

Questioning the Rule-Making Imperative in Therapeutic Stabilizations of Non-Monogamous (Open) Relationships

Mark D. Finn

Key words:
bifurcation;
counseling;
interviews; non-
monogamy; open
relationships;
order; rule-making;
thematic analysis

Abstract: Given increasing social scientific and public interest in open relationships, attending to therapeutic engagements with such a lifestyle choice is of topical concern. Specifically, the rule-making imperative for the creation and stabilization of open non-monogamies involves the widely embraced principle in counseling and self-help literature that a "couple's" rules for their non-monogamous engagements are crucial for personal and relational well-being. Data presented in this article stem from semi-structured interviews with seventeen UK counselors/psychotherapists who identified their therapeutic engagements with consensual non-monogamies (primarily in gay male open relationships) as being "affirmative" in some way. A Foucauldian-inflected thematic analysis highlighted patterns of meaning in relation to: perceived non-monogamous disorder; clinical recognitions of the inevitability of disorder; and ways in which assumed non-monogamous disorder, and thus the warrant for rule-making, can be reinforced in psychological terms. Drawing on the notion of "bifurcation" put forward in chaos theory, it is argued that to enlist the imperative of rule-making as a precautionary or remedial strategy is to overlook the more productive aspects of chaotic turbulence in open relationships and thus undermine alternative recognitions of relational health and well-being.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
 - [1.1 The flavor of rule-making](#)
 - [1.2 Premise of the article](#)
 - [1.3 A note on chaos](#)
- [2. The Study](#)
 - [2.1 Participants and their clients](#)
 - [2.2 Data collection](#)
 - [2.3 Methodology](#)
 - [2.4 Analytic procedure](#)
- [3. Analysis and Discussion](#)
 - [3.1 The subversion of non-monogamous disorder](#)
 - [3.2 The limitations of rules](#)
 - [3.3 \(Re\)settling on the familiar](#)
- [4. Conclusion](#)
- [Acknowledgment](#)
- [Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

1. Introduction

From the 1990s, in particular, there has been a renewed stream of international academic and social commentary on forms of consensual non-monogamy in cross and same-sex couple relationships. Practices of non-monogamy receiving such attention include open (gay) relationships, swinging and polyamory, with polyamory referring to relationships that involve three or more people who are either sexually and emotionally monogamous within the group or not (see BARKER & LANGDRIDGE, 2010a, 2010b for detailed discussions). Such relationships have been celebrated in much self-help style literature (e.g. ANAPOL, 1997; EASTON & LISZT, 1997; TAORMINO, 2008) and have been the focus of an increasing number of social scientific re-appraisals that aim to depathologize forms of open non-monogamy as an ethical lifestyle choice (e.g. DE VISSER & McDONALD, 2007; HECKERT, 2010; KLESSE, 2007; WILKINSON, 2010). [1]

Similarly, from the 1980s several positive or "poly-friendly" treatments of open non-monogamies have appeared in the international counseling literature, along with recommendations for therapeutic practice (e.g. BERRY & BARKER, 2014; BETTINGER, 2005; KASSOFF, 1988; PAWLICKI & LARSON, 2011; SHERNOFF, 2006; WEITZMAN, 2007). Several sex and relationship therapists are now reacting against the usual clinical association of open relationships with notions of promiscuity and dysfunction (see BONELLO, 2009). Across Europe, America, Australia and Canada specialized clinical supports for people in, or wanting to explore, such relationships are increasingly on offer, with mainstream national agencies also recognizing the need for this. For example, *Relate*, as the UK's largest provider of couple and family therapy, now holds specialist workshops to develop ways of clinically working with individuals, couples and polyamorous groups in the cultural context of shifting relationship practices. [2]

The purpose of this article is to help inform this burgeoning clinical interest, specifically by making a case for a less constrained therapeutic interaction with alternative contemporary relationships as dynamic domains of adaptation, change and possibility (e.g. BARKER, 2013; BARKER, HECKERT & WILKINSON, 2013). As an overview of what follows in the introduction, Section 1.1 is about ways in which the rule-making imperative is understood and rationalized in the counseling literature on non-monogamies, Section 1.2 outlines the article's premise, and Section 1.3 is a brief discussion of chaos theory's notion of "bifurcation" as the conceptual lens through which the study's data were interpreted. [3]

1.1 The flavor of rule-making

One central principle put forward in the counseling and self-help literature on open relationships is that crucial to their responsible management is the negotiation of agreed-to rules of engagement (e.g. ANAPOL, 1997; EASTON & LISZT, 1997; PAWLICKI & LARSON, 2011; WEITZMAN, 2006, 2007). The general premise is that the establishment of rules and contracts will help ensure commitment, trust and the stability of a relationship by minimizing undesirable

emotions such as jealousy, and reducing fear of the unknown, for example. The rule-making imperative furthermore assumes that perceived problems in non-monogamous relationships reflect deficiencies of knowledge and skill that can be addressed and taught (e.g. WEITZMAN, 2007). [4]

Not least because of fluctuation around partners' preferred degrees of autonomy on the one hand, and dependence on the other (BARKER, 2013), there is substantial variation in the rules that can be adopted (BARKER et al., 2013). Generally, however, swingers and people in open and polyamorous relationships are said to typically deploy rules that regulate the kinds of sexual and emotional engagements that can be experienced with others outside the "primary" relationship (see BARKER & LANGDRIDGE, 2010a). This can include not having sex with others in the couple's own home, the kind of sex that can be had (e.g. no intercourse or anal sex and only as threesomes), no sleeping over, no sex with friends, not seeing someone more than once, no emotional involvement, and so on (ADAM, 2010; FINN & MALSON, 2008; McDONALD, 2010; WOSICK-CORREA, 2010). Rules can involve an agreement to disclose everything to one another or stipulate no asking and no telling. According to HOSKING (2013), gay men in "open" relationships can place greater importance on adhering to agreements and rules than on the nature of the rules themselves, thus highlighting the power of the rule-making imperative itself. [5]

In clinical guidelines, self-help texts and research alike, what is shored up as being ultimately important is that rules convey and protect a sense of "specialness" in relation to a unified dyad, triad or group, and are a strategy for predicting the outcomes of transitions to non-monogamy and relationship quality (e.g. HOSKING, 2013; KASSOFF, 1988; PAWLICKI & LARSON, 2011; RUST, 1996; WEITZMAN, 2006). People are encouraged to realize their primary relationship as strong and secure before opening it up to others, and then in highly regulated ways to counteract perceived interference. Healthy non-monogamies are often made to reflect and confirm dyadic stability and are left with no rejuvenating, stabilizing or therapeutic properties of their own (FINN, TUNARIU & LEE, 2012). This is despite moves to challenge cultural assumptions about romantic and monogamous hegemony—or mononormativity, as it has come to be known—and the instabilities and distress that this can itself produce (e.g. BARKER, 2013; FINN, 2012a, 2012b). [6]

1.2 Premise of the article

This article, then, is a critical account of ways in which poly-friendly therapists in the UK can give meaning to, and warrant, rule-making as a basis for the establishment and maintenance of "healthy" open non-monogamies. Existing deconstructions of the rule-making imperative include PETRELLA's (2007. p.151) denouncement of a "strict and policed version of polyamory" in the self-help literature that is contrary to the erotic subversiveness of polyamory, as she understands it (see also KLESSE, 2011; WILKINSON, 2010). Similarly, WOSICK-CORREA (2010) has highlighted the regulatory function of rule-making in how it calls on the self-knowing individual to know their (consistent) innermost

desires, emotions and fears for the effective negotiation of personal boundaries. And KLESSE (2007) has argued that emphasis on free choice and agency in the rule-making imperative occludes the play of power relationships around race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. [7]

I put forward a related critique but one that explicitly focuses on the implicit and regulatory conceptualizations of order/stability and disorder/chaos in counselors' talk of non-monogamous rule-making and relationship functionality. In this I am not suggesting that rules and boundaries as worked up by non-monogamous populations over time are of no practical use. I do want to suggest, however, that a therapeutic emphasis on relational order and predictability can effectively sideline the productive aspects of "chaos" in non-monogamous relationships and thwart alternative recognitions of relational health that may better serve the client and professional practice. To help ground this argument, I draw on key principles of chaos theory as a science of patterns and complexity that from the 1980s has been usefully applied to counseling psychology as a model for re-appraising disorder and unpredictability in relation to conflict resolution and family therapy, for instance (e.g. BUSSOLARI & GOODELL, 2009; PROSKAUER & BÜTZ, 1996). [8]

1.3 A note on chaos

Central to chaos theory is the prioritization of open systems over closed systems, non-linearity over linearity, and the conceptualization of chaos as an extension of order and necessary for it (see PRIGOGINE & STENGERS, 1984; SERRES, 1995 [1982]). Here the stability of what can be culturally understood as chaotic social systems—non-monogamies as one example—is about the transformed new orders that chaos and its infinite possibilities can produce. Order is therefore not simply linked to prediction, certainty and control but to a system's (or relationship's) sensitive dependence on what in chaos theory is described as random conditions. This is a process whereby systems (relationships) will manifest very different forms of behavior and unpredictable outcomes following the input of random conditions or inputs. In chaos theory, random inputs are understood as "strange attractors," energies or fluctuations in a system (either from within the system itself or from outside) that cause a system to bifurcate (fluctuate and diverge) and take on new structure and order as a result. [9]

PROSKAUER and BÜTZ (1996), for example, have applied the principle of *bifurcation* to family therapy. They understand family conflict as being caused by the introduction of a strange attractor or bifurcating crisis (for example, behavioral or environmental change). PROSKAUER and BÜTZ suggest that families in crisis typically try to deal with such bifurcation by trying to return to the pre-chaotic and once stabilizing pattern as the seemingly most adaptive. This, they argue, is about reinforcing stagnation and zero tolerance for change. Allowing the system (family or relationship) to move closer to a state of chaotic disequilibrium can generate a newly adaptive and thus transformative stability. When fluctuations in a system cause the system to move into unfamiliar patterns, wherein reversing

back to a previous stability or normality is impossible, a different level of functionality is enabled. [10]

Recognizing creative stability in non-monogamous (and monogamous) relationships, then, is to recognize patterns of fluctuation and bifurcation that fuel multiple flows of energy, random dis/connections and the production of new and more adaptive kinds of order (see BROWN & STENNER, 2009, for discussion of similar propositions in process philosophy). What I want to propose is that non-monogamous rule-making as a stabilizing strategy that presumes predictability and reversibility is antithetical to a fundamental order of things that, according to chaos theory, is predicated on turbulence, erraticism and irreversibility. [11]

What follows is an overview of the study in terms of the sample, data collection and analytic procedures, and the methodology employed (Section 2). The analysis and discussion are presented in Section 3 and this is preceded by a concluding discussion (Section 4). [12]

2. The Study

This qualitative study into therapeutic engagements with practices of open non-monogamy was conducted in London in 2010. The research question underpinning the study was to explore ways in which poly-friendly or "affirmative" therapists can account for their therapeutic interactions with clients in open non-monogamous relationships. The study was funded by the School of Psychology, University of East London (UEL), UK. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee, UEL. [13]

2.1 Participants and their clients

The research sample was purposive (selective) in targeting therapists, counselors and psychotherapists who identified and publicized themselves as being affirmative of non-monogamies or as "poly-friendly" in some way. Purposive sampling was employed as a common sampling technique for selecting the most productive sample from which to generate data that answers the research question (e.g. PATTON, 1990). This sampling strategy thus aligned with the study aim as a specific exploration of accounts from representatives of the wider targeted population. Targeting therapists who identified and publicized themselves as "affirmative" or "poly-friendly" in some way was also essentially a way to help avoid possible pathologizing accounts of non-monogamies. [14]

Recruitment was via the professional websites of practicing therapists, counselors and psychotherapists in London who identified and publicized their practice in these ways. Internet searching targeted "affirmative" and "poly-friendly" practitioners as two of the most commonly used categorical markers to indicate a non-pathologizing view of open non-monogamies. While targeting only practitioners in London could have excluded the potentially diverse accounts of those outside of the capital, purposive sampling is essentially a non-representative subset of some larger targeted sample (PATTON, 1990). The

website of the large independent therapy organization supporting sexual diversity clients (*Pink Therapy*, UK) was also accessed for recruitment purposes, but not exclusively used, to target affiliated "affirmative" and/or "poly-friendly" therapists based in London. Selection of participants within the London-based sample was random. Twenty therapists (men and women) were contacted via e-mail in the first instance and this contact was followed up with phone calls if a recipient asked for further information about the study. Of the 20 contacted, 17 participants agreed to participate in the study. The research team knew none of the participants on first contact. [15]

The 14 men and three women (n=17) who participated in the study variously identified themselves as sex and relationship therapists, clinical psychologists and/or as psychotherapists. All were qualified and had experience of professionally engaging with clients in open non-monogamous relationships. This was with individuals more than couples or polyamorous groups. Participants had been in professional practice from three to 30 years, with an average of 14 years' experience. The mean age range was 40 to 50 years. Fourteen participants identified as white British, two as white European and one as white American. Most worked in private practice and with mental health organizations. While respondents employed various modalities of therapy in their work, the theoretical orientation of the sample can be broadly characterized as integrative with strong humanistic leanings. Although not directly asked, ten participants self-identified as gay or lesbian during interviews and four (three male and one female) reported having had positive personal experience of open non-monogamies in past or current relationships. [16]

The general client profile accounted for by participants was white gay men in semi/professional employment who were at various stages of their sexually (and sometimes also emotionally) open relationships or who, less often, wanted to explore the lifestyle. Participants had encountered bisexual, heterosexual and transgender non-monogamies less often, or not at all. None of the participants reported their non-monogamous clients as having significant mental health issues. There is thus notable homogeneity in terms of the gender, sexuality, ethnicity, socio-economic status and non-monogamous practice of the clients that participants gave account of. Further context for the data presented is that according to participants, clients tended to view their current relationships as problematic in some way and either directly or indirectly presented with issues that included sexual concerns, anxiety around relationship stability, differences in the expectations and wants of partners, or feelings of being coerced (e.g. agreeing to non-monogamy out of fear of losing a partner). [17]

2.2 Data collection

Data collection was through one-to-one interviews with participants. The interview method used was semi-structured. As a method involving open-ended questioning, semi-structured interviewing was used as a way of exploring the participants' own perceptions, understandings and meaning-making in relation to the topic (WILLIG, 2008). The method was thus consistent with the study's aim

and methodology and enabled probing in order to clarify meaning and explore inconsistencies and tensions in respondents' accounts (PATTON, 1990). A pre-planned interview schedule was informed by the literature on therapy and open non-monogamies and this helped to shape the interview schedule (see the [Appendix](#) for the interview schedule used). Following SPRADLEY (1979), questions were primarily *descriptive* (prompting general accounts of understanding and practice), *structural* (to identify frameworks of meaning), and *evaluative* (to gauge emotional and affective responses). [18]

The interviews were conducted at participants' private practices (with the exception of one at a private room at UEL) and generally lasted for one hour. Discussions centered on understandings and practices of affirmative therapy, experiences of professionally engaging with open non-monogamies, the kinds of support and intervention provided, and the challenges and benefits involved. Participants' talk of rule-making emerged from these kinds of discussions rather than from direct questioning. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. All names have been changed and identifying details omitted. Clients were not identified in any way during the course of the research. [19]

2.3 Methodology

The epistemological underpinning of this study is constructionist. Knowledge is therefore conceptualized as layered with shifting and contingent meanings and thus not discoverable in and of itself (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967). The analysis is characterized as thematic analysis. As understood by BRAUN and CLARKE (2006), thematic analysis is a widely used and flexible method for identifying and interpreting the themes (patterns of talk and meaning) across a qualitative (or quantitative) dataset. The thematic analysis presented here is informed by key principles of Foucauldian theory. It is therefore a deductive (theory driven) and latent form of thematic analysis wherein analytic focus does not merely rest on semantic content but concerns the identification of inherent assumptions, conceptualizations and ideologies within the data that give rise to semantic content. [20]

The analysis is Foucauldian informed in that discourses (or systematic ways of talking about something) are taken to actively construct knowledge and the very objects, realities, identities and experiences of which they speak (e.g. FOUCAULT, 2002 [1969]). FOUCAULT (1998 [1976]) understood discourses as productively enabling *and* constraining identificatory, sexual and relational experiences, amongst other phenomena, by virtue of the specific fields of knowledge and associated ways of being that they make available. What this means for the current analysis is that the prominent themes and constructions (patterns of response, talk and meaning) identified across the data are understood as being embedded in wider socio-cultural contexts and that the understandings and experiences that participants gave account of are discursively constituted and contingent. In other words, discursive repertoires—for example, socio-historic ways of talking about romance, relationship health, monogamy and non-monogamy—are what make possible particular ways of

experiencing and therapeutically understanding these phenomena. The thematically packaged analysis, then, is premised on the Foucauldian understanding of power as the effect of a field of (psychological) knowledge, and associated sets of construed problems and solutions, wherein people and ways of life are rendered knowable, manageable and healthy in particular ways (FOUCAULT, 1998 [1976]; see also ROSE, 1996). From this perspective, therapeutic change is taken to be a discursive activity involving the reflexive use and negotiation of culturally available repertoires of meaning-making (MADILL & BARKHAM, 1997; MOON, 2010). [21]

2.4 Analytic procedure

Analytic procedure followed BRAUN and CLARKE's (2006) outline for executing constructionist thematic analysis. In the first phase, extracts where participants had talked about non-monogamous rule-making, either explicitly or implicitly, were pulled from a wider dataset in which interviewees accounted for their therapeutic engagements with non-monogamies more broadly. Extracts about non-monogamy, monogamy and affirmative therapy were selected from this broader dataset to facilitate the interpretation of extracts relating to rule-making. The second phase involved coding extracts at a semantic level, resulting in 18 coding categories (e.g. negotiation, agreement, knowing, uncertainty, consistency, change, intimacy, balance, fear). These coded extracts were then organized into six semantic clusters on the basis of semantic and conceptual similarity (e.g. negotiation + agreement + balance = *order*; intimacy + knowing + consistency = *predictability*; unknown + fear + change = *threat*, with the labeling of domains of meaning in italics). [22]

The fourth phase consisted of working with these six semantic clusters to develop pertinent domains of meaning in relation to monogamy, non-monogamy and rule-making. Four key domains of meaning were identified as: monogamy as secure knowing; non-monogamy as disordered; rules as precaution; and rules as destabilizing. A prime concern at this stage was to consider ways in which these domains of meaning worked to produce certain kinds of knowledges and power relations in relation to participants' accounts of their therapeutic engagements with practices of open non-monogamy. From this, three unitary but overlapping themes were developed that best reflected the essences of the four domains of meaning, as identified, and their knowledge and power productions. The following analytic narrative is structured (told) around these three identified themes: the subversion of non-monogamous disorder; the limitations of rules; and (re)settling on the familiar. [23]

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 The subversion of non-monogamous disorder

James worked almost exclusively with gay men in sexually open relationships. He responded to being asked about the main issues that he confronted in his work with clients and their open relationships.

Extract 1: James¹

"It would be around trust and jealousy. I think it's about fear of losing their partner, falling in love with someone else and leaving them. How do they manage jealousy? How do they manage their boundaries around time—time for themselves, time for the couple if they're having extra? These are the themes that kind of consistently recur [...] I think it (open non-monogamy) improves the communication between partners. And it can increase a high degree of honesty in gay relationships [...] So building on that openness and communication and honesty and increasing their level of trust in a relationship. And I think coming up with ground rules puts a safety net around that and allows them to think, 'Oh well, we can tolerate this outside sex in ways that don't threaten our core values and beliefs and the primacy of our relationship'."

(Interview 1, pp.6 & 9-10) [24]

Consistent with much of the counseling and self-help literature on open non-monogamies, issues of trust, time, jealousy and the potential of losing a partner are said to typically cause concern amongst people in poly and open relationships (e.g. BARKER, 2013; EASTON & LISZT, 1997; WEITZMAN, 2007). An implicit sense of perceived disorder or chaos can be read into the above extract in relation to talk of potential loss, the necessity of "boundaries," "ground rules" and a "safety net" to help ward off potential threats to the predictability and ordering of trust. A chaotic-like non-monogamy held up as existing "outside" of the more knowable domain of the couple is constructed as potentially intrusive on the comforting predictabilities and consistencies of exclusive dyadic coupledness as a primary manifestation of relationship stability and order (ADAM, 2010; FINN & MALSON, 2008). What is similarly talked up in the above extract is a non-monogamy that involves a series of chaotic and interruptive noises that are to be silenced: this is an excessive "extra" that must be controlled and only ever tolerated. Fuelling this thinking—and the privileging of mono-normative romantic discourse that accompanies it—is a neat conceptual divide between the metaphorically furnished realms of a contained dyadic purity, on the one hand, and a disordering and threatening non-monogamous surplus on the other (FINN, 2012a; WORTH, REID & McMILLAN, 2002). [25]

In understanding the challenges of open non-monogamies as involving issues of trust, jealousy and fear (Extract 1), James also spoke about such relationships as providing opportunity for the development of trust, open communication and honesty (presumably as a counter to fear). Non-monogamy can, it seems, help to

1 In the extracts "[...]" indicates that some text has been omitted, and "()" demarcate detail that has been added for clarity. Transcriptions were verbatim but fillers such as "yeah," "mmm," and "oh" have been omitted from the extracts for enhanced readability.

enhance the very qualities that it can allegedly also threaten. Despite this slipperiness between open non-monogamy as help and hindrance, a couple's rules of engagement are nonetheless afforded the explicit function of keeping mononormative values firmly in place when adventuring into the noisy and disordered realm of sexual excess, as James perceives it (ADAM, 2010; FINN & MALSON, 2008; HOSKING, 2013; WORTH et al., 2002). In this construction of the rule-making imperative, any pleasure or development that an open relationship may afford an individual or couple is sidelined as something to be merely tolerated for the sake of an exclusive and healthy dyadic relationship (PETRELLA, 2007). The kind of rule-making that James advocated in the above extract can therefore be seen to cement particular kinds of ends and values that may actually not affirm the non-monogamous client/relationship in ways anticipated. [26]

Talking about how he understood the benefits that non-monogamy may have for his clients, Simon similarly spoke about rule-making as providing a kind of safety net for people and their open relationships.

Extract 2: Simon

"It (participant's therapeutic aim) is holding up the idea that there are many different ways that we can express ourselves as a couple or individually, sexually, and these are up for grabs and we want to explore these and find out. And we also want to be careful. We want to protect what we've got. Is there going to be consequence if we don't have rules?" (Interview 11, pp.16-17) [27]

While Simon echoed non-essentialist thinking about the flexibility of sexual and relational categories (e.g. HEAPHY, DONOVAN & WEEKS, 2004; PLUMMER, 1995; SANGER, 2007), he quickly moved to expressing caution about protecting more normative relationship frames. Like in Extract 1, rule-making is held up as a means of diffusing the dangers of a non-monogamous unknown by making it already known. How a client's non-monogamous identity and relationship are to be realized and experienced is to be mapped even before the unknown is allowed to become known on its own terms and apart from the knowledge that we already have by virtue of monogamous ideology and romantic discourse. The radial potential of non-monogamy to generate a new kind of relational and self-knowing is thus disarmed in spite of seeing non-monogamies as opportunities for new expressions of selves and relationships (FINN et al., 2012; HECKERT, 2010; KLESSE, 2011; PETRELLA, 2007; WILKINSON, 2010). Establishing pre-conceived rules for non-monogamous engagement as a precautionary strategy can thus be seen to rest on the assumption that anticipated chaos is threatening to, and separate from, order, rather than creatively provocative and energizing. [28]

The kinds of tensions and contradictions apparent in Extracts 1 and 2 also infuse the next quotation where Richard spoke about gay open relationships and the similarities and differences between them.

Extract 3: Richard

"I wouldn't say there is any particular trend. With one couple they've tried out a number of different things and with another it's been fairly straightforward—meeting on the Internet for anonymous sex. With another, they've explored threesomes. They've had a situation where it was okay to do it with friends but not if the friend was staying in their house and they were both there. Because that was more complicated. If one of them was feeling left out or wasn't feeling like it, it was more complicated. So you see it's very much fine-tuning. Learning to bring up what works for one but not another and talking it through which for me is the key intimacy aspect of this."
(Interview 6, p.16) [29]

The various experimentations by this couple and their working out of rules along the way—where sex with others can be had and with whom—are spoken of as a process of managing and ultimately avoiding extra-dyadic complication. On this basis, the "fine-tuning" that must take place in open relationships can primarily be about maintaining a knowable and thus more comforting dyadic balance. Significantly, this kind of maintenance involves both partners wanting the same kind of non-monogamous relationship, the same kind of extra-dyadic sex, being always involved in it together, and both feeling equal pleasure from it. At the same time, however, there is a nod to the creeping inevitability of imbalance and complication in talk of "feeling left out," "not feeling like it" and "what works for one but not another." As such, the fine-tuning of (sexually) open relationships, and the rule-making that services it, rubs uncomfortably against a sought after dyadic sameness and constancy that can never be fully realized (e.g. BLUMSTEIN, 1991; LANGDRIDGE, BARKER, REAVEY & STENNER, 2012). [30]

While participants all asserted that there is no blueprint for open non-monogamy, what I have tried to highlight so far is that in the advocacy of rule-making a blueprint is very much established. The re-occurring blueprint is one that clearly signposts the traditional romantic qualities of dyadic exclusivity, transparency and sameness as key demonstrations of non-monogamous health. I make the point that the rule-making imperative, as deployed by participants, can work to pre-empt and reinforce the dominant cultural and clinical presumption that open non-monogamies are by nature risky, lacking and fragile, and thus disordered (see BARKER & LANGDRIDGE, 2010b; BONELLO, 2009; FINN et al., 2012). It is the perceptions and locations of disorder in participants' talk of open relationships that are further explored in the next section. [31]

3.2 The limitations of rules

In the rule-making imperative talked up by participating therapists, there was a sense that rule-making—and a relational sameness and constancy it is meant to guard—is not such a straightforward process. Fiona was a strong advocate of pre-ordained and constantly negotiated rules for non-monogamy having had personal experience of an open relationship herself.

Extract 4: Fiona

"I think there are so many different reasons why someone might be non-monogamous and I think that's quite interesting because two people in a couple might have different reasons. They both want to do it but they might have different reasons why they're doing it. And I think that would influence what rules they would end up working to." (Interview 5, p.26) [32]

Fiona's talk of open relationships presents rather a different picture from James's depiction of a non-monogamous couple and the sharing of a set of core values and beliefs (Extract 1). She alludes to the many different reasons that people can have for wanting to be non-monogamous and thus the possibility that a couple may not always and already share the same values about a relationship and its non-monogamy. Indeed an open or poly relationship may involve potentially conflicting motivations and desires (KLESSE, 2007). For Fiona, this complexity would influence a couple's rule-making but rules would be worked to nevertheless, as if a similar non-monogamous motivation between, or amongst, people in a relationship is still desirable. This is particularly evident earlier in Fiona's interview when she talked about rule-making as involving a couple agreeing to one style of non-monogamy out of a host of options.

Extract 5: Fiona:

"It's important to have a clear agreement amongst all the different possibilities. Lots of clarity about what's okay and what is not okay. It's consensual and you both decide [...] So you kind of establish this is how we are going to do it. And if we come across a situation we haven't thought about before let's make an agreement that we're going to sit down and work out how we accommodate this bit as well." (Interview 5, p.7) [33]

Here variability is settled through a mutually consented-to decision to adopt a particular practice and adhere to it. Agreements and rule-making are aligned with possibility and turmoil but these vitalities are at the same time controlled for by the impositions of predestination and accommodation. The menacing unexpected is accommodated in a return to what is already familiar to the couple and agreed by them in advance. In this instance, then, rules serve the function of returning individuals and relationships to an already-in-place adaptive strategy that relies on self and relational rigidity despite voyaging into unfamiliar territory. [34]

Having spoken earlier in his interview about the necessity of reducing intrusive "complication" (Extract 3), Richard went on to convey a sense of non-monogamous fluctuation that is not so easily accommodated.

Extract 6: Richard

"One of them (a client) talked a lot about the process of discovering that his partner wanted to have an open relationship. And he went through a whole range of changes during our work together—from wanting a non-monogamous relationship to not wanting it, to then discovering that once they'd agreed a certain set of parameters that it wasn't working for him and he needed to re-negotiate it, to learning how to be assertive around the agreements they had made, which weren't being entirely kept by

his partner. One of the features for me is how much non-monogamy is a changing sea. It doesn't stay the same for very long in my experience." (Interview 6, p.7) [35]

This extract can be read as a description of non-monogamy as an unpredictable practice (a fluctuating "changing sea") that is not reducible to agreement, negotiation and the imposition of rules. The non-monogamy that this open gay relationship attempts to control by way of negotiation and parameters is depicted as a slippery one in light of constant change and the breaking of rules that can often occur (WOSICK-CORREA, 2010; see HOSKING, 2013). There is a sense of turmoil here that processes of re-negotiation and assertiveness are meant to settle. In Richard's account, however, it was *after* parameters were put in place that his client came to recognize that non-monogamy wasn't working for him. This, then, was a non-monogamy that was seen to *not* work by virtue of the agreements and boundaries that pre-determined the couple's non-monogamy as something in particular and as something that had to be practiced only in that way. [36]

Further to this, there was a prevalent tendency amongst participating therapists, and reportedly also their clients, to recognize the surprises and turbulence of non-monogamy in psychological terms; as signs of psychological malfunction that demand settlement. The next and final section illustrates some of the ways in which one participant (as an example) could psychologize perceived non-monogamous disorder as a warrant for resisting turbulence. [37]

3.3 (Re)settling on the familiar

Justin worked mainly with gay open relationships, but not exclusively, and this next extract is his response to being asked about the challenges of non-monogamy for his clients, as he saw it. As with Extract 6, Justin highlighted a non-monogamy that can have surprising effect despite a couple's pre-negotiations and agreements.

Extract 7: Justin

"Things may seem fine with the agreement that's been made between partners who talk about having an open relationship and even putting into place quite sensible mechanisms, if you like, in terms of how they will conduct the open relationship. But what sometimes isn't addressed is the emotional impact that that can have and which can surprise the couple. The emotional impact has been different from how they imagined. And they're usually surprised by their emotional discomfort with some aspects of the relationship." (Interview 13, p.6) [38]

Here Justin highlighted an unexpected consequence of rule-bound gay open relationships. Despite the "sensible mechanisms" this couple put in place to predict and control the emotional impact that their non-monogamy could have, the outcomes turned out to be other than expected. That Justin speaks of the outcomes as surprising emotional *discomfort* can be seen to underscore the inability of rules to control, predict or comfort anything. I would argue that

recognition of the surprising outcomes of open non-monogamy as uncomfortable rather than as anything else is a direct function of the rules that have already prescribed what can be recognized as comforting and not. Significant to the extract is that the relationship can be seen as reaching bifurcation point in their "emotional discomfort," as potentially moving away from the once adaptive stabilities that provided a familiar and sought after sense of comfort. According to chaos theory, bifurcation (in this case difference between expectation and outcome) can be productive in bringing about unexpected change, affect and the establishment of new expectations and order (PRIGOGINE & STENGERS, 1984). What is anti-order, then, is not necessarily a relationship's non-monogamy but the rules and parameters that can constrain the discoveries, shifts and productivities that open-monogamy (that "changing sea") can provoke (HECKERT, 2010; PETRELLA, 2007; WILKINSON, 2010). [39]

Justin went on to report that both men were "equally happy having a sexually non-monogamous relationship" but were not prepared for the emotional impact of wanting to express their non-monogamy differently, with emotional distress being aligned with the discovery of dyadic incongruence. Justin then spoke about understanding the men's different non-monogamous desires as the consequence of childhood-related psychological maladaptions.

Extract 8: Justin

"It was interesting to work with them (the couple) on their earlier attachment issues, their separate attachment issues. They didn't understand things about each other (but) they cared for each other very deeply and wanted to find a way to stay together." (Interview 13, p.8) [40]

Where this couple's non-monogamous desires and identities bifurcated as a basis for a new kind of stability and self-other recognition, Justin instead spoke of exposing childhood attachment issues as a way of countering surprise and change. This explicit psychologization of the surprises and bifurcations of non-monogamy is, I suggest, likely to return the couple to the original but seemingly no longer adaptive stability. Justin can be seen to be reinforcing an adaptive strategy that rests on socio-historic notions of secure mononormative attachment and Bowlbyesque safe havens that are perhaps no longer relevant to the couple (see HAZAN & SHAVER, 1987). [41]

While I cannot dispute Justin's account of his client's distress, I want to suggest that problematizing the energizing shifts of non-monogamy by way of psychological discourse obliges the individual to be psychologically fit *before* embarking on non-monogamy. It also obliges the client to avoid questioning mononormative ideology itself in order to be recognized as psychologically healthy (HICKS, 2010; MOON, 2010). In this I suggest that clients are potentially steered away from creatively engaging with the "up for grabs" relationship and identity surprises that non-monogamies can potentially generate (Extract 2). [42]

4. Conclusion

The prime aim of this article has been to prompt thinking about how else the construed chaos that therapists can attach to non-monogamies (and understand as being somehow unique to non-monogamy) can be differently recognized and deployed in therapeutic contexts. I have attempted to do this by highlighting ways in which sex and relationship counselors can advocate a rule-making imperative that is tied to a negative view of non-monogamous turbulence. I have argued that in seeing the structural and psychological turbulences that open relationships can create as always destructive, and thus to be averted and resolved, the creative potential of such turbulence can be negated. [43]

I have specifically drawn on chaos theory as a way of re-thinking the apparent disorders of open non-monogamy and for challenging a rule-making imperative that can support a mononormative view of non-monogamies. In a more complex view of chaos that is not unfamiliar to clinical practice (e.g. BUSSOLARI & GOODELL, 2009; PROSKAUER & BÜTZ, 1996), turbulence and bifurcation are conceptualized as grounds for moving through ever-shifting forms of relational and self-knowing and for supporting new orders, new patterns of responses and new repertoires of meaning-making that may better serve clients who seek support in their open relationships (see FINN et al., 2012; also BERRY & BARKER, 2014). [44]

I have suggested that clinical emphasis on a rule-making imperative can be ultimately about guaranteeing the stability of an original dyad (or group) as if non-monogamy and its affective, subjective and relational provocations are nothing more than adventurous add-ons, or mere disruptions to perceived stabilities that are always and already fragile. In this it is as if open non-monogamy can serve no purpose in challenging the mononormative assumptions that may in fact fuel a client's, and no purpose in bringing about positive change. It is, in essence, as if the always variable self/subject is inseparable from changing context and setting—that an open relationship setting (like any other) would not inevitably trigger variation in how one comes to recognize oneself and another (see LANGDRIDGE et al., 2012, in this forum for a discussion of the uncomfortable but productive disruptiveness of jealousy in "couple" relationships). [45]

I argue that in light of chaos theory, a rule-making imperative that frames non-monogamies as inherently hazardous could be replaced with acknowledgment of random conditions or *inputs* that are not predetermined, negatively charged, or tied to rules and associated notions of expectation, prediction and reversibility. In other words, clinical engagement with non-monogamous populations could instead focus on the unfamiliar, unsettling but productive *inputs* that open relationships can generate, and indeed call for. This could assist with supporting clients (and others) to understand the surprises, discoveries, fantasies and hazards of their non-monogamies as acts of *putting in*, as processes for injecting new kinds of *re-stabilizing* energies, affects and characteristics into selves and relationships. [46]

A focus on inputs rather than rules could, I suggest, serve to highlight what open non-monogamies can bestow and contribute to rather than what they can harm and detract from. It is to move from a concern with what has been prohibited to what can be, or is being, absorbed and charged. It is to shift emphasis away from compulsory adherence to prefabricated affect, subjectivity and relationality to allow ongoing process and movement. Accentuating the processes of inputs over and above the prohibitions of rules would not necessarily compel action where an individual or relationship may not want it—the nomad who can go anywhere does not have to go everywhere (HECKERT, 2010)—simply having less rule-bound possibility can be movement enough. Given increasing public interest in open non-monogamies, and the changing landscape of contemporary couple relationships, it seems crucial to equip people (in therapy and otherwise) with altered frameworks for understanding what "openness" can mean in terms of opportunities for relational and psychological rediscoveries where these are being experienced or sought. [47]

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank Kham C. LEE for assisting with the research in recruiting participants and conducting the interviews.

Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Participants' demographic data collected prior to interview (see Section 2.1).

Generally speaking, what would you consider to be your counseling orientation? Which method do you employ most? Why?

How do you understand affirmative therapy in relation to sexual diversity clients? How is this similar or different to what you may know about other practitioners who work with a similar client group?

Can you tell me about some of the kinds of open non-monogamies that you have encountered in your practice?

What are some of the ways in which you practice your affirmative approach when working with clients in non-monogamous/open relationships in particular? (Both theoretical and practical aspects and examples probed for.)

How might this have changed over time for you in your practice? Why? Do you expect it to change?

How prevalent is non-monogamy (however practiced) in the presenting issues of your clients in open relationships? How might this have changed over time? Do you see it as changing?

In your experience what are some the common issues among this client group when non-monogamy is a presenting issue or emerges as one?

Do you see there being any kind of social pressure or expectation affecting your clients in non-monogamous/open relationships? How might you work with this?

Can you tell me about any particular challenges you may have experienced in counseling individuals or couples in relation to their non-monogamy/open relationships—professional, personal or both?

Can you tell me about any particular benefits you may have experienced in counseling individuals or couples in relation to their non-monogamy/open relationships—professional, personal or both?

To what extent do you feel resourceful/resourced in engaging with clients in non-monogamy/open relationships? What are the resources you tend to draw on? What further resources do you think you might need?

Is there anything else of significance to you that we haven't yet spoken about?

References

- Adam, Barry D. (2010). Relationship innovation in male couples. In Meg Barker & Darren Langdrige (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp.55-69). New York: Routledge.
- Anapol, Deborah (1997). *Polyamory: The new love without limits*: San Rafael: IntiNet Resource Center.
- Barker, Meg (2013). *Re-writing the rules: An integrative guide to love, sex and relationships*. Hove: Routledge.
- Barker, Meg & Langdrige, Darren (2010a). Whatever happened to non-monogamies? Critical reflections on recent research and theory. *Sexualities*, 13(6), 748-772.
- Barker, Meg & Langdrige, Darren (Eds.) (2010b). *Understanding non-monogamies*. New York: Routledge.
- Barker, Meg; Heckert, Jamie & Wilkinson, Eleanor (2013). Polyamorous intimacies: From one love to many loves and back again. In Tam Sanger & Yvette Taylor (Eds.), *Mapping intimacies: Relations, exchanges, affects* (pp.190-208). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berger, Peter L. & Luckmann, Thomas (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York: First Anchor Books.
- Berry, Michael D. & Barker, Meg (2014). Extraordinary interventions for extraordinary clients: Existential sex therapy and open non-monogamy. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 29(1), 21-30.
- Bettinger, Michael (2005). A family systems approach to working with sexually open gay male couples. *Couple and Relationship Therapy*, 4(2-3), 149-160.
- Blumstein, Philip (1991). The production of selves in personal relationships. In Judith A. Howard & Peter L. Callero (Eds.), *The self-society dynamic: Cognition, emotion and action* (pp.305-322). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bonello, Kristoff (2009). Gay monogamy and extra-dyadic sex: A critical review of the theoretical and empirical literature. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 24(3/4), 51-65.
- Braun, Virginia & Clarke, Victoria (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brown, Steve & Stenner, Paul (2009). *Psychology without foundations: History, philosophy and psychosocial theory*. London: Sage.
- Bussolari, Cori J. & Goodell, Judith A. (2009). Chaos theory as a model for life transitions counselling: Nonlinear dynamics and life's changes. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 87(1), 98-107.
- De Visser, Richard & McDonald, Dee (2007). Swings and roundabouts: Management of jealousy in heterosexual "swinging" couples. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(2), 459-476.
- Easton, Dossie & Liszt, Catherine A. (1997). *The ethical slut: A guide to infinite sexual possibilities*. San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press.
- Finn, Mark D. (2012a). Monogamous order and the avoidance of chaotic excess. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 3(2), 123-136.

- Finn, Mark D. (2012b). The psychological architecture of the stable couple relationship. *Theory & Psychology*, 22(5), 607-625.
- Finn, Mark D. & Malson, Helen (2008). Speaking of home truth: (Re)productions of dyadic commitment in non-monogamous relationships. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(3), 519-533.
- Finn, Mark D.; Tunariu, Aneta D. & Lee, Kham C. (2012). A critical analysis of affirmative therapeutic engagements with consensual non-monogamy. *Sexual & Relationship Therapy*, 27(3), 205-216.
- Foucault, Michel (1998 [1976]). *The history of sexuality 1: The will to knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel (2002 [1969]). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Hazan, Cindy & Shaver, Paul (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(3), 511-524.
- Heaphy, Brian; Donovan, Catherine & Weeks, Jeffrey (2004). A different affair? Openness and non-monogamy in same-sex relationships. In Jean Duncombe, Kaeren Harrison, Graham Allan & Dennis Marsden (Eds.), *The state of affairs: Explorations in infidelity and commitment* (pp.167-186). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Heckert, Jamie (2010). Love without borders? Intimacy, identity and the state of compulsory monogamy. In Meg Barker & Darren Langdrige (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp.255-266). New York: Routledge.
- Hicks, Colin (2010). Counselling psychology contributions to understanding sexuality. In Martin Milton (Ed.), *Therapy and beyond: Counselling psychology contributions to therapeutic and social issues* (pp.243-258). Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hosking, Warwick (2013). Agreements about extra-dyadic sex in gay men's relationships: Exploring differences in relationship quality by agreement type and rule-breaking behaviour. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60(5), 711-733.
- Kassoff, Elizabeth (1988). Non-monogamy in the lesbian community. *Women & Therapy*, 8(1-2), 167-182.
- Klesse, Christian (2007). *The spectre of promiscuity. Gay male and bisexual non-monogamies and polyamorities*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Klesse, Christian (2011). Notions of love in polyamory—elements in a discourse on multiple loving. *Laboratorium*, 3(2), 4-25.
- Langdrige, Darren; Barker, Meg; Reavey, Paula & Stenner, Paul (2012). Becoming a subject: A memory work study of the experience of romantic jealousy. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(2), Art. 5, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs120258> [Accessed: August 2, 2012].
- Madill, Anna & Barkham, Michael (1997). Discourse analysis of a theme in one successful case of brief psychodynamic-interpersonal psychotherapy. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 44(2), 232-244.
- McDonald, Dee (2010). Swinging: Pushing the boundaries of monogamy? In Meg Barker & Darren Langdrige (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp.70-81). New York: Routledge.
- Moon, Lyndsey (2010). Towards a queer praxis: The democratization of feeling. In Lyndsey Moon (Ed.), *Counselling ideologies: Queer challenges to heteronormativity* (pp.71-89). Farnham: Ashgate.
- Patton, Michael Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Pawlicki, Paul & Larson, Paul (2011). The dynamics and conceptualisation of non-exclusive relationships in gay male couples. *Sexual & Relationship Therapy*, 26(1), 48-60.
- Petrella, Serena (2007). Ethical sluts and closet polyamorists: Dissident eroticism, abject subjects and the normative cycle in self-help books on free love. In Nick Rumens & Alejandro Cervantes-Carson (Eds.), *Sexual politics of desire and belonging* (pp.151-168), Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Plummer, Ken (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change, and social worlds*. London: Routledge.
- Prigogine, Ilya & Stengers, Isabelle (1984). *Order out of chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature*. New York: Bantam Books.

- Proskauer, Stephen & Bütz, Michael R. (1996). Feedback, chaos, and family conflict regulation. In Linda L. Chamberlain & Michael R. Bütz (Eds.), *Clinical chaos: A therapist's guide to nonlinear dynamics and therapeutic change* (pp.193-205). Ann Arbor, MI: Brunner/Mazel.
- Rose, Nikolas (1996). *Inventing ourselves: Psychology, power and personhood*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rust, Paula C. (1996). Monogamy and polyamory: Relationship issues for bisexuals. In Beth A. Firestein (Ed.), *Bisexuality: The psychology and politics of an invisible minority* (pp.127-148). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sanger, Tam (2007). Queer(y)ing gender and sexuality. In Lyndsey Moon (Ed.), *Feeling queer of queer feelings? Radical approaches to counselling sex, sexualities and genders* (pp.72-88). Hove: Routledge.
- Serres, Michel (1995 [1982]). *Genesis*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Shernoff, Michael (2006). Negotiated non-monogamy and male couples. *Family Process*, 45(4), 407-418.
- Spradley, James P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Taormino, Tristan (2008). *Opening up: A guide to creating and sustaining open relationships*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.
- Weitzman, Geri (2006). Therapy with clients who are bisexual and polyamorous. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 6(1/2), 137-164.
- Weitzman, Geri (2007). Counselling bisexuals in polyamorous relationships. In Beth A. Firestein (Ed.), *Becoming visible: Counseling bisexuals across the lifespan* (pp.139-164). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wilkinson, Eleanor (2010). What's queer about non-monogamy now? In Meg Barker & Darren Langdridge (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp.243-254). New York: Routledge.
- Willig, Carla (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill.
- Worth, Heather; Reid, Alison & McMillan, Karen (2002). Somewhere over the rainbow: Love trust and monogamy in gay relationships. *Journal of Sociology*, 38(2), 237-253.
<http://jos.sagepub.com/content/38/3/237.short>
- Wosick-Correa, Kassia (2010). Agreements, rules, and agentic fidelity in polyamorous relationships. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 1(1), 44-61.

Author

Mark FINN is senior lecturer in psychology, teaches qualitative research methods, and has published several papers on relational non/monogamies. This and a recent paper on therapeutic engagements with open non-monogamies are the results of a small-scale research project funded by the School of Psychology, UEL. His research interest continues to be in contemporary forms of coupledness, particularly alternative relational practices and the productivities of chaos.

Contact:

Mark Finn

School of Psychology
University of East London
Water Lane, London, E15 4LZ
UK

Tel.: 020 8223 4493

Fax: 020 8223 4937

E-mail: m.finn@uel.ac.uk

URL:

<http://www.uel.ac.uk/psychology/staff/markfinn/>

Citation

Finn, Mark D. (2014). Questioning the Rule-Making Imperative in Therapeutic Stabilizations of Non-Monogamous (Open) Relationships [47 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 15(3), Art. 6.
<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs140363>.