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Understanding levers of kinship changes and variations in contemporary northern societies: An analytic and comparative examination of emergent non-monogamous family patterns.

A PhD project of Pierre-Yves Wauthier

pywauthier@gmail.com

Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches sur les Familles et les Sexualités (UCLouvain — Belgium)

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Abstract:

Several works in sociology and social anthropology show that kinship practices are impacted by material and immaterial societal changes at a larger scale. The exact nature of the link between kinship practices and larger societal changes remains unclear.

Western societies today are showing emerging kinship phenomena. Single mothers choose to raise children without a partner; other adults are consensually joining together with multiple partners simultaneously to variably involve them in parenthood duties. To understand what structures intergenerational solidarities, residence, feeling of attachment and sexuality today, this project aims to compare traditional and marginal kinship systems practiced in French-speaking Europe, focusing on emerging non-monogamous kinship practices which seem to lean on modern values, technologies and economy.

Current situation: sociodemographic data and new family occurrences

For the five last decades, in Western Europe, demographic studies have shown radical changes in family and conjugal matters. Europeans marry today around twice as less than 50 years ago and they divorce twice to three times more. Some big cities show divorce rates very close to marriage rates. The average fertility of European women has been decreasing below the threshold of societies' reproduction. The amount of birth outside marriage progressively reaches the amount of birth inside marriage.

Family's life paths correspond less and less to a standard pattern. For instance, sociologist E. Widmer [2010] distinguishes several types of conjugality; each of them characterised by different ways to live the conjugal dynamic and to relate with the outer surrounding. Conjugal life paths are occurring following ideological affinities and more or less variable material context.

A quick look at the recent history of family and sexuality show that the purpose of being in a relationship seem to be different today than one or two generations ago. The English notions of *pure relationship* [A. Giddens: 1992] or *liquid love* [Z. Bauman: 2003] are (discussed) signs of these transformations. The loving feeling now seems to be the base of the couple and its duration. And the possibilities to build one's own identity and to enrich and fulfil life within the dyad seem to ensure the continued existence of the couple [de Singly: 2011].

Besides, there is today a plethora of advices and norms regarding sexuality that invite individuals to (re)define the scripts of their own sexuality [N. Bajos & M. Bozon: 2008].

Intimate life can now be experienced, maintained and developed partly or fully on line. Meaning that what is considered as intimate practice today can be realized through the internet, as media linking real persons [J. Marquet & Ch. Janssen: 2009], or can be realized with and/or through an on line avatar [T. Boellstorff: 2008].

According to sociologist Kaufmann [2010], contemporary women claim to access sexuality the same way men do. Together with the every day use of Internet, it leads to invert the process of making a couple. The traditional sequence *dating before having sexual intercourse* is being swapped to *having sexual intercourses first* (with unknown individuals found on line) *then perhaps being a relationship*.

By right, the legitimate sexual intercourse no longer occurs inside marriage but inside mutual consent. Most western countries have decriminalized adultery; and have criminalized intercourse without consent inside marriage.

According to the Belgian law-analyst J. Fierens [2011], the trend to contractualize relationships might even lead to the end of monogamy.

Reproduction does not seem to be the purpose of the couple anymore. However, the filiation axis of kinship remains rather strong. The child is no longer protected by the

concept of “paternal power” but protected by the concept of “parental responsibility”, affecting variably the genitors and the raiser parents.

As a matter of fact, the laws are both inherited from the mentality of previous generations and following new trends in the public opinion. The legislative legacy of the different countries, together with their subsequent state’s institutions, is providing a framework regulating matters such as sexuality, housing, filiation made for family patterns such as the nuclear family, the blended family, or same sex parenting.

Besides those three family patterns, some rather creative individuals are exploring alternative ways to live their affective and sexual lives while raising children (or not). The media and a few sociologists are pointing out two emerging figures in the contemporary landscape of family practices. The first figure is the *single mothers by choice* [R. Hertz: 2006] [V. Mannis: 1999], corresponding to women choosing to raise one or several children by themselves, without a partner. She’s not married, therefore that figure does not match the monogamous/polygamous ethnological framework. Nevertheless, she might share an accommodation, mobilize institutions, professionals or relatives to assist her in her parental duties, she might be involved in a “pure relationship” with a significant other not related to the children, or she might experience occasional or regular sexual intercours with one or more partner(s).

The second recent figure is the *polyamorous parent* [E. Sheff: 2014] [M. Barker & D. Langdridge: 2010]. The vernacular expression “polyamory” describes contemporary western open affective relationships networks where individuals bond with more than one adult; all the partners are aware of the others and are consenting to the affective network. Among people practicing “polyamory” netloving, some of them are parenting. So called “polyparents” run “polyfamilies”. That corresponds to parenting individuals maintaining an open network of partners to share what is traditionally due to the nuclear family in the West (such as care towards partners, care towards children, and management of practical domestic life). Technically, we cannot call it “polygamy,” since they are not married (to marry more than one is not legal in most western countries that also practice polyamory), since each partner may be variably involved within the different family matters and since each partner is free to maintain his/her own network of partners in terms of feeling of attachment or sexual activities.

Are *single mothers by choice* and are *polyparents* forming the core of something to be called “a family”? In this work, I tend to use etic expressions such as ‘uni-parent’ and ‘multi-parent’ to describe those non-monogamous individuals raising children.

Psychosociological approaches focus on the individuals’ (parent or children) points of view, tending to describe today’s family as a variable *network* of blood and bond (affinity) ties. Regardless of what defines the family today, this work aims to describe and compare what different people do within the area traditionally known as “the family”. Here we focus on such matters as mutual care and assistance in parenting, housing, affectivity and sexuality.

Teleology and description of the project

Couples life paths are showing more and more diversity. Family life paths are showing more and more configurations and patterns. It's not common in anthropology to witness mutations within the kinship practices of a given society. We see today's multiplication of family and kinship patterns as an opportunity to understand levers of change in western contemporary "family" practices. And a comparative approach must be enlightening to understand levers of kinship changes in general.

On one hand, it is sociologically and ethnologically recognised that ways to "make families" are depending on social and cultural heritage, in there symbolic (mental) and material (economy, technology) aspects. On the other hand, one can empirically observe that new kinds of conjugal and family practices are emerging today. After a separation, some tend to reshape or maintain the traditional family pattern. Others are trying new ways to "make families". So called "non monogamous" practices are questioning the traditional kinship model based on the nuclear family.

In order to achieve a comparative work, and in order to avoid the locking concept of "family", this work considers it as an emic expression. The contemporary "nuclear family" is not a human universal; it's a social occurrence to be placed in a sociohistorical context. We don't want to consider emergent phenomena such *single mother by choice* or *polyfamilies* to be the future of western kinship practices. Neither do we want to assume that the traditional western nuclear family will be the core of western future kinship patterns. But we can describe and compare basic human kinship behaviours. The concepts of significant attachment bonds, regulated sexual practices, residence (shelter) and care for offspring are human universals. And to understand what does change today, we want to register and analyse how those human universals articulates nowadays to the material and immaterial social environment.

Such a research in social sciences appears to us to be at the crossroad of sociology and ethnology. That is why we mobilize both sociological and ethnological theoretical background.

According to the French anthropologist Maurice Godelier's, one can unfolds kinship studies into six subtopics:

1. The *Filiation and descent* topic explores how individuals of different cultures identify themselves in terms of generation. For instance, it questions *who is to be considered as someone sons?* in a given society and *what does it take in terms of transmission and legacy?*. Filiation types such as patrilinearity / matrilinearity describe generational transmission.
2. The *Marriage* topic tends to understand to the choice of the mate(s), its ways and its purposes. It leads to classifications such as exogamy / endogamy or polygamy / monogamy.
3. The *Residence* topic explores how and where do people live, and *who are their sharing their housing with*, and *what for...* Residential organisation can be describe as neolocality, viri/uxorilocality etc.

4. *Beliefs about reproduction* explores what does it take to make a new human being through the eyes of a given culture. For instance the making of a human being can imply the divine intervention of the increment of a soul to the newborn to explain its life. Sperm might be considered as irrelevant regarding procreation in some societies.
5. *Sexual prohibitions and regulation* describes what is allowed (or not) or what is seen as a cultural preference in terms of partner or in terms of specific practices. This matter describes who is to be considered as an appropriate sexual partner and how is it appropriate to use sex.
6. Last but not least, *terminology* describes what names are given to specific kin relations (such as uncle/nephew, grand parent/grand son, etc.).

How come kinship practices are what they are in a given society? The question has been a long time concern in anthropology. Kinship practices have been considered as a cultural construction related to ways of subsistence, sexuality and reproduction, children education, mutual care and protection of others, distribution of duties and responsibilities, etc. Actually, what kinship embraces greatly participates to the individual's identity [Barry: 2008] and to his/her survival as well. Kinship practices are interleaved to the rest of the social surrounding such as economical ways of subsistence, technologies, management of the environment, religious believes, political order, etc.

The conjugalities, sexualities and families we know in Europe are elements of the western kinship practices. Since they are interleaved to the rest of social life (such as work, religious believes or space management...) they are indeed “des faits sociaux totaux” [according to M. Mauss’s expression].

Based on field works and extensive comparative studies, anthropologist Maurice Godelier [2004] argued that no society has ever been based on kinship nor family. On the contrary, Godelier asserts that kinship practices in every society are expressions of its “political and religious” order. Collective values and representations give meanings and legitimacy to kinship practices cited above. And kinship practices participate to the reproduction of the society, not just by producing new members but also by transmitting the political and religious order to the next generation.

The project

Together with other scientists, we see the sociodemographic elements cited above as marks of the social crisis (and not just as a crisis of the family world).

Margin phenomena [Becker: 1963] and lapse of cultural crisis [Morin: 1994] question, and therefore, highlight mainstays of societies. According to Godelier’s theory, mainstays are ideological because “political” and “religious” mentalities and beliefs are telling who’s who, how to exploit and share resources, how to organise housing and how to regulate sexuality... Kinship forms are not just practiced according to certain

mentalities; kinship practices also are the *drive belt* of the political and religious order, from one generation to the other. Therefore, we see modern kinship occurrences such as family, couple, parenthood, sexuality and relationships with significant others as talkative items to reveal the mainstays of ordinary and extraordinary life in a society.

It goes without saying that studies of periods of change are therefore of great social importance.

Single mother by choices and *polyparents* are margin phenomena that one can study and mobilize to understand social transformation at a larger scale. We consider that these two practices do not occur by chance; we consider that it has been making sense for some people to build and maintain such configurations today. Understanding what leads some individuals (agents), all around the northern countries, to choose out-norm kinship practices today may help to understand the causes of the currently increased diversity and de-standardization of family forms and configurations. In other words, we're studying the *unusual* to get a better understanding of the *usual*.

Choosing to be a single mother, or openly involving more than one significant other into an affective network, are ways to take care of children, to share a shelter, to have a sexual life and to maintain attachment bonds with significant others outside the frame of the inherited monogamous family paradigm. Being a single mother or a polyparent by choice is not just about subtracting or adding partners.

Doing so, such cases are telling us what is expected from the traditional family pattern. And since the family is a keystone kinship institution related to larger world of political and religious values, it is telling us a lot about what is expected from a family today and what is being in question on the level of societal values, beliefs and economic organisation. Understanding what drives single mothers by choice or polyparents is also informing about the values (political or religious-like) such agents carry.

Single mothers by choice and polyparents do not only question the appearing taboo of monogamy, they also question the purposes of the family itself, while the family is (more than ever?) seen as a hedge in western societies. Therefore, the goal of our research is to describe and compare alternative kinship practices and their meaning (as provided by the actors). Doing so, we aim to understand how new practices articulates with changes in the social environment.

Methodology

This work is divided into four packages.

(A) The first package corresponds to gathering academic publications about (a) the impact of material and immaterial changes on kinship practices, (b) "single mother by choice" and (c) "polyfamilies", in order to produce three syntheses regarding the state of the art in social sciences on these topics.

(B) The second package corresponds to measuring the kinship network of a hundreds of individuals corresponding to the uni-parent or multi-parent patterns described above. This measure is realized following the *family network method* protocol [E. Widmer], extended to the following domain: residence, care of children and elders, significant affective attachment (sharing of emotions, moral support) and sexual partnership. Every three months during two years, the respondent lists the people significantly involved in his/her network. The first time the respondent fills in the questionnaire, he/she does it retrospectively for the last previous quarters. Diachronically, this will inform us about the plasticity of the network and the dynamic of the intensity of every relationship of every respondent during three years. Synchronically, will be able to compare networks' configurations regarding kinship matters.

(C) The third working package corresponds to inventorying material and immaterial elements mobilized today to produce and justify a non-monogamous kinship configuration. The inventory is done using several types of ethnographic data.

- Empathic interviews of at least 15 individuals corresponding to the uni-parents by choice pattern and 15 individuals corresponding to the multi-parents by choice pattern; the interviews will be based on an open question: "What did lead you to your situation and how do you do it today?".
- Field notes of observations made during participations to events (on line or on location) gathering single or polyparents by choice.
- Systematic description of residential management, measurement of spatial and time distance between significant others, inventory of technologies used in kinship practices (such as information and communication technologies, transportation, procreation/contraception...).
- Compilation of cultural artefacts produced or presented as relevant by people from the field (such as texts, audio and/or visual documents).

Although non-monogamous phenomena are occurring in the Northern and Western societies in general, we choose to limit our study to the French speaking area of Europe (Belgium, France, Switzerland), for speech analysis matters. The three countries also present a variety of legal and urban contexts, which might be talkative.

(D) Finally, we will analyse results and write a thesis intended to (a) present and compare contemporary kinship network configurations; (b) present and compare material and immaterial elements mobilized for non monogamous kinship practices; (c) compare monogamous and non monogamous kinship practices; (d) highlight contemporary societal and cultural elements involved in the transformation of kinship practices and invite to ethnological comparison with other cultures presenting kinship transformation.

Partial results and conclusion

Non-monogamous practices seems, a priori, radically diverging from the normative nuclear and (sometimes serially) monogamous family pattern. So are we applying an ethnographic approach towards non-monogamous kinship agents. That means we have

got in touch with self-called “polyamorists” in French speaking Europe (Belgium, France, Switzerland), through the web first, and then through their monthly meetings (mainly in Brussels and Paris). By a snow-ball effects, we have now been introduced to several hundreds of polyamorists. We became close enough to some of them to be introduced to their significant others (of all generations), to visit their residence and gather observations about their daily life. For the last three years, we have been practicing extended empathic interviews (more than 40 hours have been recorded so far). We have practiced participative observation on line (on chatrooms) and into public and private meetings. We have been gathering written and audiovisual polyamorist’s artefacts such as books, documentaries, movies or manifestos written or elected by them). We are now about to start approaching the field of the single mothers by choice.

The field data, together with academic state of the art, show several results.

Non monogamous contemporary practices so called “polyamorous” parenting involve more than one significant partner into reproduction and co-parenting, co-residence, sexual bonding and/or feeling of attachment.

Partial discourses analysis among the multi-parents show that humanist values are driving the life course of these agents, such as individualism, mutual consent, self-fulfilment, gender equality, a taste for freedom and non violent communication... Those values are justifying their choices in terms of relationships management.

Discourses analysis tallied by field observations show that elements of the contemporary material and technological surrounding (concerning sexuality, mobility, communication, consummation and production of goods, time-space management) make *non-monogamous networking relationships* possible for a large amount of the population of western Europe.

Just like *LGBTIQ studies* are showing there is such a thing as a “heteronormativity” when it comes to family and gender practices in northern-western societies, uni/multiparenting concerns regarding the secret and the integration in social life show there is such a thing as “mononormativity”: a monogamous paradigm under which it is considered normal to be a *pair* of adults to be in charge of children, to manage a housing with children, to cultivate an intimacy made of a lasting attachment bond and a lasting sexual partnership. According to my respondents and other researches [D. Black: 2006; M. Barker & D. Langdridge: 2010], mononormativity is mainly experienced through contact with institutions such as schools, hospitals, and administrations... It might be stigmatised or encouraged by people in the social surrounding of the actors.

As a conclusion, although our data processing is in progress and uncompleted, we would like to argue that:

(a) the following hypothesis is right; when (1) the political and religious values and representations of a society change and when (2) the material environment of that society changes as well, then, parts of inherited kinship practices are changing

accordingly (i.e. they are changing into new practices, materially and mentally congruent to the new social and cultural environment).

(b) if polyamorist practices and ethic ever become quantitatively significant or dominant, the average kinship practices will get through other patterns first;

(c) because these phenomena are emerging today and because they concern kinship matter, such as residence, sexuality, parenting, care and transmission (of goods and symbols), we assume one cannot understand what contemporary kinship changes are within the frame of the traditional inherited pattern of the family. Therefore, instead of considering the concept of the family as an etic concept, we consider it emic and observe what individuals do and relate to one another, without assuming what it is to be a family. In other words, we see the word “family” as a vernacular expression, not as a scholar description of a phenomenon. To understand what are the contemporary changes and what is about to come in the near future, we mobilize human universals. We remove ourselves from the normativity of the contemporary monogamous paradigms of “couple” and “family”. Then we describe what non-monogamous agents¹ are doing in terms of kinship practices.

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¹ We are talking here about social monogamy and not about biological monogamy. In other words, we focus on the fact that people are married or not, we don't care if they have indeed more than one sexual partner (per period of time).

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