

**‘No expectations’:**

**Straight men’s sexual and moral identity making in non-monogamous dating**

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**The article has been published in *Sexualities*:**

**<https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718779946>**

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## **Abstract**

This paper juxtaposes the discursive strategies of two groups of heterosexual men in the context of non-monogamous internet-mediated dating in Belgium, notably men who are open about their extra-dyadic sexual practices and 'cheating' men. The analysis shows that regardless of the men's use of openness or discretion to construct narratives of sexual identity, morality and care, their accounts seem to be deeply intertwined with monogamist and gendered ideas on sex, care and commitment, which serves to define a largely uncaring and consumeristic dating culture. The paper argues that attentiveness to power inequalities should be the main focus of 'ethical' non-monogamy.

**Keywords:** non-monogamy, internet dating, masculinity, openness, gender inequalities

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#### **Introduction**

Feminist theorists have pointed out that monogamy as an institution has usually not served women’s best interests, but, on the contrary, has functioned to make women contribute to the capitalist reproduction and sustenance of the workforce without being paid. Discourses of romantic love as the exclusive (physical and emotional) commitment to one person, have served to make women accept their subordination and see their unpaid labour in the private sphere as something that is done naturally and out of love (Rich, 1995; Jackson, 2006; Illouz, 2013; Robinson, 1997; Giddens, 2013/1992). However, while feminist scholars have eloquently documented the role of romantic love and monogamous marriage in the capitalist oppression of women (see also: Federici, 2004), the ambivalent position of non-monogamous practices with regard to the cultural dynamics of neoliberal ‘emotional capitalism’ (Illouz, 2015/2007) is poorly understood.

Critics of ‘monogamism’ have turned their attention to non-monogamous practices as potential sites of political contestation and anti-hegemonic resistance in the personal sphere. Some critical perspectives notwithstanding (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2014; Horvat, 2016; Willey, 2016), most studies draw a rather optimistic picture of ‘open’ forms of non-monogamy and polyamory in particular, as having the potential to contribute to more egalitarian intimate relationships (e.g. Robinson, 1997; Sheff, 2005; Ritchie and Barker, 2006; Shannon and Willis, 2010). The discourse of subculture groups who advocate for consensual non-monogamous lifestyles and of polyamory self-help guides (Anapol, 2010; e.g. Veaux and Rickert, 2014) also tends to foreground open non-monogamous lifestyles as having

counterhegemonic and, above all, ethical and emancipatory qualities. Relatively little attention so far is given to the ways in which these lifestyles reproduce gendered, classed and other power inequalities and buy into, rather than resist neoliberal imperatives.

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on the narratives of men who engage in predominantly heterosexual non-monogamous dating and relationships, and is based on data collected through research conducted from 2015 to 2018 in Belgium. By juxtaposing the stories of men who have secret affairs with the stories of men who engage more overtly in non-monogamous interactions, the paper aims to uncover the dominant discursive frames that are actively negotiated in the men's moral reasoning and identity constructions. Building on feminist critiques of late-capitalist emotional culture (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 1997; Illouz, 2015/2007), the paper also questions the (moral) assumptions that structure the ways in which non-monogamy is usually discussed in public discourse and in research. It aims to question the persistent moral stratification of non-monogamous practices structured by an ideology of openness, and aims to shift attention to the intersectional inequalities and power dynamics that might get reproduced in a context in which dominant relationship rules are being rejected and reinvented. The paper argues that attentiveness to power relationships should be the main focus of ethical non-monogamy.

The paper's specific focus on dating sites leaves out of the picture other non-monogamous interactions and relationships that might occur through other means. Dating site users can choose the dating site that fits their needs and imagery, but, conversely, the dating site context also structures users' interactions and influences the way in which their imagery unfolds. Many studies have documented how the dating sites' market place context inevitably influences the way in which people interact with one another and tends to condition people

to objectify potential partners as easily replaceable products (as in a human supermarket so to speak) (Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2015/2007; Kaufmann, 2012). The specific context of internet dating will definitely make more salient certain aspects of current day dating culture (such as consumerist objectification) while obscuring others. It is therefore clear that this paper by no means claims to cover the experiences of all men who engage in non-monogamous practices and relationships, nor does it claim to provide the only possible account of internet-mediated dating. Nevertheless, the narrative analysis of the stories that I collected, helps to identify broadly held ideologies that informed them. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that internet mediated dating has become commonly accepted for meeting partners in general (see also: Kaufmann, 2012), and—as my observations in non-monogamy advocacy groups show—is widely used by people who wish to pursue ethically non-monogamous lifestyles in particular. Many people in my study indicated that due to the taboo that still persists regarding non-monogamy, they consider internet dating as the safest way to search for partners. It seems inevitable that this ubiquity of internet dating among non-monogamous folks influences the way sex and relationships are imagined within these communities more broadly.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I discuss my methodology, and give an overview of the dating sites in which I conducted participant observation. Then two sections are presented in which I discuss my findings. First, I show how the men's narratives are marked by various strategies of moral self-construction, in which not only openness, which in public discourse is generally praised as inherently morally worthy, but also secrecy and discretion, can operate as technologies of commitment and care. Second, I describe the tensions between the men's formation of caring masculinities and non-monogamous dating culture that seems to prioritize a rather un-caring detached and sex-oriented dating style.

## Methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on a study concerned with everyday negotiation of ideologies of exclusivity in intimate relationships, conducted in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium and Brussels. The study builds on feminist radical theories of (hetero)sexuality that aim to identify, describe, explain and denounce injustice and sexual oppression (Rubin, 1998/1984; Jackson, 1999) and anti-essentialist perspectives that see femininity and masculinity not as permanent or natural, but as discursively produced and reproduced through social interaction and negotiation and bound up with power structures (Edley, 2001; Connell, 2005). The data were collected through multi-method ethnographic research, including internet ethnographic research. This 'netnography' (Wilson and Peterson, 2002; Hine, 2005; Kozinets, 2009) entailed active participation in four dating sites as a heterosexual woman in her forties. This method enabled me to have a large number of conversations through chat and email, typically with men in their thirties to fifties, in some cases followed by in-person meetings and conversations. My specific positionality made it more difficult to get in conversation with women, also because they are already overwhelmed by messages as a result of their relative underrepresentation in these websites. To be able to hear their experiences, I complemented internet ethnographic research with in-depth interviews with mostly women in non-monogamous relationships (12 interviews in total), informal conversations with both men and women during extensive participant observation in the advocacy group *Polyamory Belgium* and textual analysis of the dating site profile texts and posts and discussions in two Facebook groups (notably *Polyamory Belgium* and *Ethisch Nonmonogaam*). In addition, my own lived experiences as a heterosexual woman with a non-monogamous lifestyle have been extremely important in the research process (for detailed description of my methodology and ethics, see De Graeve, forthcoming). The paper uses a

narrative approach (McCormack, 2004; Plummer, 2002) to explore the men's understandings of their identity and experiences while simultaneously looking to the wider social and cultural resources on which they draw. It looks at the men's narratives as produced in interaction with the participant-researcher and shaped by the specific context of the dating sites.

The four dating sites are Victoria Milan (VM), Second Love (SL), OKCupid (OKC) and PolyamoryMatch (PAM). VM and SL are both paying dating sites specialized in offering the practical tools to facilitate secret affairs and hook-ups, their marketing and slogans implicated in the hegemonic model of cheating as a technology of upholding the monogamous long-term couple. Both companies have an international scope, yet provide localized websites, offering their interface in local languages (Dutch or French in the Belgian branch of VM, Dutch in the Dutch/Flemish branch of SL). In both VM and SL the number of men is significantly higher than the number of women, which seems to create an atmosphere in which stereotypically gendered seduction scripts get reproduced (see e.g. Beasley et al., 2012): men take the initiative (men 'hunt'), and women merely respond to (or ignore) men's proposals. OKC and PAM are both dating sites that make appeal to more alternative life and/or relationship models and the gender ratio in these dating sites seems to be a bit less skewed. Both websites were brought up by participants during my ethnographic research in polyamory support groups as tools for getting to know like-minded people and potential partners. OKC has a relatively young user base, with a median age of 29 (Rudder, 2014), which is lower compared to most dating sites, and particularly lower compared to VM and SL, which are mainly used by people in their thirties to fifties. OKC is an American-based, internationally operating dating site, facilitating both monogamous and non-monogamous dating. PAM is a small dating site for Dutch-speaking people in the Netherlands and Flanders who specifically seek polyamorous relationships. Both websites offer free and paid membership, each with different options and

abilities to interact with other users. Due to OKC's elaborate gender, sexuality and relationship status options, it tends to attract people with somehow liberal and non-traditional lifestyles and views on relationships and sexuality. Users have access to profiles of people of all over the world, but search options allow to browse based on specific limitations. I limited my search to men in their thirties to fifties (the same age group that is most active in VM and SL), living in Belgium and open to non-monogamous dating with women. The resulting pool contained predominantly white, educated men, yet not necessarily native Belgians. While they were all in search for non-monogamous dating, the type of interactions they seem to be searching for were quite divergent. As during the several months I had a profile on PAM, I did not manage to get into meaningful conversation with other users, my research in this website was limited to reading website and profile texts.

### **Moral Identity-Making**

In this section, I aim to look at the moral components in the accounts with which the men in this study presented themselves. By conducting a nuanced reading of their discursive strategies, I aim to show how they navigated social norms, societal values and expectations in presenting their sexual and love relationships and desires. Showing how in their accounts not only openness but also secrecy and discretion tended to function as technologies of commitment and care, I aim to make some reservations about commonly used categorizations of non-monogamous practices. The men's differential constructions of 'caring' masculinities show that accounts of non-monogamy that praise openness as a moral accomplishment and secrecy as necessarily morally corrupt, might be too simplistic.

The men in consensually non-monogamous relationships typically foregrounded being non-monogamous as an important part of their sexual identity. Although the degree of being 'out



of the closet’ differed among the respondents, being honest with their intimate partners and having obtained consent for sexual activities by all partners involved was usually pointed out by this group of men as a quintessential feature of their sexual and relational experience. Cheating was generally talked about disapprovingly by the respondents, many also indicated that they would never want to have sex or a relationship with people who cheat on their partners.

Only a minority of the men in my study who identified as openly non-monogamous indicated to be in search for strong emotional bonds with women. Most of them indicated to seek extra-dyadic sex and those open to relationships tended to emphasize the limits of their emotional investment. Filip, a man in his forties in a married open relationship with children, for instance, described his desires as follows:

‘What I would want to find is an “easy love”: someone I can cherish (in all senses of the word) without this bringing about big obligations’.

Discourses of self-actualization and maximizing personal fulfilment were typically combined with discourses that consistently link openness and honesty with moral virtue. This reading of ‘open’ non-monogamy as morally praiseworthy was made most explicit in PAM.

Prioritizing honesty over secrecy and the emotional-spiritual over the physical—the website for instance gives its (female) users the advice to ‘open your heart first, then your legs’—the kind of dating proposed by PAM is implicitly depicted as a morally superior kind of dating.

This moral superiority is established primarily in relation to cheating and to sexual interactions that are not necessarily grounded in love, but implicitly also in relation to monogamous dating, which is purportedly the domain of close-minded people.

The positive appraisal of 'openness' and 'honesty' is in line with widely shared views in Western popular discourse in general, and discourses on intimacy, sex and relationships in particular. The prevailing ideology of openness turns being overt and open with one's partner about one's intimate life into a moral obligation. Being covert or secretive about certain (e.g. socially controversial) practices or thoughts and not revealing them to one's intimate partner(s) in particular, is generally considered reprehensible and harmful. Openness is seen as the key to relational bliss and intimate disclosures as the core of good communication, avoidance and secrets as the dark sides of personal and relational health (Spitzberg and Cupach, 2009). It is also a relationship philosophy of open communication and honesty that in handbooks on non-monogamous practices is often labelled as 'ethical' (Easton and Liszt, 1997; Veaux and Rickert, 2014) or 'responsible' (Anapol, 2010), implying that other forms of non-monogamy are 'unethical' or 'irresponsible'.

Liberal notions of sexuality as an essential identity and the struggles for intimate citizenship and sexual rights that accompany them (Plummer, 2001; Plummer, 2002) have resulted in the general denouncement of strategies that navigate hegemonic notions of sexuality and relationality in less vocal ways. Recent critical analyses of the strategies of people who engage in non-normative sexualities in non-Western societies (e.g. Dankwa, 2009; Tamale, 2006) can be inspirational here. These studies show how the narrative of coming out of the closet about one's engagement in certain sexual practices, is not necessarily helpful in all contexts. Spronk (2016), for instance, describes how in the relationship and sexuality model prioritized in the Ghanaian context same sex practices are implicitly tolerated as long as they remain hidden. She argues that this 'economy of silence' is not necessarily stifling for same sex practitioners, yet allows them to navigate the social spaces in a productive way.

The economy of silence that is built around cheating bears similarities to the economy of silence Spronk describes. The ideology of monogamous romance that prevails in society offers the context in which non-monogamous practices are not considered such an urgent moral question nor an identity issue as long as they remain unspoken and hidden. Similar to the young British and US male university students in Anderson's study (2012) the men in my study who engage in cheating tended to keep intact their identities as monogamous and not to consider non-monogamy to be an important part of their sexual and relational identity.

In spite of an increasingly sexualized culture in the West, in which a variety of sexual preferences are tolerated and the object of identity politics, non-monogamy still remains highly stigmatized (e.g. Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Shernoff, 2006). The possibilities and willingness of turning one's preference for non-monogamy into a matter of identity politics vary across individuals and socio-cultural milieus. Critics have pointed to the sexist, racist and classist ideologies of morality and respectability that tend to expose to graver stigmatization women, working class people and non-white people assuming non-monogamous identities (Haritaworn et al., 2006; Klesse, 2014; Robinson, 1997). In other words, people have differential agency and opportunities of being 'out of the closet' about their non-monogamous practices and preferences (even with intimate partners). Moreover, the narratives of the 'cheating' men in my study show that also men in largely privileged positions might not be willing to upset the status quo nor to jeopardize their respectability and tend to revert to strategies of submission and silence.

Many of the 'cheating' men in my study emphasized that hiding sexualized encounters with other women from their partner was informed by the wish not to hurt their partner, and, closely related, the wish to keep things the way they are. Geert, for instance, a married

heterosexual man in his forties with three children, explained why he had signed up for VM as follows:

‘My relationship is relatively okay. Pretty happy, yet I miss something. Five years ago I fell in love with a colleague. I had been telling myself not to fall in love with her. But it happened anyway, and it was mutual. It was pretty intense, on many levels. It lasted for three years. It was an impossible love because of the children and all that. Long story. Anyway, we managed, with a lot of pain, to put a stop to it, come to terms with it. My wife knows, or at least part of what happened. To cut a long story short, things have never been the same since. I had tasted, felt something, something I miss since then. (...) Back then I was willing to leave my family. My children were still young. Now, I wouldn’t do it anymore. I feel my children need me now. There needs to be a daddy, structure, a helping hand, a man. The woman I had the relationship with was also willing to leave her family, but in the end she felt too guilty. (...) And now, when I look back, I think it has been a good decision.’

Geert told me that he and the woman stopped seeing each other, remained within their families, and that he now was having sexual encounters and sexualized chats through VM with different women and kept this a secret from his wife. He also told me that he took care not to fall in the trap of falling in love again, not allowing himself to develop other than sexual feelings for the women he meets. Both in describing the relationship with his colleague, as in talking about his current secret affairs, he kept intact a monogamous identity (see also Anderson, 2012). In the former, he used the narrative of being torn between two women, a narrative that is very popular in romantic imagery and presupposes the necessity of eventually having to choose. He kept a monogamous identity in the sense that he reserved his romantic

feelings to his colleague, while his obligations as a family man and a father made him decide to stay with his wife. His story fluently blends discourses of promiscuous male sexuality free of emotional attachment with traditional masculinity roles (the man as the cornerstone of the family, the disciplinarian father). He constructs the monogamous biological nuclear family as the only framework in which this traditional role can be played—as he seemed to have dismissed any alternative scenario as a recipe for chaos and conflict that would harm the wellbeing of his (and his colleague's) children.

Thomas, a married man in his late thirties with two children, told me that his wife, who suffered from severe depression, had literally said to him that if he ever had an extramarital affair, she would kill herself. This threat did not refrain him from having a secret relationship with a much younger woman for about a year, a relationship he ended as soon as the young woman asked him to leave his wife. Since then, he has had a couple of casual affairs with women through VM. He stated:

'I believe polyamory is possible. Yet my wife is absolutely not open to it. So I must do it secretly, which is difficult. But I've felt that having relationships (sexual or not) with other women makes me feel a lot more relaxed and happy.'

He constructed having affairs as necessary for his own wellbeing, as it enables him to cope with the difficult situation of living with a person who is depressed. He added that as the secret affairs make him happy, they indirectly turn him into a better husband and father, and thus also benefit his wife and family. In the way he framed his secret affairs, discretion and tact are turned into technologies of care and commitment in light of contextual constraints that prevent him from being open about his sexual and relationship desires.

By accounting for their actions and managing their identities, the men in both narratives differently negotiate the regulatory conceptions of a 'caring' masculinity, and openness and discretion are part of two different strategies of navigating the monogamist frameworks that structure intimate life. While the former mainly borrows from a liberal language of sexual identity politics and 'coming out' and 'disclosing intimacy' (Jamieson, 2005/1998), the latter is grounded in an economy of silence and in more traditional conceptions of sexual relationships and the family. The former is implicated in liberal ideals of a free, rational unified and coherent individual that construct sexual practices as constitutive of identity and secrets as a betrayal not only of the trust of others but also of one's inner self ('cheaters' were often called two-faced or hypocritical). Within this discourse, non-monogamy tends to some of the men reported to feel guilty or to feel some level of self-contempt be seen as a sexual orientation that puts the individual in an essential conflict with the system. The latter is a strategy that complies with the norm of monogamous intimate relationships whereby a man can uncouple the fact of his behaviour from the way he identifies himself. In other words he feels he can act in one way, such as having extramarital sex, while identifying as monogamous to the outside world. Although about their desires and actions, they at the same time tended to justify these actions by blending traditional concepts of male sexuality with traditional conceptions of 'caring' masculinity. Within these narratives, non-monogamous practices do not pose a threat to the men's personhood nor to the monogamous family, as long as they are kept within certain boundaries. While within a logic of openness, men construct being open and honest with their partner(s) as an essential part of what it means to be a 'good' and 'caring' man, within a logic of silence, the men's concern with discretion and not crossing certain boundaries is crucial in their construction of 'caring' masculinity.

### **Dilemmatic masculinities**

In the previous section, I pointed to the strategies of care and commitment that can be found in the narratives of both the men who were active on the dating sites secretly or with the consent of their partners. Using a rhetoric of discretion or openness respectively, the men constructed narratives that articulate their identity as a caring partner and a morally good person. In this section, I describe to what extent the men's formation of caring masculinities is in tension with their accounts of a non-monogamous male sexual identity. I look at the complex, contradictory and competing claims and dilemmas in the men's discursive constructions of non-monogamous masculinity (see: Edley, 2001). I aim to show that the

prevalent discourse in both groups seem to be involved in reproducing the hegemonic in various ways, also the discourse of those men who position themselves through narratives of ethical non-monogamous practice and interpersonal equity.

‘I listen to the call of my soul and my desires and I believe in the freedom to be yourself. I’m in search for women for friendships or casual encounters, yet without any strings attached. I desire for free love, though believe love has nothing to do with loyalty or obligations. True love is not dependent on how the other affects you, true love is a state of being. I’m committed to my girlfriend yet I’m also open to sexuality with other women. My girlfriend knows and I try to be a hundred percent open person.’

This is a quote from the OKC profile text written by Nico, a man in his late thirties. He explicitly identified as non-polyamorous, designating the relationship with his girlfriend as emotionally exclusive. In spite of his (ambiguous) use of a language of love when addressing potential new partners, love or strong emotional commitment is not something these partners can expect. While his reference to love and new age spiritual practice and his self-definition as a ‘hundred percent open person’, seem to point to resistance to hegemonic masculinity, his emphasis on individualism, autonomy and self-actualization seems to function to re-align himself to the dominant masculine ideal.

As became clear in the previous section, many of the men, both men who had secret affairs and men in open relationships, expressed a strong willingness to maintaining the emotional relationships with their ‘primary’ partner and pointed to their strategies of separating sex from feelings as a way not to jeopardize these close connections. Nico told me that his girlfriend was the only one who ‘gets the real commitment’. Through these narratives, Nico and other men positioned themselves with caring masculinities in which emotional

engagement and attachment figured prominently, though drew on hegemonic relationship ideals that situate responsibilities and care exclusively within the romantic couple relationship.

‘No strings attached’, ‘sex without expectations’ or ‘share the fun, not the trouble’ were often used phrases with which the men I talked to in the dating sites—both the men who were searching for secret affairs and the men who searched for consensual non-monogamous interactions—aimed to articulate their longing for physical pleasure detached from (intense) emotional labour or obligations. The rhetoric of ‘no expectations’ was typically a shorthand for expressing expectations for intimate interactions that allow only a well-delineated range of emotions—such as sexual arousal and sexual desire—and construct as undesirable and inappropriate any other emotions that these interactions might bring about. However, this rhetoric did not exclude a different scenario. In the men’s narratives I often found a lingering desire for a strong physical and/or emotional ‘click’ (as it is usually called in dating culture) that might make possible a more long-term engagement. Feeling ‘butterflies’ was often described by the men as a condition for wanting to see again a person they had dated. This narrative blends romantic love-on-first-sight discourses (that assume that sexual and emotional attraction is something that happens instantly and is the result of magical destiny) into discourses of detached sex-oriented sexuality, keeping up the promise of an encounter that surpasses the ‘fuck-and-dump’ scenario, yet its realization entirely beyond one’s control (for critiques of romantic love see: hooks, 2001).

However, some men also told me to be dissatisfied by the lack of emotional connection that characterizes dating culture. Patrick, a man in his mid-fifties, in an unmarried cohabiting



relationship with one child, for instance, described his secret sexual affairs with other women as often sexually satisfying yet lacking concern:

'Yes, I had a couple of sexually satisfying dates. I met the women more often, had sex with them, emailed with them, talked through *WhatsApp*. With some I still do. But emotionally and humanely, it remains like this: almost but not quite. We have some interest in each other, but not too much. We hope the other is happy, but not too much, we try to be open, but not too much. And these women and I, we know that the slightest ripple in the other person's life will cause the end of the relationship. It makes it a dead-end situation, and a bit lonely. We share the fun not the trouble (*de lusten delen, niet de lasten*), as it is nicely phrased in adultery language. But sometimes I *do* want to share some existential issues. Not during the sex, but after. The feeling to share something essential with a woman makes a lot better sex I think.'

The limited possibilities for emotional connection the men described, and the ambiguous discourses that oscillated between a longing for emotional detachment and a longing for love and connection, is in line with what Kaufmann (2012) describes in his study of online dating among French single men and women. He points to the dilemmas that have been produced by the increasing pervasiveness of sexuality in Western societies and the 'prevailing idea that all desires can be satisfied in the vast online hypermarket where individual pleasure has nothing to do with emotional commitment' (165). The idea that sex can be just another leisure activity in a 'world that is based on the wretched "calculating individual" model' (165) clashes, according to Kaufmann, with people's need for comfort and recognition.

Although since the turn of the century in particular, the 'no expectations' narratives are, increasingly used by both men and women, the narrative of the men in my study show that

men and women got positioned differently in the dating game. The men, for instance, not seldom made reference to widely circulating interpretations (in public discourse but also in research, see e.g. Anderson, 2012) that explain men's non-monogamous practices in terms of biological-cultural incongruence. Naturalizing stories were widespread in the accounts of men who adhered to more traditional relationship values, though they also invaded the counter-discourses of the men in my study who explored ethically non-monogamous lifestyles. Kurt, a man in his late twenties, for instance, wrote in a Facebook discussion:

'Open relationship is the form of relationship that suits me best. Because I believe in love, because I believe in polyamory and because I believe the need for men to spread their seeds as widely as possible is in their DNA'.

These 'male sexual drive' discourses (Hollway, 1984) cast men's purportedly 'naturally' insatiable sexual needs as in conflict with cultural expectations. This imagery tends to explain monogamy as a cultural mechanism that is used for disciplining men's sexual desire and providing women with the protection and emotional commitment they—because of their reproductive capacity—'naturally' need. The men's rhetorical strategies often tapped into hegemonic views of masculine sexuality as detached, self-focused and autonomous, and views of women as emotionally needy and clingy. Within this interpretative framework, promiscuous sexuality and a desire for freedom are considered as inherently masculine traits. Commitment and emotional labour, conversely, are seen as things women typically *want* from men. Any assertiveness or generosity from women's side then easily gets interpreted as signs of women's purported possessive nature.

This can be exemplified by the men's use of popular madwoman tropes, tropes that start from the idea that women's irrational nature and unreasonable expectations can easily turn them

into hysterical stalkers who make men's life a hell. Tom, for instance, a married man in his thirties with children, recalled an anecdote of a secret sexual encounter with a woman who in his opinion acted inappropriately.

'I had a one nightstand through VM...She seemed very attractive on the computer screen, but in real life, and especially in bed, she was just not nice. But to be honest, when as a man you have started and you have a hard-on, then it doesn't matter if you like her or not, then nature made you in such a way that you just finish it and be polite enough not to run away with your clothes under your arm. (...) But then she started to stalk me on Facebook after I had honestly told her that there wouldn't be a second time. And I can tell you, you really don't want this kind of nonsense when you have a double life.'

Many of the men in my study brought up this kind of stories, both the men (like Tom) who tended to align themselves with hegemonic masculine ideals and the men who drew on more alternative masculinities. Olivier for instance, a single men in his late thirties who embraced a non-conformist 'bi-curious' and polyamorous masculinity, told me a similar story of a sexual encounter that was disappointing for him. He told me that when the woman involved stood at his door a couple of days later and wanted to talk, this felt 'like stalking'. These type of anecdotes seem to function to make clear to female interlocutors what is expected from them. Moreover, by dramatizing the behaviour of women who do not understand the rules, the men warn their interlocutors (in my study: me) that if they do not comply with the rules, their behaviour will be considered harassment. Doing so, men seemed to symbolically re-enact gendered stereotypes and the underlying imbalanced power relations. The men's stories reproduce the stereotypes of detached male and attachment-driven female sexuality,

yet at the same time set the rules in which women are allowed to operate. What these stories seem to want to communicate is that women are expected to adjust to the stereotypically male sexuality (as nature made them that way) and not the other way around.

While the men tended to see the rules of the game as somehow 'natural' to them—as detached sexuality fits within the ideal of hegemonic masculinity—the rules were considered as inherently alien to women's nature. Within this line of thinking, women's sexuality, and the irrational feelings and longing for attachment that are believed to go with it, are seen as a threat to the 'masculine' longing for freedom and independence and therefore in need of men's control and containment. I believe that this stereotypically gendered imagery is another important element in the ways in which in the context of non-monogamous dating, the exploration of connections between men and women beyond the traditional scripts of the couple relationship and beyond imageries of detached sexuality, is often blocked.

## **Conclusion**

Both the narratives of 'cheating' and the narratives of open non-monogamy tended to draw upon stereotypically masculine sexual scripts that construct men's needs for promiscuous sex as 'natural' while explaining their needs for care and commitment in cultural terms. Regardless whether they espoused an ideology of openness or an ideology of discretion to construct themselves as caring and committed partners, the moral reasoning used by many of the men was deeply intertwined with monogamist and gendered ideas on care and commitment, which interestingly enough were employed to normalize a largely uncaring and consumeristic attitude towards their dating partners. The normalization of 'sex without expectations'—and the inherent equation of the expectation of separating sex from emotions with no expectations at all—is not likely to eliminate the gendered power inequalities

structuring intimate relationships nor does it leave men or women who are in search for other forms of non-monogamy much room for negotiation.

While since the 1960s onwards, women have received greater access to sexual promiscuity without necessarily being outlawed, the extent to which this access equates sexual liberation has been the object of feminist debate. While radical feminists talked about 'the myth of sexual liberation' that obscures how unequal power relations between men and women have remained intact, libertarian feminists have stressed the increased sexual empowerment of women (see e.g. Willis, 1984). I believe, in line with what Ferguson (1984: 112) argues, that 'contemporary sexual practices are characterized both by dominant/submissive power relations and by potential for liberation'. The narratives of (at least some of) the men in my study testify of this potential for reinvention, and of a willingness to build equitable and caring relationships with women. However, the narratives—including those narratives that make claims to anti-hegemonic and ethically non-monogamous identities—show how stereotypical views on men's and women's sexuality severely limit the potential for radically reinventing these relationships and hamper possibilities for crafting relationships that might be more satisfactory for both men and women. A discourse that blends fantasies of free sexuality with an insistence on detachment and independence is not necessarily a challenge to the economic model of consumerism and neoliberal individualism nor to traditional relationship models. This prevailing 'counter-hegemonic' view of free sexuality and the centrality of sex and/or sexual romance in Western imagery of relationships and families more general is increasingly criticized and identified as hampering the development of alternative formulations that might centralize love (Kaufmann, 2012; Horvat, 2016; hooks, 2001) or other forms of attachment (Wilkinson, 2012; Willey, 2016).

Moreover, the prevalent discourse that exalts 'open' non-monogamy as inherently ethical (as long one is open about one's intentions and actions it must be good), yet ignores the ways in which gendered power dynamics get reproduced in the process of drafting new types of relationships, not necessarily poses a challenge to gender inequalities and patriarchal relationship values. I therefore believe that without an increased sensitivity to power mechanisms, the production of 'persuasive new imaginary positions' (Wetherell and Edley, 1999: 29) in the construction of sexuality and relationships will be impossible. From a feminist revolutionary perspective, 'ethical' non-monogamy will be nothing else than a 'failed reinvention of love' (Horvat, 2016: 29) when this sensitivity is not at the centre of our moral concerns.

### **Notes**

1. Names of respondents are fictitious in order to maintain anonymity. Chat or interview excerpts are translated from Dutch by the author.

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