and political context and the influence this context has on research, creating privileged 'blind spots'. Colonial research methods are blinded to the limitations of 'objective expert' academic findings, and to the real effects these expert knowledges, and this colonial gaze, have upon the lives of the subjects of their research when their findings pass into popular culture and social policy.

The conference guidelines did not seek to disregard academic knowledge production, but to place it in a context of power relations. For example, diverse sex and gender identities were clearly acknowledged through preferred pronouns on name tags. Participants were invited to use accessible terminology above academic jargon, not only across the domains of activist, artist and academic knowledges, but also across language. While the conference was conducted in English, the majority of conference participants came from contexts in which English was not the primary language or culture.

Monogamy/Couple Privilege

The extensive influence of 'expert' knowledge passing into popular discourse was the subject of a keynote entitled '*Poly and MOREs go to the Movies: Analysing Polyamorous and Mixed-Orientation Relationship Representations in film*', by Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli. This presentation examined representations of diverse intimacies in film. Unsurprisingly, characters engaging in 'non-monogamous' activities generally met with untimely ends, or led doomed, miserable lives.

Exploring the 'hows' in which the 'othering' of contemporary intimacies occurs, while simultaneously shoring up Couple and Monogamy privilege, was another area of discussion. For example: Popular culture (operating from a monogamous frame) deems polyamory to be about having multiple sexual partners, and while it can certainly be about the joys and challenges of engaging more than one sexual partner, that

is not, in my understanding at least, the most salient feature about polyamory and other contemporary intimacies.

The word 'Poly' means many and the word 'amor' means love, so Polyamory is primarily about love. It's primarily about loving many, and how to do that, and do that well. If non-monogamy means 'non-sexual fidelity to one sexual partner', then it is incorrect to place polyamory under a non-monogamy umbrella, yet this is what dominant Monogamy/Couple discourse routinely does.

The extraordinary difficulties associated with trying to decentre the dominance of Monogamy discourse (lifelong sexual fidelity to one partner) was another of the key challenges debated and discussed: The growing use of the term 'Contemporary Intimacies', rather than 'Non-Monogamy' is an attempt to escape this ubiquitous and tenacious 'Monogamous Frame'.

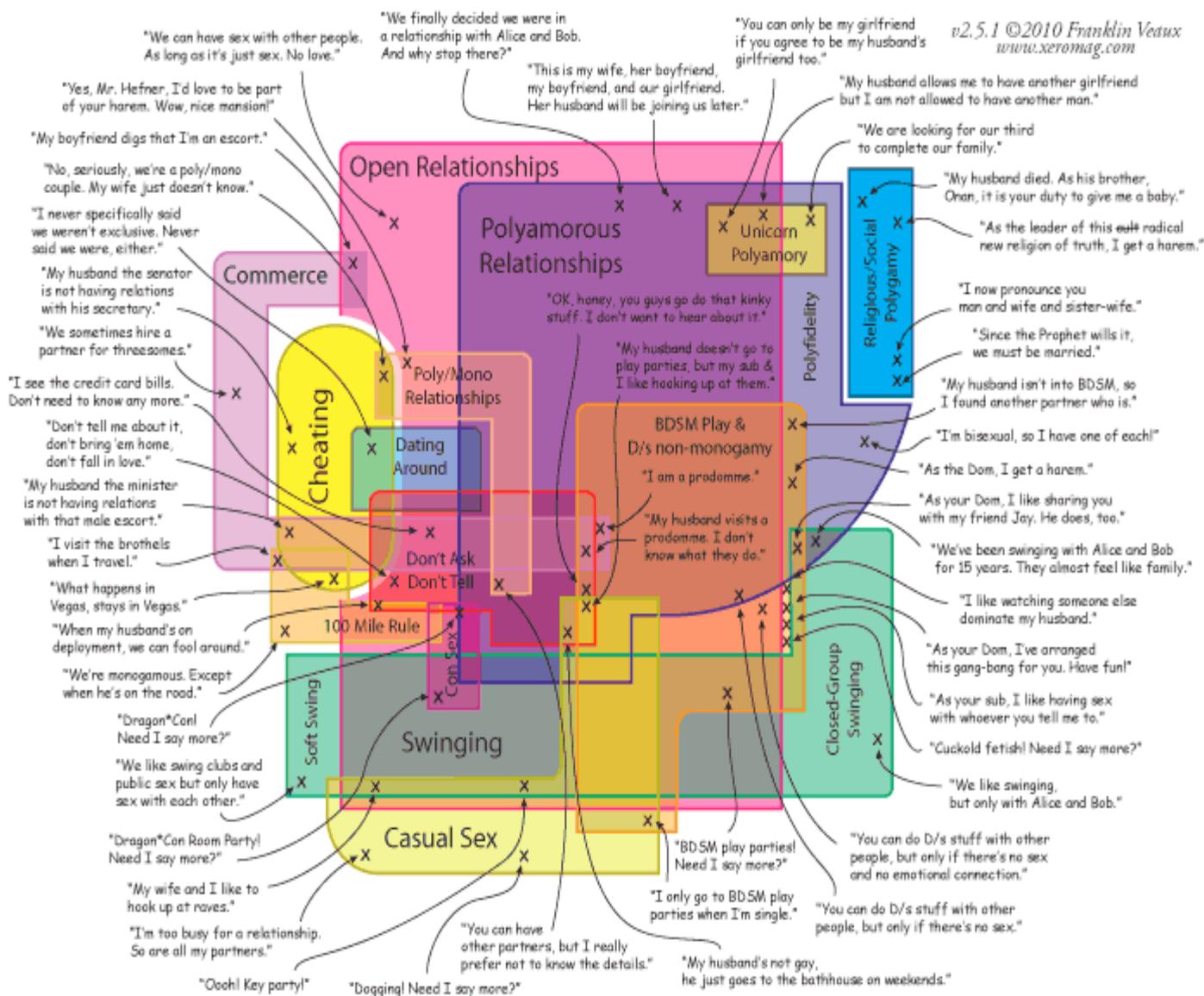
Conference conversations sought to learn from the resistances and legacies of social movements that have come before.

Feminist, Critical Race, Post-colonial and Queer theory, among others, were explored for their insights in relation to effectively subverting colonial academic research methodologies, and the social policy and practice frameworks stemming from these.

Diverse Contemporary Intimacies

In framing a diverse range of contemporary intimacies, including Aromanticism, Asexuality and Friendship networks under the one umbrella of 'not-monogamy', 'expert' academic knowledge can foster the erroneous assumption that this is a cohesive movement or a unified concept. However, as can be seen from the map created by Franklin Veaux (below), even just one form of contemporary intimacy: Polyamory, can be expressed in a wide range of ways.

Intersections of the various contemporary intimacies with Gender, Trans, Class, Race and Queer politics were some



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of the other contested sites of discussion at the conference. Nathan Rambukkana addresses some of these issues in his book, *'Fraught intimacies: Non-monogamy in the public sphere'* (2015), which was launched at the conference and which analyses representations of polygamy and polyamory in the public sphere in Canada.

Rambukkana's keynote address at the conference included analysis of the difference between acceptable, glamourised forms of non-monogamy, such as some expressions of polyamory in the global north, and those that are reviled, such as multiple marriage within Islam. (Colonial) social sciences locate the practice of multiple marriages within Islam alongside polyamory and other contemporary intimacies, under the single umbrella concept of 'non-monogamy'. Rambukkana offered evidence that 'multiple marriage' is not actually conceived of, spoken about, or practiced within Islamic cultures: People are either single or married, and the question of whether there is one marriage or multiple marriage is irrelevant.

Free Informed Consent

'Breaking with monogamy is a political issue, and a primary one, because the way we build our intimacies is related to the way we build all the rest' (Vasallo, 27/9/15 NMCI keynote).

Despite its depiction in dominant discourse as irresponsible promiscuity, chaos and betrayal, polyamory holds quite different aspirations, placing a high and central value on open and honest relationships, and on the importance of informed consent. Sociological research on Monogamy shows that high percentages of people in supposedly committed monogamous relationships break their vows and betray their partners by 'cheating' or secretly having sex with other partners. Far from being about betraying vows, polyamory commits to an approach in which sex with others is only entered into when the prior informed consent of all affected partners is reached.

Integrating informed consent into everyday ethics has many challenges associated with it. One of the interesting informal discussions I had during one of the longer convivial breaks in the formal program, was about the idea of 'compersion', or the pleasure taken in one of your close partners having close relationships with another/others. Informed consent definitely requires skills in compersion! Several participants spoke about the considerable pain and effort that goes into developing compersion within our current historical and cultural context. These lived experiences are really on the front-line of knowledge production about contemporary intimacies.

I find the idea of 'open' relationships based on respect and 'enthusiastic' consent to be such an exciting, inspiring and revolutionary idea not only for its potential for ending violence against women, but because of the political implications it

has for building a world free from political, economic, cultural, racial, and other forms of violence more generally. I attended a session run by Meg John Barker who had the following things to say about consent:

'We assert that consent is about:

- All sex, not just kinky sex
- Enthusiastic mutual agreement, not just the ability to say 'no'
- The whole relationship, not just the sex parts
- All relationships, not just sexual relationships (including the relationships that we have with ourselves)
- *The whole culture, not just the individuals within it* (my italics)

The idea is that unless we aim for consensual relationships beyond the bedroom, with all the people in our lives, and in our wider culture, it will be very hard – if not impossible – to ensure consent within sexual encounters. It isn't possible to isolate just one aspect of human behaviour (sex) and ensure that it is conducted under a completely different set of rules than the ones that we use when managing domestic chores, for example, or inviting someone out to a social occasion, or putting structures in place for how our work projects will be conducted.' (Barker, 2014)

Implications for Narrative Therapists and Community Workers

New insights into contemporary intimacies offers us, as therapists and community workers, new ways of understanding the effects of dominant discourse on marginalised lives, with implications for the operations of privilege in our therapy and community work conversations. Privilege, with its supreme ability to slip our grasp, often leaves us blind to our own prejudice and at risk of being co-opted as agents of social control, despite our best intentions for acting in the interests of more equitable social change. For example, in our everyday practice it can be very easy to overlook the implications of the fact that:

'In recent history of western culture, it has been the heterosexual married couple that is privileged over all other relational forms. Not only is this privileged as the ideal relational form, but many other relational forms have been consistently downgraded, discouraged, marginalised, disqualified and punished.'
(White, 2004, p.8)

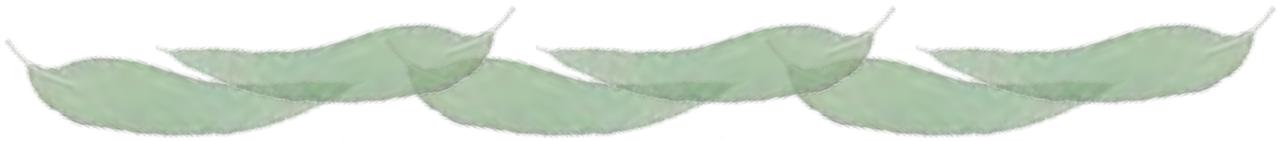
In my own presentation at the conference, entitled 'Dodging dominant and de-humanising discourse, in life and in therapy' (2015), I referred to methods employed by Narrative practitioners to counteract the inevitable influence of dominant monogamy discourse and couple privilege, including the use of Michael White's 'failures map' (2002); decolonising practices drawn from Aboriginal narrative practice, such as 'telling our stories in ways that make us stronger' (Wingard & Lester 2001), and 'stepping out of missionary rules' (Wingard, Johnson & Drahm-Butler, 2015); and solidarity

and accountability practices such as those discussed by Vikki Reynolds and Sekneh Hammoud-Bennet (2012), among others.

Future conferences should offer Narrative practitioners, thinkers, artist and activists a wealth of opportunities for improving the relevance and effectiveness of our practice. For myself, the conference gave me hope, and a glimpse of a future in which a person's ethics and actions matter more than their sex or gender, or how many people they may share their lives with.

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