

The Kintsugi Art of Care: Unraveling Consent in Ethical Non-Monogamies

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Beatrice Gusmano** 

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Abstract

Making a contribution to the sociology of intimacy, this article aims to present how lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer people live their ethical non-monogamous relationships in Italy. Giving great space to the concept of consent through the literature on the ethics of care, I will refer to different conceptualizations of critical consent given by feminist and BDSM communities, spaces in which ethics is based on unveiling power structures through the focus on consent. In fact, the centrality of the collective dimension in embracing ethical non-monogamies appears fundamental, challenging the self-help – and neoliberal – literature according to which polyamory is just a personal choice. Afterwards, I will deepen the concept of care, developing it through its means of communication, attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness within relationships. Presented this way, care recognizes us all as interdependent: at the same time, care-givers and care-receivers. I suggest that this interdependency is symbolized by the kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with a mix of golden powder, a representation of the manifold matrix of care, composed of care-giving, care-receiving, and care for oneself.

Keywords

Care, consent, ethical non-monogamies, LGBTQ, polyamory

While you are away/My heart comes undone/Slowly unravels/In a ball of yarn [...]. So
when you come back/We'll have to make new love.

Björk, "Unravel" [1997]

Introduction

Notwithstanding the fact Italy has no legal recognition for partnering outside the monogamous borders of heterosexual marriage, and only recently, of same-sex and heterosexual

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civil unions (law 76/2016), practices of polyamory (Zell-Ravenheart, 1990) are not new within the gay community (for the Italian context, see Marcasciano, 2007). What is new is that they are starting to be framed as a legitimate alternative to monogamy, deconstructing the heteronormative and mononormative framework (Heckert, 2010; Jamieson, 2004; Pieper and Bauer, 2005; Wilkinson, 2010) in order to resignify intimate relationships (Jamieson, 1998; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004) in a context of increasing precariousness (Griebling, 2012; Klesse, 2014).

In this article, I present how LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer) people live their ethical non-monogamous relationships in Italy. Setting the debate within the practice turn (Schatzki et al., 2001), the focus is not on theoretical structures, but on social action as embodied in daily practices (hence on the daily micro-practices of “doing”). Interviewees’ narratives proved fundamental in assessing care as the most incisive strategy to manage ethical non-monogamies: therefore, care will be employed in order to interpret the concept of consent.

Starting from the feminist critics of the ethics of care as a female issue (Gilligan, 1982; Parton, 2003; Tronto, 1987), care means “to watch over, look after or assist in practical ways as well as to feel attachment and fondness” (Jamieson, 1998: 10): it reaches out to something other than the self and it involves action (Tronto, 1993). Showing how any of us is vulnerable, therefore avoiding the risk of infantilization, dependency, and subordination, Tronto (1993) shows how care is a practice that blurs the boundaries between care-giver and care-receiver through:

- Attentiveness: caring about, that is, noticing the needs of others;
- Responsibility: taking care of, and through that assuming responsibility to care;
- Competence: care-giving and the activity of caring involved in this;
- Responsiveness: care-receiving, which comprises an awareness of one’s own vulnerabilities. (pp. 127–134)

The literature on the ethics of care proves useful to unravel the concept of liberal consent, according to which consent is simply a contract between free individuals. As far as I know, “care” is not frequently implied in the mainstream poly literature. Therefore, I will refer to different conceptualizations of critical consent given by feminist and BDSM communities, spaces where ethics is explicitly rooted in care. Williams et al. (2014) present a framework for BDSM negotiation called the 4Cs (Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution) that introduces for the first time “care” as a central issue in BDSM practices. The 4Cs model is based on Orme’s (2002) definition of caring that includes “attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and a commitment” (p. 810), features shared by Tronto’s (1993) ethic of care. Moreover, it sees care as strongly related with communication that is “important before, during, and after a scene” (Williams et al., 2014: 6). Finally, caution implies the awareness of risk. Indeed, “power dynamics and hierarchies, be they societal, subcultural or individual relationship based, have an impact on one’s ability to negotiate and establish consent” (Bauer, 2014: 76). This focus on social oppressions and power structures counteracts the liberal understanding of consent. In this regard, Bauer (2014) defines consent as:

- Negotiated, through mutually beneficial and cooperative agreements;
- Affective: relationship-specific and based on desires;
- Critical, thus always provisional and aware of power dynamics and hierarchies.

Combining the ethics of care with conceptualizations of critical consent given by feminist and BDSM communities, I will ground my analysis on unraveling consent within the framework of care.

In the following sections, polyamory in Italy will be contextualized through the examination of the collective knowledge produced. Then, I will describe the sample through an analysis of interviewees' experience of polyamory, underlining the centrality of the collective dimension in shaping their relational styles. Afterwards, I will deepen the concept of care, developing it through attentiveness, responsibility, the competence of communication and responsiveness. In order to show the dynamics involved, I will adopt the mending metaphor of *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with a mix of golden powder, a representation of the manifold matrix of care, composed of care-giving, care-receiving, and care for oneself.

Contextualizing polyamory in Italy

The framework of the research is the five-year long European project *Intimate – Citizenship, care and choice*, the main aim of which is to contribute to legal, policy, and cultural innovation through the findings of a comparative and qualitative research designed to explore LGBTQ experiences of partnering (lesbian coupledom and polyamory), parenting (assisted conception and politics of naming a child) and friendship (transgender networks of care and living with friends in adult life) in three Southern European countries: Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Focusing on Southern Europe helps widening the existing literature coming almost exclusively from English-speaking regions, filling the gap concerning non-normative intimate relationships in countries characterized by a Mediterranean regime (Ferrera, 2008), where families and kinship are supposed to provide the services that are not supplied by welfare. In this regard, ethical non-monogamies offer a valid alternative to family care networks, especially for people who don't comply with heteronormative assumptions, as it is for the sample of the present article that self-defines as non-monogamous and either lesbian, gay, queer, or bisexual.

In order to contextualize how partnering was experienced in each country, in 2015 we carried out 27 semi-structured interviews with gatekeepers, and we referred to secondary source data to complete country-specific legal and social policy analysis. Literature on polyamory in Italy has started to grow from general contributions drawing on international literature (Ballabio, 1997; Consiglio, 2006; Deriu et al., 2016) to more in-depth and contextualized analysis (Acquistapace, 2011, 2014; Gusmano, 2018a, 2018b; Pes, 2018; Zambelli, 2017). According to its standard and widespread definition given by Franklin Veaux in his blog,¹ polyamory is defined as “the state or practice of maintaining multiple sexual and/or romantic relationships simultaneously, with the full knowledge and consent of all the people involved.” Given these premises, even though I'm aware of the fact that

“ethics” is a situated concept, I prefer to use the notion of ethical non-monogamies (Veaux and Rickert, 2014), where ethics is presumed to be based on honesty, commitment, respectful negotiation and decision-making, integrity, equity (Anapol, 2010: 76–82), and on dismantling hierarchies (Wilkinson, 2010), trying “to treat people well and not hurt anyone” (Easton and Hardy, 1997: 20).

Concerning activist discourses on ethical non-monogamies in Italy, data were drawn through the analysis of three websites; the results of four semi-structured interviews and one focus group (with three activists); and participant observation. Data show that the term “polyamory” is not fully recognized in Italy: it was used in the beginnings by activists as a keyword to be found, since the main reference was literature from North America. Considering the fact that Italian media started to use the same term, the choice was to focus on a well-known word:

“Polyamory” as one word is easy to store [...] instead of talking about “ethical non-monogamy” – which is a term that smacks of academia – or “relational anarchy” – [...] loaded with a whole range of connotations, unfortunately negative ones.

[Luca, Poliamore.org]

As an activist, the most important thing is that as many people as possible talk about this issue, that language enters the everyday talk for everyone [...]. Polyamory sounds well, it works from the media point of view.

[Jade, Rifacciamolamore]

Looking at the collective knowledge produced by Italian communities, I defined two activist approaches to ethical non-monogamies in Italy: experiential and radical. Concerning the experiential approach, I draw on the work of two websites that deal with polyamory and are not specifically LGBTQ, even though they deconstruct heteronormativity: Poliamore.org² and Rifacciamolamore.it.³

The main aim of the experiential approach is to share experiences and to build community support: these two groups do not self-define as a movement, but they prefer to call themselves either “a group of people sharing experiences” [Luca, Poliamore.org], or “a voluntary network of support” [Vera, Rifacciamolamore.it]. They organize thematic events and translate international texts. Therefore, the main merit of this approach is to create a safer place to be visible and share experiences about a too often silenced form of relationship, namely, ethical non-monogamies, and a too silenced sexual orientation, namely, bisexuality.

According to experiential activism, it is too early to talk about political demands in the Italian poly community but, arguably, there is a strong commitment to those claims that could apply to any important relationship falling outside the traditional family: healthy visibility that can lead to acceptance; partnering recognition; welfare protection, since many people still fear to come out at work, to be visible in the media, and to lose their children while divorcing.

Finally, concerning differences and intersections between polyamory and LGBTQ issues, a debate took place in 2014 within the Rainbow bar of the Festa dell’Unità (a week of events linked with the Democratic Party) in Rome.⁴ Moreover, I had the opportunity to participate in a debate organized by the polyamorous community and

hosted by one of the major Italian LGBTQ associations.⁵ Both discussions underlined the similarity of the process of coming out and the claim for the recognition of non-biological ties. Notwithstanding these common claims, the polyamorous community in Italy presents itself mostly as heterosexual or bisexual, while there is a strong polarization within the homosexual population concerning polyamory: due to an almost total lack of rights concerning sexual orientation, there is a tendency to normalization and assimilation. The interviewed spokesperson of Poliamore.org calls it a slippery slope (Sheff, 2011) caused by the process of othering, happening when LG people affirm to be different from polyamorous people. During the debate, LG people who do not support polyamorous demands affirm that it is not a LG problem, since polyamory is simply asking for a variation of the traditional couple; or they disagree with polyamory as a political claim; or, even if they agreed, they deem it not strategic to overlap claims.

Looking at the radical approach to ethical non-monogamies, I refer to the work of *SommovimentoNazio(a)nale*, a transfeminist network born in 2012, gathering queer⁶ activists and collectives in Italy. *SommovimentoNazio(a)nale* (2013) refers to the expression “other intimacies” in order to include not only sexual partners but “all the subjects that constitute the emotional landscape, the sexual possibility and the material support of people characterized by precarious geographies in terms of work, recognition, income, housing, relationships.”⁷ This activism is specifically aimed at considering together emotional/sexual life and working conditions through the lens of gender and sexuality (*SommovimentoNazio(a)nale*, 2016). Their manifesto is not just against the imaginary of the romantic couple, but against the economic basis that sustains the “compulsory couple” (Acquistapace, 2011; Wilkinson, 2012; Ziga, 2011). This specific archetype is deemed normative (two monogamous people fulfilling totally each one’s desires and needs); compulsory (the worthy style of relationship taught since childhood and reproduced by social, legal, and political institutions); teleological (a lifelong relationship aimed at constructing a steady future); and privileged (it grants access to social and legal rights granted to normative couples).

SommovimentoNazio(a)nale responds to this mandatory imaginary by creating forms of non-normative neo-mutualism and networks of care that go beyond kinship and romantic love. Therefore, they frame their political proposal within the context of precariousness and institutional blackmail of dissident existences who resist to the normativity of sexual and emotional life, since proposing a new form of recognition and relationship is a way of creating another kind of society.

In the next session, the sample will be presented through the respondents’ narratives about how they live ethical non-monogamies in daily life.

Positioning the sample: equivalence more than equality

I cannot speak of a balance because the way in which we form networks and bonds is not quantifiable.

(Taika, 2013)

The sample concerning biographical data on polyamory was selected using a snowball method as well as a call for interviewees on websites of LGBTQ associations, polyamorous

groups, institutions, and social networks. A total of 15 LGBTQ participants were recruited in the three countries, 5 of which were interviewed in Rome. Inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be between ages 25 and 45, (2) live in the capitol city, (3) self-identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or trans, (4) be currently engaged in more than one relationship at the time of the interview, and (5) have the acknowledgment and consent of every person involved. Empirical research was carried out using the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (Wengraf, 2001), which encourages the interviewee to speak as freely as possible in response to a single initial question which focused on narratives about ethical non-monogamies along the life-course. After the response to the initial question (which varied in length between 10 and 67 minutes), the interviewer seeks further details about events and experiences that had been mentioned in the first part of the interview. Interviews lasted from 95 to 204 minutes, with a mean length of more than two and a half hours. In contrast to a traditional semi-structured interview, this method allows for spontaneous links and associations given by the interviewee: this is why many respondents focused not only on ethical non-monogamies as LGBTQ subjects, but ranged from BDSM to feminist practices.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect participants' privacy, all interviews have been anonymized. Afterwards, they were analyzed through the NVivo software whose nodes were organized in around 20 macro-themes chosen by the research team and linked with sociological literature on intimate citizenship, care, choice, and partnering.

Table 1. Participants in the study on polyamory in Italy.

Name	Age	Gender identity	Sexual orientation	Job	Education	Housing
Nadia	25–29	Cis woman	Pansexual	Temporary jobs in the educational system	University dropout	Flat owned by parents
Nicoletta	25–29	Cis woman	Lesbian/queer	Temporary jobs in the educational system	Diploma	Shared rent
Bruno	25–29	Gender fluid	Faggot	PhD	PhD	Flat owned by parents
Rudy	30–35	Trans man	Gay	Short –term contract	Diploma	Shared rent
Morgana	30–35	Cis woman	Bisexual	Multiple administrative jobs	MA	Partner's apartment

All interviewees (Table 1) are Italian, White, lower middle-class,⁸ able, young (27–35 years old), childless people with an attractive body appearance (at least according to my queer eye), and a sex-positive attitude. These features do not mean that they are free from oppression: they are all non-heterosexual and self-define as either pansexual, bisexual, gay, faggot, or lesbian (two of them use the label “queer”). Concerning their gender identity, one is transsexual, and another one is gender fluid. All of them face precarious working conditions: two work part-time in the educational system (having other temporary jobs); one has multiple jobs in the office sector; one works in an institutional

department with a short-term contract; and one is attending a PhD course. Concerning education, one has dropped out of university, one has a Master's degree, and two have a diploma. Regarding housing conditions, two live in a house owned by parents, one lives in her partner's flat, while two are sharing a rent. Concerning geographical positioning, two of them have experienced periods of time abroad thanks to university (one Master's degree and one Erasmus project), and three have (or had) sexual-affective long-distance relationships abroad.

There are different factors that allow the participants in the study to question power structures and the individualistic turn proposed by mainstream self-help books on polyamory focusing only on free personal choice and agency (Deri, 2015). In order to exit individualism, they all value the collective dimension in their discovering of the oppression of mononormativity: two pan/bisexual ciswomen belong to the polyamorous community, two recognize themselves in queer activism, and all attend or organize BDSM events. Therefore, my discussion is limited to a sample that is aware of power structures within society, and tries to resignify them through an effort to build safer and engaged relationships. As argued by Jillian Deri (2011: 180), "the goal is not to equalize power by imposing the same rules or same numbers on all parties" or, in Preciado's (2000) words cited by Bruno, "a contrasexual relationship is based on equivalence and not on equality" (p. 42).

According to their narratives, two out of five interviewees are in what I define a "reciprocal non-monogamous relationship," meaning that all partners are willing to be involved in other relationships. Bruno, a PhD student in Humanities, self-defines as faggot and queer, and is involved in a long-distance relationship with a Venezuelan guy living in Berlin who has four relationships. When they start their relationship, Miguel talks about his other bonds, asking Bruno if he feels at ease in non-monogamy, and giving time to both to decide how to handle distance together:

"The time it took me to metabolize certain things are not the times that I request from you. Slowly and together, we can see how to manage it" [...]. It was the best thing because if he had told me: "this is my position: either you get here, or goodbye darling," I would have been scared to death because [...] I would have chased it as a tormenting goal.

[Bruno]

As it usually happens in relationship anarchy (Nordgren, 2006), the relational style chosen by Bruno, consenting to other relationships is not at stake: communication involves the process of building a relationship outside mononormative frameworks. The same strategy is chosen by Rudy, a self-defined gay transman actually living with Cristian, his ten-year-long relationship, and Cristian's girlfriend, Roberta. After ten years in the poly scene, Rudy affirms that he would not start a relationship again with somebody unable of conceiving a poly context: the three of them decided to have an ethical non-monogamous relationship at the beginning. Therefore, what is at stake is how to manage other relationships, not the fact of having them.

Concerning the other three interviewees, they affirm to be very honest in their relationships with their partners who are embracing non-monogamy precisely because they have a relationship with them, without being interested in having other partners. Nicoletta is a self-defined queer lesbian activist who has a two-year-long relationship with Anna

(who once practiced polyamory) and a starting relationship with another girl; she strongly refuses hierarchies between friends and lovers – as Bruno and Nadia do. In this respect, Nadia – a self-defined pansexual woman – talks about her polyfamily, including ex-lovers, lovers, and friends. She has a relationship with Daniele (a monogamous heterosexual man) and a starting relationship with Marianne (who is involved in two other hetero-relationships). Concerning equality within relationships, Nadia gives another example of the importance of equivalence:

Within polyamory, I have seen that people's needs are even more important than equality [:] maybe he [her ex-boyfriend] was looking for people, and back then I didn't want to, but I did it anyway because he was doing it.

[Nadia]

In fact, in her previous romance, she was chasing other relationships in order to get in line with her partner, even though she didn't feel like having other relationships.

Finally, Morgana is a self-defined bisexual woman, cohabiting with Alberto, a six-year-long relationship, and having a love story with Marta for the last two years; none of her lovers considers themselves as poly:

Sometimes the people we love [...] did not choose spontaneously, and they did not feel the need to follow this path. I also pushed them, maybe even too much [:] I think they both got upset.

[Morgana]

In addition, interviewees deem ethical non-monogamy as a way of being in the world, underlining its political meaning:

It became a political struggle, as well, in the sense that ... it's not only about your relationship, it's also about how you experience the world, how you live situations, how you perceive certain things, how ... how you inhabit a space.

[Nicoletta]

As affirmed by Schippers (2016), the concern regards “what effect poly [...] relationship choices might have, not just on the individuals involved, but also, if chosen collectively, on social relations more generally” (p. 4). Therefore, I will now explore in more detail the collective dimension of ethical non-monogamies, described by interviewees as a turning point in their understanding of intimacies.

“I felt like at home”: intimacy within non-normative sexual communities

The involvement in non-normative sexual communities (Bauer, 2014; Zambelli, 2017) was presented as the gate through which experiencing alternatives to mononormativity:

I had the chance to meet people that ... thought like me ... that /felt it/ (emphatically) as I felt it [...]: there was a deeper acknowledgment of what comes with this daily practice [...]. The further step was political: then, I understood that what I was doing was linked with queer and politics.

[Nicoletta]

As shown in the literature (Bauer, 2014; Deri, 2015), ethical non-monogamous relationships are prevalent in contexts where sexual orientation and practices don't comply with heteronormative assumptions, as it happens in LGBTQ and BDSM communities. Interviewees greatly value their non-normative sexual spaces: Bruno refers to how his first contact with ethical non-monogamy happened within the bear community that he started to attend when discovering cruising during adolescence. Bruno defines the big steps that in three years brought him to embrace ethical non-monogamies:

My encounter with queer/feminist theory, queer/feminist practice in our collective and [...] all the people, besides the collective and the political project, with which we began to talk about certain things: intimacy, love, and so on. And then, the practical realization.

[Bruno]

Both Bruno and Nicoletta admit that they started to practice ethical non-monogamies through their networks that were already trying to build alternative collective practices outside the mononormative box. For other interviewees, the BDSM community was the gate to self-discovery. According to the literature (Monro, 2015), key shared topics between polyamory and kinky spaces are consent, mutual trust, and the tolerance of a wide range of sexual diversity and gender variance:

In Rome I found another fundamental aspect, which is the community, the connection with the BDSM community: thanks to that I grew up so much [...] particularly as a person.

[Rudy]

For example, Rudy met his bisexual partner Cristian through the BDSM community before his decision to make the transition. This encounter was key to his self-discovery: Rudy found in Cristian a competent advisor concerning both his master role on the BDSM scene, and his path as transman, since Cristian already had a relationship with a transman, thus positioned to provide many pieces of advice concerning the transition. Moreover, the BDSM scene itself allowed Rudy to explore and perform his gay identity through role-plays before he finally decided to make the transition.

Another space of discover and sharing is feminism. Nadia agrees with Bruno and Nicoletta about the centrality of feminism in her path; moreover, she underlines, as Morgana, the importance of the polyamory community in meeting a bisexual space that does not properly exist in Italy:

And it was, I mean, a total revelation because for the first time I met people that had more than one relationship at the same time and ... I had already met a lot of bisexual people but it never happened to me to ... find so many [bisexual men] all together. I felt like I was really at home.

[Morgana]

The importance of these quotes resides in the fact that they challenge the depoliticizing self-help stream within polyamory that stresses agency and individual choice against structural constraints. The social context in which we are embedded molds our possibilities, and it is precisely the existence of non-normative communities that opens up space for practicing non-normative and sex-positive ways of bonding in a mononormative and heteronormative society.

“Don’t go against yourself”: unraveling consent

We do not need to make rules about things we do not fear. (MaeBee, 2004)

Building ethical non-monogamous relationships is a hard path, since “consent needs to be an ongoing negotiation rather than a one-off moment after which it can be assumed” (Barker, 2013: 904). Therefore, consent limitations come to light only when personal borders are crossed. Indeed, the ways interviewees found to preserve each other are rooted in care, meant as attentiveness, responsibility, and trust. Morgana stresses how the challenges posed by a mononormative culture need to be faced through cooperative and mutual beneficiary steps (Bauer, 2014):

You face many challenges [...], and you have [...] to dismantle piece by piece what it means to stay together [...]. It is scary, because you have to get rid of some ... certainties: I mean, the certainty of living together, of exclusivity, of ... being the special person for the other [...], in order to root your relationship on other things, like honesty.

[Morgana]

In order to unravel consent, I will analyze the case study of Morgana, who talks about two episodes that were not foreseen in her relationships: falling in love with a woman and having a sexual affair with a man. During her two long-lasting heterosexual relationships, Morgana was used to have only sexual encounters (and not love relationships) uniquely with women (and not with men). When she falls in love with Marta, she feels totally unprepared. She starts to change her daily routine in order to accommodate her time with Marta, while Alberto “had to deal with this change.” At first, Alberto has a hard time because they were used to sleeping together every night; afterwards, he starts to appreciate the fact of having more time for himself. In vulnerable moments of her partners, Morgana has the ground rule of changing plans to accommodate for partners’ needs, but she states that most of the time she prefers not to allow for this kind of change:

We have an agreement. If one evening in particular he tells me: “please stay”, I do everything [to stay, and] it’s the same thing with Marta. [...] But there are other moments that ... that are

actually the majority in which ... I cannot [long pause] make choices for you, I mean I cannot ... protect you from me.

[Morgana]

Morgana expresses how “we can’t demand that others protect us from our insecurities by limiting themselves” (InsideFront, 2003), since we should be aware that “care is fraught with conflict” (Tronto, 1993: 109), meaning that care is not an easy task. We are confronted with the fact that our desires may come in conflict with other people’s needs, as it happened to Morgana when she started a sexual affair with a man: Morgana was aware that she was at a crossroads between what she wanted and what her partners would have preferred. For gendered reasons, both Alberto and Marta would have preferred a female meta-amour.⁹ Morgana felt trapped, and she decided to do it anyhow, finding Alberto’s admiration at the end:

If you don’t understand deeply what you want, then you are going to be uncomfortable in that situation, so you are somehow undermining it [...]. And he said [...]: “I admire you [...] because, somehow, you don’t go against yourself, against what you really want, even if it means to ... to challenge what you have and love.”

[Morgana]

Therefore, consent is better understood as a blurred concept: it is more likely that people try to stretch the boundaries of negotiations instead of waiting for the green light. Indeed, Morgana decides to do what she wants, choosing to bear her partners’ possible vulnerabilities.

Consent is not clear-cut, thus communication and a fair management of spaces and times that take partners’ needs into consideration are the best strategies found by interviewees to cope with different desires.

“Never take anything for granted”: care as communication

Understood as a never-ending process, consent means to “never take anything for granted and keep on questioning” [Bruno]. More than getting consent, the aim is to make partners aware of what is going on through a transparent communication aimed at sharing needs and vulnerabilities. When you learn to express your feelings and unsatisfied desires, communication seems to flow more smoothly:

When we realized what was not working right between us, automatically [...] everything stopped to be an excuse for negative feelings. For example, this morning she didn’t ask me at all what I was going to do, but I told [her] anyway.

[Nicoletta]

A central topic is sharing beforehand: waiting for a partner’s questions means to put the burden of asking on the other, instead of anticipating possible vulnerabilities.

Recognizing interdependency as the starting ground for negotiated consent (Bauer, 2014) means that we are aware that our desires may be in conflict with our partners' wishes. Thus, we may decide to anticipate possible vulnerabilities, assuming the responsibility to care about them. Likewise, communication is a process that works better if it is transparent since the beginning. When they decided to start a long-distance relationship, Miguel avoids creating hierarchies between partners in order to make Bruno feel more comfortable:

"I don't want to measure on a scale all my relationships and see which one weights more, which one less, only to make you feel better and more important. I just tell you that I have these relationships. If you wanna stay with me, you accept them, you know that they exist."

[Bruno]

Miguel prefers to anticipate Bruno's expectations of exclusivity, being clear about the importance of every relationship he is into. Therefore, Bruno has the possibility of deciding whether or not he wants to stay in that constellation, without building fantasies of primacy that Miguel was not willing to meet:

Being clear, that's it, with no misunderstandings. [...] He told me this, because, if he hadn't, I would probably build again [...] the same model of previous relationships.

[Bruno]

Communication beforehand is considered a form of care of every person involved: what is at stake, here, is not sexual exclusivity but trust. In this regard, Wosick-Correa (2010) affirms that "agentic fidelity"

involves an acute self-knowledge that informs one's ability to articulate needs, desires and boundaries to a partner, while exercising agency through personal choices in determining and demonstrating commitment aside from the socially normed tenets of sexual and emotional exclusivity. (p. 45)

Trust is based on a high level of intimacy through transparent communication that puts everybody on the same level of vulnerability. As in BDSM play, trust is "a prerequisite for giving up control" (Bauer, 2014: 150): I tell you my non-monogamous desires because I believe you won't control me; I listen to your non-monogamous desires because I know I won't need to control you in order to understand what's going on in order to "find a little space that completes with all the other spaces in the puzzle" [Bruno].

Again, as in Bauer's (2014) narratives of BDSM within dyke/queer communities, "they did not base their trust on ruling out certain possibilities or future developments [;] rather, they remained aware of the risks they were taking" (p. 150). Building trust through transparent communication means taking care of how the situation is perceived by partners, allowing them to take "risks" that are actively chosen. While sharing desires, partners feel the effect of the information on others, assessing the most caring way to stretch the boundaries of negotiations. Part of this process of caring is also the fact that everybody decides

their own rules of disclosure (Deri, 2011) on the basis of the relationship they are living, starting from the assumption that the only unacceptable thing is lying:

If I am in a relationship, I really want to know, it's almost a condition [...]. You can tell it slowly: "listen, I am not sure yet, I will tell you later".

[Nadia]

At the same time, partners need to recognize that everybody may make mistakes in this intertwined complexity of caring, listening, talking, and acting. Ethical non-monogamies aim at displaying care before, in the act of sharing desires; during, while communicating what's going on; after, when partners realize that they might have gone beyond their boundaries.

“The monsters inside me”: attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness

Since care is a process, it is necessary to understand how to take care one of the other – giving attentiveness, assuming responsibilities, and accepting responsiveness:

They always accused [us] of refusing to build anything, of refusing to grow up, of rejecting responsibilities. It seems to me that polyamory has given me a double, triple responsibility: you have many sensibilities in your hands, and you make a lot of mistakes, and sometimes you feel like being in a glass store, and you break everything. Then, everything can be fixed, can be alright, can be rebuild, and even what got broken becomes stronger.

[Nadia]

Admitting moments of rupture is a fundamental step to fix things up according to the vulnerabilities of all people involved. This process recalls the technique of *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with a mix of golden powder. This technique comes from a philosophy that considers breakage and its subsequent reparation as part of the object's history, something to be proud of, since it embodies the signs of rupture, the flow of time, and the attempts to fix it. The *kintsugi* art of care works as a reparative metaphor that comprises consent as negotiated, affective, and critical. For example, having the sensibility of respecting partner's times has the outcome of being a better strategy of negotiation and encounter than aprioristic consent, since it lets everybody meet in a common terrain of care that allows vulnerabilities and fears to emerge:

She is usually very [...] self-balanced. [...] She told me: “maybe I am not very self-centered now.” And so it's not necessary to be always self-balanced, but [...] there is also some space to understand when you are and when you are not, and how to get better.

[Nicoletta]

Attentiveness leads also to *compersion*, a well-known term in poly literature (Taormino, 2008) that can be described as the joy felt when experiencing someone else's

happiness. In poly relationships, it refers to the joy felt when our partners are happy because of other sexual/affective encounters:

The three of us live together: Roberta, Cristian and I. When I see them getting ready for a play party, I tell them “have fun”: I really feel happy if they are happy.

[Rudy]

Attentiveness and responsibility, though, have limits because others’ needs cannot be incompatible with personal limits, as clearly explained by Nicoletta when talking about compromise, and Morgana about guilt:

I’ve always hated the concept of “compromise” within relationships because it means that you are renouncing a part of yourself, and it means that someone is not doing what they feel, and so, automatically it creates discomfort in the relationship.

[Nicoletta]

Feeling guilty is [...] not doable. [...] I have to accept and deal with the fact that I may put him into uncomfortable and challenging situations. But I need to be sure that he’s the one who has to decide for himself if he wants to stay with me or not. I do want to stay with him.

[Morgana]

The starting point in this complex matrix of care is the interdependency of responsibility, attentiveness, and responsiveness, meaning that all partners involved are willing to share commitment and to notice each other’s needs. Care is a process in which borders between care-givers and care-receivers are blurred, a process in which one’s own vulnerabilities are unveiled (Tronto, 1993). Some of these are the result of a socialization imprinted by monogamies, others are the results of personal experiences, and it is not always easy to distinguish between them. In the next excerpt, Bruno refers to them as “monsters”:

At home, I dealt with the monsters inside me [:] it’s all about understanding where [...] odd dynamics that lead to control [...] are activated. [I said to Miguel:] “I indeed have [limits] inside me. Honestly, I still have to undo them”.

[Bruno]

Referring to jealousy as a monster is a common refrain in ethical non-monogamies, as explained by Dominguez (2015) in her study on polyamory through the lens of the affective turn:

I call “affect domestication” the process that begins with a decision, a political commitment that has to reeducate the body, and the way we feel and experience affects and emotions [:] a series of practices that involves modifying a series of emotions different from those already learned with monogamy. (p. 133)

In this process of domestication, when jealousy or a striving for control are experienced, interviewees often understand that those emotions are expressions of their own self-balance, about how much they are able to manage their emotions without letting them become their partner's responsibility. It's not just a personal path, it's a political one, given the fact that we are all socialized to mononormativity that presents jealousy as a legitimate feature of true love:

I went really jealous [and] I felt so humiliated by myself: I was locking myself up in feelings that were so useless to my relationship with myself and with the others.

[Nicoletta]

I instinctively understood that jealousy was arising but this was because I had some sort of emptiness inside [...]. And so I started to carve out some space for myself, to do things I liked. It was a sort of rebirth.

[Rudy]

Interviewees let surface how those emotions to which everybody is socialized since birth – such as jealousy, possessiveness, control, guilt – can be deconstructed only through a constant path of self-determination which is both personal and political:

You have to learn to live certain emotions, emotions against which you constantly fight, like possession, jealousy, control ... but then, when you manage to do it, it's nice [.] It is hard work, [and] you have to be [...] stronger than tranquility: you have to fight now in order to feel better after.

[Nicoletta]

Thus, responsiveness is a way of taking care of one's own emotions, a way of taking responsibilities for them, allowing space for support. Interviewees can count on communities to share their frailties, thus escaping the solipsistic solutions. And it is also a way to make relationships lighter, free from emotions that have to do with vulnerabilities assimilated during years of forced mononormativity that can be triggered by the relationship itself.

Concluding thoughts

There is a crack in everything, That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem" [1992]

Care is a central feature in ethical non-monogamies, and it goes well beyond liberal consent. It is a way of coping with power dynamics, admitting them as being inherently part of our multifaceted identities, since "power relations [...] complicate[d] the ease with which consent in polyamory can sometimes be reached, blurring the lines of both agency and consent" (Deri, 2015: 124). Indeed, all interviewees highlight the constant

struggle they face in finding a balance (relational, social, and personal) between agreements, wishes, and consent in a mononormative world where intimate decisions are constantly put under scrutiny by heteronormative rules of bonding. While the liberal definition of consent is to give permission beforehand, care takes place not only before, but also during and after things have occurred, “acknowledging the human condition as a state of interdependency, rather than acceptance of the liberal illusion of personal autonomy” (Bauer, 2014: 106). Liberal consent operates in a fictional linear dimension, without taking into account unexpected events, new relationship energy, vulnerabilities, desires, and crossroads – that is, precisely the raw material of intimacies, from which arises the art of care: a relational practice shaped in creative ways by affective contingency. Moreover, while liberal consent affects a limited number of people (usually two) who make an agreement, care can radiate all over because it isn’t bound to a specific situation: it’s a way of being in the world, of caring about, of assuming responsibilities, of admitting vulnerabilities. Making a patchwork of the definitions that I’ve appreciated the most, I would say that critical consent can be defined as an “active, ongoing collaboration for the mutual benefit” (Bauer, 2014: 106), “well-being and pleasure of all persons concerned” (Easton and Hardy, 1997: 20–21), “in which the conditions under which a ‘no’ is possible need to be created, by everyone involved, in order for a ‘yes’ to count” (Barker, 2013: 908).

Within this framework, care assumes an overwhelming power that puts care-givers and care-receivers at the same level, giving both the responsibility of taking care not only of each other, but of themselves as well, thus warding off shadows of victimization. Furthermore, giving great value to sexual non-normative communities in shaping the way we do intimacies proves to be an effective antidote to isolation and individualization. Being part of non-normative communities also helps in unveiling the burden of heteronormativity and mononormativity, challenging other taken-for-granted systems related to:

- Identity, in its multi-faceted nuances, as a mean to exit the normative way of understanding gender, sexual orientation, class, body perception, etc.;
- Relational hierarchies, blurring the boundaries between friends, lovers, family, kinship, ex-lovers, and giving centrality to non-normative communities;
- Care, both for oneself and for all the people they interact with, as a way to share goods in a context of precarious conditions of work, housing, and health.

Summarizing, the most evocative image concerning ethical non-monogamies could be that of *kintsugi*, a mending metaphor involving the complexity of doing intimacy through the awareness of one’s own limits, and other’s vulnerabilities, where the golden powder used to repair broken pottery represents the multifaceted matrix of care, composed of care-giving, care-receiving, and care for oneself.

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Notes

1. <https://www.morethantwo.com/polyglossary.html>
2. Online from April 2012, it was created with the goal to become the benchmark for polyamory in Italy. Based in Rome, it has many local groups spread all over Italy, thanks to voluntary work. They usually refer to the term "ethical non-monogamies."
3. Born in October 2013, after the split between members of Poliamore.org, it deals with unconventional relationships, therefore promoting a critical reflection on sexuality, identity, and gender patterns. The core group is based in Bologna, where poly people met for the first time in Italy. They usually refer to the term "openness" through a logo that is a heart with many arrows toward the outside.
4. <http://www.poliamore.org/amori-non-allineati/>, 20 July 2014.
5. <http://www.mariomieli.net/poliamore.html>, 19 April 2015.
6. The word "queer" is used to define a non-mainstream movement of activists who self-identify as feminist, and either LGBTAIQ (here, the acronym has been implemented to include asexual and intersex people), hetero-dissident or cis-dissident.
7. www.sommovimentonazionale.noblogs.org
8. Meaning a young and urban group, "a marginal class in terms of its economical capital, but" whose "social and cultural capital is high" (Savage et al., 2013: 240).
9. In poly communities, it refers to the partner of one's partner.

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