

They ‘went in two by two’

The challenge for couple psychotherapists of working with those in open and polyamorous relationships

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Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on and explore the nature of relating in open and polyamorous relationships, as an antidote to, or extension of, the more familiar couple relationship at the heart of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy practice. And, although the development and application of psychoanalytic theory to couple relationships have proved invaluable, unfortunately, its primary focus on dyadic functioning has inevitably limited its interest in and understanding of the relevance of its theory to those in open and polyamorous relationships. Moreover, the inherent belief at the heart of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy in the importance of monogamy, signifying mature and healthy functioning, has resulted in those who do not adhere to this standard being ignored, seen in a bad light, or believed to be blighted by the challenges of intimacy. Furthermore, traditional psychoanalytic accounts of development, attachment and relatedness, linked to heterosexual perspectives (D’Ercole & Drescher, 2004), have only served to tighten the grip on normative thinking and sealed the outsider status afforded to those in more open and polyamorous relationships.

Theoretical considerations

The primacy of monogamy

When thinking about open and polyamorous relationships, it is noticeable how these particular relationship configurations are often contrasted against the apparent advantages of monogamy and fidelity. Spence (1997), for instance, suggests that monogamy is associated with a deeper sense of intimacy and that both intimacy and sexual desire are found to be positively correlated. Underscoring this point, Jamieson (2004) highlights the belief that sexual fidelity is symbolic of trust and that sexual exclusivity accounts for the ‘specialness’ in couple relationships. Not surprisingly, these aspects of relating emphasise not just the popular ideals of monogamy, but also touch

on the fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory when applied to couple relationships, which, in my view, emphasise the importance of commitment and exclusivity. The incomprehensibility of open and polyamorous relationships for many continue to reinforce the ideals of monogamy, reflecting notions of maturity and development. For instance, research conducted by Conley and colleagues (2013) strongly suggests that those engaged in non-monogamy are viewed as having poorer and less responsible relationships than their monogamous counterparts. Matsick *et al* (2014), in their research, also found that people seemed more uncomfortable with the idea of strictly sexual relationships than with those involving multiple romantic and/or emotional attachments. And Barker (2013), in their chapter on ‘Rewriting the rules of monogamy’ captures this thinking when they say that pairing off and getting married are viewed ‘as an inevitable, natural, normal and healthy part of development over the lifespan’ and that ‘relationships outside of the couple are only considered in the context of cheating and infidelity and the damage this can do’ (p. 96). How then do those working with couples, where sexual exclusivity is not a reality, engage such couples in ways that avoid reinforcing the ideals of monogamy, and moreover, how might the key theoretical tenets of couple psychoanalytic theory assist those in this endeavour?

The couple state of mind

Ruszczynski (1993) suggests that for the couple therapist, the patient is the couple or, more precisely, the interaction between the partners is the patient, whilst Morgan (2005, 2019) refers to the importance of the therapist holding, what she refers to as ‘a couple state of mind’. Taken together, these ideas are at the heart of the therapeutic endeavour and they constitute important organising principles in both the theory and practice of couple psychotherapy. Both concepts essentially promote the centrality of the couple’s relationship as being the object of interest and attention, whilst at the same time also cautioning against the dangers of focusing too much on individual partners at the expense of the couple relationship itself. However, it is this aspect of the theory that, in my view, poses particular challenges for those working with open and polyamorous relationships, since it not only raises questions in terms of what actually constitutes the couple, but also in terms of how to think about the needs of individuals within a couple when relating romantically or sexually to others outside of that relationship, something that I will examine in more detail later in the chapter.

The creative couple

A further concept that has influenced the development of thinking about couple relationships within the field is that relating to what Morgan (2005) refers to as *the creative couple*, in which the couple ‘can experience their

relationship as an entity, a resource, something they have created and continue to create together' (Morgan, 2019, p. 136). The forerunner to the elaboration of the creative couple state of mind lies in the developmental processes relating to one's early relationship with the mother/caregiver, the negotiation of the triangular nature of the Oedipal situation, as well as dealing with the challenges of adolescence which, when taken together, provide the template for managing separateness and difference alongside intimacy — all of which are felt to be crucial in the development of a creative couple state of mind. In fact, in working one's way through these different stages of psychic development, the individuals concerned are already glimpsing the nature of couple relating with its potential for opening-up what Britton (1998) refers to as a *triangular space*. Importantly, Morgan's belief that 'the movement towards feeling oneself to be part of a couple in which two minds come together to create something (*new*)' (p. 18) provides a helpful illustration of the development of triangular space, whilst challenging both partner's narcissism and omnipotence as they relinquish aspects of independence and autonomy. Yet, within the *creative couple* relationship, there is still the possibility of retaining a measure of psychic separateness without losing connection to one's partner, as both grapple with issues of separateness and attachment, disillusionment and ambivalence (Ruszczyński, 2005). Furthermore, the application of these ideas for open and polyamorous relationships is not something which Morgan foresees as an issue, especially since she believes that there is no limit to the number of such couplings with which one might engage, and instead the emphasis is more on the sense of one's identity being enhanced through these couplings (Morgan, personal communication). Nevertheless, given that these ideas have yet to be properly theorised in regard to open and polyamorous relationships, this chapter provides an important opportunity for further exploration.

Developing the point of separateness and togetherness further, Kernberg (1993) believes that the couple 'acquires an identity of its own in addition to the identity of each of the partners' (p. 63), capturing something of the tension between the individual needs separate from and in relation to couple relationships, which may also have relevance to our understanding of open and polyamorous relationships. Additionally, Ruszczyński (2005) suggests that 'Individual partners in an intimate relationship have to tolerate the fact that *for the purposes* of their relationship, they may sometimes have to give up needs, interests, and aspects of themselves, and tolerate doing so, however ambivalently' (p. 40), raising further questions concerning the meaning that partners in open and polyamorous relationships attach to this particular challenge. Moreover, the requirement for each of the partners to take back ownership of the split-off aspects of self that have through projective identification been put into the other, as evidence of a further developmental shift in relating, will also need consideration when applied to those in non-exclusive relationships. This seems especially important, since Colman (1993) also points

to the principle of the couple relationship providing what he refers to as ‘good enough’ containment for the partners, particularly in regard to containing the ‘tension that arises from the need of the individuals to develop outside the relationship as well as within it’ (p. 73). In addition, when thinking about dyadic couple relationships, Colman points to the importance of boundaries which offer protection from disruption both inside and outside the relationship, as another essential ingredient for its continuity and development. In other words, the couple’s need of a ‘shared private space’ from which others are excluded, sits in relation to the demands of relating to others that has the potential to continually pull partners in couples away from each other, and which may also pose challenges for those in open and polyamorous relationships. However, at the very heart of this exploration, for both exclusive and non-exclusive couples, is the fundamental question of whether these relationships are developmental or defensive, serving some unconscious motive that works against the potential for intimacy and growth.

Love, desire, sex and attachment

Generally speaking, psychoanalytic thinking when applied to couples holds the belief that sex, love and emotion tend to be directed solely towards one’s partner and lived out and contained in one place and, so, when this is not the case, as, for example, with infidelity, this may be viewed as an actualisation of splits within the individual’s and couple’s shared unconscious organisation. Therefore, ‘what had been lived unconsciously between them is now lived out with a third participant who becomes an object, consciously or unconsciously, for both of them, and who receives their projections’ (Scharff, 2014, p. 255). Building on this thinking, others have advanced additional perspectives to the question of what can or cannot be contained within the couple relationship. For instance, Kernberg (1991) speaks of unresolved Oedipal conflicts as a major cause of invasion of the couple’s sexual boundaries and a vehicle for the expression of dissociated aggression from many sources, whilst also drawing attention to the indissoluble nature of the interaction of libido and aggression, of love and hatred as important factors in determining the nature of the emotional relationship of the sexual couple. Rasmussen and Kilborne (2014), on the other hand, take the view that sexual infidelity occurs when the sexual and/or intimacy needs of one or both partners of a couple are not being satisfied. They also query the assumption that sex and intimacy go hand in hand, by stating that ‘sex can and does occur in the absence of intimacy, and intimacy is not always associated with sexual activity’ (p. 12). Yet, decoupling sex and intimacy and permitting its existence outside of the committed couple dyad offers the potential for a new and exciting reading of the creative couple state of mind, rather than one that is premised on dysfunction or symptomatic of a failure in the primary couple container.

Benioff (2017) helpfully reminds us that 'desire and sexuality are unruly, capricious, resistant to conscious control, and always threaten to undermine our ideal views of ourselves and our partners' (p. 213). Clulow (2017) calls our attention to an attachment perspective that 'having confidence in someone who can be relied upon to be both available and responsive, creates room for feelings of sexual desire' (p. 198). In other words, partners who feel secure with each other may be able to deepen their sexual relationship because they are not having to contend with the fear of rejection or abandonment that might impact their sexual desire. Eagle (2007), on the other hand, notes that 'there is a good deal of evidence that predictability, familiarity and availability frequently dampen the intensity of sexual interest and excitement' (p. 197), something that perhaps accounts for the demise of so many exclusive couple relationships, whilst also providing at least part of the explanation for why some individuals and couples choose to open their relationship or opt to have more than one romantic partner at any one time.

Clulow (*ibid*) introduces yet another variable into the mix when he says that 'abstinence, promiscuity, one-night stands, sexual coercion and cybersex are behaviours that can be understood in terms of attachment related anxieties' (p. 199), possibly suggesting that secure and insecure attachment patterns of relating may be relevant in distinguishing those in open and polyamorous relationships from those in more exclusive forms of relating. Indeed, there is a proposition that securely attached individuals are found to be more comfortable than insecurely attached individuals with their sexuality and, as a consequence, are more likely to eschew casual sex outside of their relationships (Hazen, Campa & Gur-Yaish, 2006, as outlined by Brown, 2015.) Stretching the point further, Brown (2015) suggests that additional research (Freeney, Noller & Patty, 1993; Ridge & Freeney, 1998) has found that avoidantly attached men tend to have more sexual partners than those who are anxiously attached, and that the avoidantly attached men tend to have more permissive attitudes about sex and report more casual sex outside of their relationships, an attempt, perhaps, to avoid dependence on or being burdened by the needs of others. Brown (*ibid*) concludes that 'open relationships are more successful when the gay male partners are securely attached or appear to meet each other's emotional needs at a mutually acceptable level through a complementary dyadic pattern' (p. 396).

Reflecting further on these theoretical considerations, I find it interesting that infidelity continues to occupy such a compelling focus for the field in theorizing partners looking outside of their primary relationships. Given the absence of secret non-monogamy as a feature of open and polyamorous relationships, how then might we understand and explain this thinking in regard to those in non-exclusive relationships. Furthermore, although the theory underpinning couple psychoanalytic and attachment theory offers a rich conceptualization and backdrop for practice, I am, nevertheless, concerned about the appropriation of theory in the service of reinforcing

beliefs about what may be considered desirable and functional over that in which the reading of the couple's situation, i.e., non-monogamy, may be less welcome or appropriate in regard to their developmental needs. That said, perhaps a more fruitful line of exploration would be that of understanding the beliefs about relating that lie at the heart of open relationships and those who practice polyamory, in addition to understanding how they might feel about approaching a couple psychotherapist for help?

Towards an understanding of open relationships

In a previously published paper (McCann, 2017), I suggested that 'the sense of fluidity of relationships in the non-heterosexual world is, to some extent, shaped by the lack of a sanctioned institutional framework for intimate partnering, in turn creating opportunities for creativity and choice largely denied to couples subscribing to a framework of monogamy' (p. 46). This may explain why, in my practice with lesbian, gay and bisexual couples, there seems to be such openness to thinking about open and polyamorous relationships, in marked contrast to that of my work with straight couples. This is perhaps not so surprising given the recent findings of a YouGov poll (2016) where only 10% of respondents opted for non-monogamy when asked, 'what would be your ideal relationship' and barely 5% indicated that they would be tolerant of their partner's wish to engage in sexual activities with someone else. Yet, the increased tolerance towards open relationships, especially amongst gay men and bisexuals, need not trouble us too much since, in and of itself, it does not seem to be problematic, provided that, according to Spears & Lowen (2010), the couple is able to openly negotiate the rules governing the framework within which the open relationship operates. However, for some couples, there may be a danger of one of the partners pushing to open the relationship and the other attempting to resist, resulting in what is termed 'mono-shaming', an attempt to pressure the resistant partner into submission, or threatening the demise of the couple if the partner does not agree to the opening of the relationship.

Open relationships refer to a form of dyadic couple relationship that is open to partners having sex with others, although not usually forming loving or deep attachments with anyone other than the primary partner. Indeed, within gay male couple relationships, this openness usually takes the form of the men in a primary relationship cruising (either together or separately) for sex with other men. The sexual encounters tend to be brief, although sometimes there may be longer-term sexual friendships. Gay men themselves report varying levels of emotional connection to sexual partners outside their primary relationship, but ultimately, they view their primary relationship as the strongest source of comfort, reliability and security (Pawlicki & Larson, 2011). However, in the same way that sexual infidelity in monogamous relationships constitutes a crisis for the couple, emotional

infidelity within an open relationship may be just as devastating, since it suggests that one of the partners has formed a strong emotional connection to a sexual partner outside of the primary relationship, thereby threatening its foundation.

The splitting of sex and emotion that often accompanies the decision to open an existing couple relationship is something that can feel both challenging and alien to many. This is especially so for those holding strong beliefs in the exclusivity of couple relationships and who consciously or unconsciously impart these beliefs onto others. Greenwell (2020) reminds us that queer sexuality that doesn't fit the heterosexual mould of family is still treated with disdain. The discomfort and confusion that may accompany a therapist's realisation that the couple with whom they are working is considering opening their relationship, is something that needs careful thought, especially given the dangers of the therapist's implicit bias being communicated to the couple. Yet, Bonello (2009) suggests that sexual variety is often a central motivating factor for most couples who choose non-exclusive relationship arrangements, and for some, it provides freedom from dead, redundant patterns of psychosexual relating as well as an important means of managing discrepancies in sexual desire. Some have even suggested that being in an open relationship actually enhances the sex and intimacy within the committed relationship (Bergstrand & Williams, 2000; Spears & Lowen, 2010). This point is further underlined by Barash & Lipton (2001) who put forward the idea that sexual satisfaction with primary partners is often revived when partners experience each other in a new light and that passionate love may be rekindled when partners venture outside of the primary relationship. However, although the incidence of gay men and bisexuals electing to open their relationships is believed to be high, those turning to therapy suggest particular challenges that may be worthy of further exploration.

Drawing on the work of Constantine and Constantine (1972) and Macklin (1978), in thinking about open and polyamorous relationships, Weitzman *et al* (2009) suggest that couples in non-traditional relationships tend to present for therapy with issues that are not dissimilar to those in more traditional couple relationships. Included in their list of presenting problems are: inadequate communication; differences in the degree of commitment; conflicting expectations; and the search for a balance between autonomy and intimacy, something that has already been discussed (Colman, 1993; Ruszczynski, 1993). Deri (2011), however, suggests that differences in attitude between partners towards sexual intimacy can be enough to create considerable relationship distress, and from my work with gay male couples in open relationships, I have been struck by the depth of the distress and disturbance within the primary relationship that result in these couples presenting for therapy. What seems to be at play in these encounters is a conscious wish for one or both of the partners to address discrepant sexual

needs within the primary relationship through the decision to look outside. Moreover, although the majority of the couples I have seen have agreed to a framework and set of expectations for opening their relationship, it is noticeable how, in a number of these cases, the experience of opening their relationship appears to have exerted a destabilizing influence on the couple's primary connection, to the extent that they seek therapy to prevent a separation or divorce. Perhaps new passionate encounters obscure attention to the challenges that most couples face, linked to unconscious processes and feelings that such encounters stir-up in the individuals and couples concerned (see Nathan's chapter in this book for a fuller examination of this phenomenon)

Case example

Matt and Jason, a gay couple of nine years standing, agreed to open their relationship to, as they put it, introduce some excitement into their sex life, which they said had become both dull and routine. The couple had already decided that they would only ever see other men together, a decision that may have been influenced by Jason having cheated on Matt five years previously and Matt having then threatened to leave. It is of note that Jason's father had also cheated on his mother in the past.

In starting psychotherapy, the couple believed that they had worked through the upset caused by Jason's affair, and at the point that they discussed seeing other men together, their intention was to deepen their sexual connection. Nonetheless, in the triangular dynamics of the threesomes, Matt had quickly found himself the outsider, as Jason and the 'third' partnered-up, leaving Matt feeling angry and resentful. Matt then tried to deal with this rejection by suggesting that he and Jason start seeing other men separately, and although Jason was not entirely sure, he did accept that the threesomes were not working so well for them as a couple. Matt, whose father had left when he was two years old, subsequently looked solely to his mother for the fulfillment of his attachment needs. However, when he was nine years old, his mother introduced her own 'third' in the form of a stepfather. Although Matt recounted the event with little emotion, he was clearly deeply distressed by this turn of events, much as he had been when Jason had the affair and again when Jason partnered-up with the outsider in the threesome encounters. Matt's unconscious rage relating to being pushed out led to multiple encounters of his own, and before long, Jason was feeling abandoned and 'betrayed'. Jason soon learned that Matt was forming passionate relationships with two of the guys he was seeing, and sex between Matt and Jason had all but stopped. The couple presented for therapy in crisis, and feelings were running high. The early stages of the work were dominated by the need to provide a container in order to help Matt and Jason begin the

painful process of trying to understand what was happening to them and their relationship. During the eleven months of therapy with this couple, I suggested that perhaps Jason was being made to feel some of Matt's unacknowledged pain and outrage. Being on the outside, Jason felt powerless to control Matt's manic attempts to deal with his own psychic pain through the excitement of sex (Nathans 2012). Unfortunately, for the couple, Matt's unconscious retaliation was setting up a rivalrous dynamic in Jason, who was now becoming secretive and punitive towards Matt, by starting his own affairs. Whilst drawing particular attention to the need for the couple to make use of the containment the therapy offered, I did manage to think with them about the shared unconscious pain and disappointment that they were feeling as a result of opening their relationship, especially since it referenced some deep-rooted unconscious associations with their respective internal parental couples. For instance, I understood that Matt and Jason had an identification with their respective fathers, who had both looked outside their primary relationships for something that may have been missing within or, which had felt unresolvable. However, in seeking therapy, it was possible to be curious about the ways in which their past histories interacted with current trends relating to the openness of gay male couple relationships and how what they were doing seemed to be destroying their primary connection. Armed with this knowledge, they seemed to take a step back, and in the reflective space that had opened within the therapy, they were more able to look towards each other rather than to turn away.

Whilst accepting that this composite case illustration raises some difficult questions for those opening their relationships, it is worth noting that there are a number of couples in open relationships that seem to work extremely well (Spears and Lowen, 2010) and, it would also appear that through this means, they secure their primary relationship which might otherwise have faltered. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that un-mourned loss of sexual functioning within the primary relationship, manifest in a conscious or unconscious fantasy that opening the relationship will provide a much-needed solution, may not always go to plan, especially given the need for couples to establish a secure enough base or foundation as a necessary prerequisite for deciding to open their relationship. As with Matt and Jason, the un-mourned loss of their sexual relationship appeared to reference other losses that only became apparent during the course of the therapy, and these served to reinforce their shared sense of abandonment, betrayal and insecurity. Only through identifying and addressing these issues and making the necessary links to the source of the disturbance were the couple able to think about what was happening to them and their relationship. Their decision to keep their relationship open, following the therapy, suggests that there was both a clearer understanding and firmer framework on which to take things forward.

To my mind, the process of therapy with Matt and Jason constitutes a version of the *creative couple* within the meaning of Morgan's (ibid) definition, especially since it demonstrates an ability between the couple to think about the meaning of what it is that is happening to them. This, in turn, enables them to use their relationship as a resource to help them work together in finding a less defensive solution to the problems within their partnership manifested in the opening of their relationship. Further reinforcing this point, Clulow (2017), from an attachment perspective, suggests that an important aim of couple therapy is 'to increase the capacity of the couple relationship to act as a safe haven and secure base for the partners, containing their anxieties and enabling them to weather the storms of life and learn from them' (p. 210). He goes on to describe the therapist's task as that of working with 'the psychological skin around the couple, making their relationship, rather than either of the partners the principle focus of attention and the site for change' (p. 210). I believe that this is exactly what happened in my work with Matt and Jason, who came to see their primary relationship as a safe haven and one that allowed them the freedom to look outside without the fear of abandonment or the demise of their couple connection.

Polyamory

Polyamory (or poly) is commonly defined as a form of consensual or ethical non-monogamy, where individuals and partners maintain multiple, simultaneous relationships of varying degrees of emotional and/or sexual intimacy. According to Deri (2011), 'the term polyamory was coined in 1990 by Morning-Glory Zell, a self-proclaimed polyamorist, and the terms *polyamory*, *polyamorist* and *polyamorous* officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006'. The increased exposure of polyamory within the society may be viewed as a response to the limitations of monogamy, where exclusive relationships are frequently seen as an unrealistic ideal. Weitzman *et al* (2009) also highlight the importance of clinicians and counselling professionals being prepared to help clients navigate this new relationship terrain, and Anapol (2010) suggests that it is essential that we loosen our attachment to conditioned beliefs about love, sex, intimacy and commitment, especially since polyamory seems to blur the boundaries between sex, friendship and intimacy.

Koyanagi (2018) helpfully identifies four types of polyamorous relationships and usefully explains the differences between them.

- The *primary partner and others approach* – reflects a relationship between a couple where one or both of the individuals within that relationship have other partners. Although, as a couple, they negotiate the kind of relationship that one or either partner has with the other, in

essence they ensure the protection of their primary relationship alongside all other relationships which are positioned in qualitatively different ways. To my mind, it differs from open relationships, as outlined above, because there is less emphasis on sex, although this may also be a feature of these poly relationships.

- In the *group approach* – an individual may be engaged with multiple people in the same relationship. However, it is important to emphasise that although a person may be having individual relationships, there is also the group dynamic that links the partners to each other and to the group as a whole and, in situations where sexual exclusivity exists within the group, this is known as poly fidelity.
- Within the *egalitarian network approach* – no one relationship is centred as the main relationship in a person's life, and although some of these relationships may replicate that of the primary relationship, the difference here is that the individual in the *egalitarian approach* may have a number of these relationships. Essentially, these are people who have chosen polyamory for themselves and may, for instance, be part of a multi-person household with an entire poly network of lovers all living together or an individual having multiple relationships with partners who do not necessarily wish to meet or live with the other partners.
- The *solo approach* – 'looks like the *egalitarian network approach*, in that each individual person decides how to engage in their relationship with other people and no one central relationship determines the shape of other relationships' (Koyanagi, *ibid*). However, solo polyamorists never couple-up in a central relationship, such as a primary relationship or a central group, but neither do they couple-up with many different people. Solo polyamorists are in relationships, but as Koyanagi suggests, they maintain the identity of a solo individual and may identify as single even if they are in multiple romantic relationships, or the way they structure their lives is more centred on the individual rather than centring couple-hood or family. Most solo polyamorists choose not to marry or live with anyone and may best be characterised by 'living apart together'.

Case example

It was one year into my work with Eleanor when she revealed that she was in a poly relationship with a married couple named Andrew and Lisa. Eleanor, aged thirty years, had presented with anxiety following the sudden and unexpected death of her mother six months earlier. The beginning stages of the work were dominated by Eleanor's feelings of anxiety and depression, which seemed to be related to the death of her mother, but also linked to her sense of isolation and her lack of success in finding an intimate partnership. Eleanor identifies as bisexual and works as an assistant director for a charitable organization specialising in conservation.

Before Eleanor told me that she was in a poly relationship, I heard that some months ago, she had met a woman called Lisa at a conference and that they had really hit it off. I thought that they had become best friends, but I later understood that Lisa had been keen for Eleanor to meet Andrew, her husband, and that the three of them soon began hanging out together.

In the sessions that followed her disclosure, Eleanor seemed different with me, more alive and more hopeful. However, it took her a while longer to actually let me know what was happening, 'you see I fear the judgment of others'. Yet, we also thought about the stress of Eleanor having to keep this new and exciting relationship secret. She could not at that time see a way of integrating the relationship into her life, a situation that intensified following her decision to move in with Lisa and Andrew. Despite Eleanor telling me that things were going well after moving into the couple's home, she was fraught with insecurities about being the outsider in the 'throuple'. Added to this, she was preoccupied by the fears of what others might think of her if they should ever learn that she was in a poly relationship. Some of Eleanor's anxieties seemed to be related to Lisa and Andrew being a couple and Eleanor's confusion about her position within the group. Furthermore, as the relationship deepened, the partners became more exposed to their differences, i.e., Lisa and Andrew's wish to take care of Eleanor, and Eleanor's need to take care of herself. These differences began to create conflicts in relation to their individual needs and those of the group. On a number of occasions, Eleanor even considered leaving the relationship and seemed desperately conflicted in terms of her wish for closeness and her need for space and separateness. She complained bitterly about the dominance of the couple and of her being second best, but she also accepted that her fear of conflict was not helpful to her in the negotiation of fairness and equity between the three of them, possibly a feature of some poly relationships.

Deri (2011) argues 'that poly is closely aligned with queerness, since polyamorists resist mono-normativity and challenge the dominance of the nuclear family'. Given its radical nature, i.e., a sex-positive community in which 'a variety of forms of sexual sharing between consenting adults are affirmed' (Weitzman *et al* 2009), it seems likely that couple psychotherapists trained to think in terms of dyadic couple relationships may struggle to comprehend their poly clients. This may also explain why so many poly clients fail to disclose their poly lifestyle in therapy, since there may be an absence of mirroring, incongruity between internalized values and the values expressed to others, and confusion concerning one's place within poly networks and rules of engagement. Weitzman *et al* (*ibid*) suggest that it is important for therapists to distinguish troubled individual, couple or group dynamics from problematic transitions in predominantly healthy poly relationships, for instance, supporting individuals in moving forward with decisions about exploring polyamory in its many forms. Equally, helping those in poly relationships manage fears and insecurities related to letting go of the romantic

ideal about being the 'one and only' may be something that is also shared by therapists. Furthermore, attempts to overcome jealousy in poly relationships with *compersion*, i.e., taking delight in a partner's love for another, may be felt by analytically trained therapists as an extreme act of denial.

Developing the thinking further, it seems that the tension outlined by Colman (*ibid*) concerning the need of individuals in relationships to develop outside the relationship as well as within, may have greater meaning for those in poly relationships, as the partners balance the 'I' and the 'You' with the 'We' and the 'Us'. Moreover, we might assume that the projective system, which has such meaning for couple therapists working primarily with dyadic relationships, can be equally applied to those in poly relationships. Returning to Eleanor's relationship with Lisa and Andrew, it is possible that Eleanor struggled to individuate from a mother who looked to her daughter, following the death of Eleanor's father when she was in her early teens. In the wake of her own mother's death, Eleanor was finally free to pursue her own intimacy needs. Her choice of an established couple, perhaps because it allowed her the possibility of being part of an intimate relationship whilst also being separate from it, might not have been as possible within the tighter confines of a dyadic couple relationship. Similarly, Lisa and Andrew may also unconsciously have chosen Eleanor to mediate something for them related to the sharing of psychic space within the confines of their long-term dyadic relationship. The unconscious relational fit for all three partners might therefore be one of finding a comfortable space within the 'throuple' to accommodate their respective psychological spatial needs. Without the space to think, perhaps with a therapist who helped Eleanor hold the specific tensions of the poly relationship she was in, Eleanor may well have retreated. Instead, she was helped to stay in and face the complexities of her relationship with Lisa and Andrew and their relationship with her — an example of a developmental process. During the work, we also considered whether all three partners might benefit from attending together, but Eleanor was reluctant to consider this, as she believed that the insecurities and anxieties were all hers. Thankfully, in thinking about the projective system, this belief has now shifted, to the extent that she can see more clearly the inner workings of Lisa and Andrew's relationship and the part she plays for them and them for her.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to challenge the dominance of dyadic couple relationships in the theory and practice of couple psychotherapy, by considering other relationship configurations, namely, those in open relationships and those who embrace polyamorous. However, this challenge occasions another task, that of considering how theory relating to the functioning of couple relationships come to be thought about and applied to those in non-exclusive relationships. Although I accept that it is not the job

of the couple psychotherapist to impose their own preferred models of relating when working with couples, I still think that we need to consider how a therapist holding a belief in the greater functionality of those in exclusive couple relationships might, through the transference and countertransference dynamics of the work, affect the nature of the therapeutic encounter. In addition, there is also the question of the therapist's own openness to working with more than two partners at any one time and, perhaps, the question of how they might think about and manage dual relationships, i.e., the partner in one couple being seen in parallel with a partner from another couple. Ultimately, as for all of us working with difference, it is felt to be helpful for therapists to self-examine and to keep an eye on their approach, and this seems equally important for couple therapists working with those in non-exclusive relationships, even if they rarely encounter these clients in their practice.

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