

# Polyamories in Southern Europe: Critical Perspectives – an Introduction

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sro](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sro)**Ana Cristina Santos**

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal

**Beatrice Gusmano** 

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal

**Pablo Pérez Navarro**

Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal

Despite significant social and political changes in personal life in recent decades, the focus of mainstream sociological literature on family has been the heterosexual, monogamous, and reproductive couple. Surprisingly, there is still little research exploring non-conventional relational politics and policies and their impact on intimate biographies in Southern Europe. This Special Section aims at filling this gap by exploring a range of topics concerning the intimate life and politics experienced by consensually non-monogamous lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people (LGBTQ). In so doing, the articles selected for this issue bridge an important gap between LGBTQ studies and non-monogamies, with a particular emphasis on the current political and cultural contexts of Southern European countries.

Within the populous field of non-monogamies, polyamory is a central but still contested term (Klesse, 2006, 2014) generally understood to be the practice of consensually engaging in usually long-term sexual and/or affective relationships with more than one person simultaneously (Haritaworn et al., 2006). Thus, it has been described as responsible (Lano and Parry, 1995) or ethical (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995; Veaux and Rickert, 2014) in order to distinguish it from cheating. The centrality of critical consent (Bauer, 2014) makes polyamory a significant case study when analysing intimacy as a biographical

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**Corresponding author:**

Ana Cristina Santos, Centro de Estudos Sociais, Universidade de Coimbra, Colégio S. Jerónimo, Apartado 3087, 3000-995 Coimbra, Portugal.

Email: [cristina@ces.uc.pt](mailto:cristina@ces.uc.pt)

experience and a political practice, within and beyond the law (Aviram and Leachman, 2015; Klesse, 2016). Moreover, it has also been argued that polyamory constitutes a powerful example of the Giddean 'pure relationship', entailing an emancipatory potential by undoing gender roles and expectations (Cascais and Cardoso, 2012). In contrast, the emphasis placed by some on this emancipatory potential as a way of differentiating polyamory from other non-monogamies such as polygamy has triggered concern about the role that certain cultural assumptions underlying notions of autonomy, choice, or gender equality might play in the exclusionary making of citizenship in Western nation-states (Rambukkana, 2016; Vasallo, 2018).

Although the heterogeneous spectrum of 'polyamories' has been under analytical scrutiny for a number of years, it has only recently become a research topic in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. This has partly been the effect of minority, but still noisy, forms of street activism, often in coalition with other collectives. Interestingly, due to the way polyamorists, relationship anarchists, swingers, and other non-monogamous communities challenge that core element of respectability politics which is the couple norm (Klesse, 2018), its irruption in Southern European sexual politics has sometimes been perceived as a threat by institutional LGBT groups (Cardoso, 2014; Santos, 2013). However, due to the fact that non-monogamous activism represents a rather dense intersection of relational counter-cultures, including heterosexual ones, its place in the ranks of transfeminist and queer coalitional politics is also subject to special political scrutiny (Pérez Navarro, 2019).

In the light of these and other cultural, political, and theoretical intersections, the aim of this Special Section is to bring together both activist and academic reflections on the topic, with a focus on LGBTQ non-monogamies and providing a critical insight into consensual non-monogamies as involving complex negotiations around non-cohabitation, property, affect, kinship, and networks of care in the specific context of Southern Europe.

## **The Queering Partnering International Conference**

The Special Section was inspired by the Queering Partnering International Conference organised in March 2016 by the INTIMATE research project that gathered about 200 scholars, students, and activists from across the globe at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. Funded by the European Research Council<sup>1</sup> and conducted at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra between 2014 and 2019, INTIMATE – Citizenship, Care and Choice: The Micropolitics of Intimacy in Southern Europe drew on original empirical research with a specific focus on Portugal, Spain, and Italy. The choice of countries was based on the existing sociological and social policy literature that constructs Southern Europe as a geopolitical context in which aspects associated with welfare regimes and 'gender regimes' (Walby, 2001) highlight distinctive features in relation to other European countries (Trifiletti, 1999). Southern Europe is often presented as patriarchal, Catholic, conservative, and familist (Flaquer, 2000), and statistical information analysed within the sociology of family literature reinforces a homogenising image of these countries. If we consider cohabitation, for instance, Eurostat demonstrates that Italy, Spain, and Portugal have the lowest cohabitation rates of all European states

(9%, 10%, and 11% respectively; Eurostat, 2008). Also, in the sphere of care and public services, Southern European countries – also known as the Mediterranean (Ferrera, 2008) – are described as having a strong ‘welfare society’ (Sousa Santos, 1993) in contrast with the low provision of the welfare state, a feature stemming, among other factors, from the impact of austerity politics on semi-peripheral European countries.

Regardless of certain similarities, this somewhat generalised image of Southern European countries risks reinforcing the stereotype, without properly interrogating it. In fact, sociological literature on Southern Europe often disregards important differences between countries, running the risk of contributing to a homogeneous and static picture. Conscious of these risks, INTIMATE comparatively explored the common as well as the specific features of three of these countries regarding LGBTQ intimacies. We did so by considering the different historical, legal, and political context of LGBTQ rights in Portugal, Spain, and Italy, as well as conducting in-depth fieldwork on a micro (biographical) level. Since the beginning of the INTIMATE project, the situation of monogamous same-sex relationships has changed from a scenario close to formal equality when compared with their heterosexual counterparts in Spain<sup>2</sup> and an almost total absence of rights in Italy, with Portugal positioned between them, to one with more nuanced differences between those countries, due to the recognition of same-sex civil unions in Italy and of same-sex parental rights in Portugal. At the same time, we need to acknowledge how the movement against what is wrongfully labelled as ‘gender ideology’, that is, in defence of traditional gender roles and (monogamous) family values, is breaking boundaries in Europe (Lavizzari and Prearo, 2018) and taking positions in Southern European countries against the legal recognition of same-sex couples, transgender identities, LGBTQ reproductive rights, or the introduction of gender and sexual education programmes, to name but a few of its open fronts. The impact that the increasingly leading role of this kind of discourses in national politics (Butler, 2019), already clear in the case of Italy and Spain, may have on the heterogeneous field of non-monogamies is yet to be discovered. However, the fact that Brazil, which had become one of the most important sources of news on processes of legal recognition concerning polyamorous relationships and multi-parental family structures (Calderón, 2016), has recently banned legal contracts providing this kind of legal protections (Pontes, 2018) is far from encouraging in this regard. In the case of Southern Europe, this conservative effect will have to be modulated by a general lack of interest (or radical distrust) of non-monogamous activism in struggles for legal recognition, which has made polygamous migrants the protagonists of most legal challenges to the monogamous foundations of European ‘public order’ (Pérez Navarro, 2017, 2018). In this sense, we may advance that the increasing Islamophobia fuelled by far-right discourses might well turn out to represent an underestimated threat to the mid-term future of non-monogamies in Southern Europe, given the proximity, in cultural and legal (lack of) imagination, of polygamy, polyamory, and other non-monogamous relational practices.

In this context, LGBTQ non-monogamies represent an especially dense locus of resistance to the role which monogamy plays in the constitution of current regimes of relational citizenship. For this reason, taking LGBTQ consensual non-monogamies as our point of departure, in this Special Section, we try to gather answers to the following questions: how do intimate biographies of self-identified LGBTQ people in Southern Europe shed

light on gender and sexual regimes in different countries? How do existing laws and policies in each country play out in terms of the opportunities and constraints affecting LGBTQ non-monogamous relationships? How can politics and practices of intimacy in everyday life contribute to new ways of conceiving fair and comprehensive laws and policies, as well as inclusive cultural representations of relational diversity? What has the story and the impact been of polyamorous activism in Portugal, Spain, and Italy? What lessons can be drawn from Southern European countries in terms of achieving formal and/or social equality? And what do LGBTQ non-monogamies teach about the relation between monogamy and the cultural and political borders of Southern Europe? These issues are discussed within the wider context of citizenship, care, and choice.

## **Polyamories in Southern Europe: critical perspectives**

Polyamorous relational practices contest a complex set of cultural expectations governing the intimate field in Western societies. Gender and sexual regimes are at the core of these expectations and are, therefore, transversal to all of the contributions gathered in this Special Section. However, all of them share the critical task of taking LGBTQ polyamories in Southern European countries as a point of departure rather than as an end in itself. To begin with, especially if we understand the South as a political metaphor rather than as a geographical context (Sousa Santos, 2018), these works constitute a challenge to the consuetudinary privileges that surround knowledge production in the main academic centres of the Global North.

In addition, LGBTQ consensual non-monogamies also occupy a peripheral position in the intersecting fields of Gay and Lesbian Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Citizenship Studies and Legal Studies, among many others. In this sense, the Foucauldian notion of ‘subjugated knowledges’ (Foucault, 1972) may serve as a productive guide to understand how these works come to question conventional approaches and key concepts in well-established academic fields. This issue is not about theory being applied to the object of polyamorous practices. This is theory *coming from* or being produced in close, intimate relation with unconventional relational practices that defy regimes of sociocultural legitimacy and those of academic knowledge production at the same time. Thus, as editors, we tried to include emerging scholars and activists, as well as established academics and independent scholars within the field. The inclusion of early-career researchers also enabled us to tap into research which is still in progress, thus further strengthening the originality and novelty of this Special Section.

To begin, Christian Klesse explores the surprisingly limited literature on polyamorous parenting in order to highlight the transformative potential of the ‘queer bonds’ that sustain many of these practices. We chose to open the Special Section with this intersection of topics in order to expand the reader’s perception of the normative effects of mononormativity from the sexual sphere to other crucial issues such as reproductive practices and kinship relationships.

Subsequently, Roma de las Heras explores some of the most influential feminist and queer understandings of monogamy as a political institution. From this departure point, she develops a queer feminist approach to relationship anarchy as a political philosophy, grounding a critical analysis regarding how the different hierarchies challenged by relationship anarchy – amatonormativity, sex-centrism, and couple privilege – are linked.


Next, relying on personal experience as one of the most visible faces of poly activism in Portugal, Daniel Cardoso gives a situated account of the rise of the Portuguese polyamorous social movement, drawing on the literature on affect by Sara Ahmed, and mapping how interpersonal relationships fundamentally shape the way activism is performed.

Inspired by Wittig's theorization of heterosexuality as a political regime, Catalan non-monogamous activist and independent scholar Brigitte Vasallo zooms out from the political implications of what she terms 'the monogamous mind' to the process of construction and violent policing of frontiers in contemporary Europe, both based on hierarchy, confrontation, and exclusion.

Ana Cristina Santos, drawing on empirically original data, unpacks the mononormative underpinnings of law and social policy that restrain intimate citizenship, while suggesting the notion of relational performativity as an analytical tool for interpreting cultural norms and expectations around partnering. Her article further advances the idea of relational citizenship, a way of articulating the consensual non-monogamous relational spectrum with the academic field of intimate citizenship.

Finally, Beatrice Gusmano offers yet another reading of central concepts connecting ethical non-monogamies with the genealogy of feminist thinking: care and critical consent. Through the powerful metaphor of Kintsugi, her analysis focuses on biographical narratives coming from the context of Italy, showing the importance of developing collective tools for the management of intimacy, challenging the self-help – and neoliberal – literature according to which polyamory is just a personal choice.

## ORCID iD

Beatrice Gusmano  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1645-1044>

## Notes

1. 'INTIMATE – Citizenship, Care and Choice. The Micropolitics of Intimacy in Southern Europe', funded by the European Research Council – Starting Grant no. 338452 (2014–2019).
2. Including same-sex marriage and adoption rights since 2005, and the access of lesbian couples to assisted reproduction since 2006, but still maintaining some forms of legal discrimination, such as the obligation to marry for two mothers in a lesbian couple to be recognised as such without resorting to a co-adoption process (Trujillo, 2016).

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### Author biographies

Ana Cristina Santos with a background in Sociology and a PhD in Gender Studies, University of Leeds, UK, she works as a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra. Over the years she has coordinated a number of research projects on LGBTQI+, gender, dissident bodies, intimate citizenship, and human rights. Between 2014 and 2019, she was awarded a Research Grant by the European Research Council to lead the cross-national study INTIMATE – Citizenship, Care and Choice: The micropolitics of intimacy in Southern Europe ([www.ces.uc.pt/intimate](http://www.ces.uc.pt/intimate)). Currently she is the Coordinator in Portugal of two International Research Projects: CILIA LGBTQI+ Lives, funded by NORFACE (2018–2021), and Diversity and Childhood, funded by the European Commission (2019–2021). Vice-chair of the Sexuality Research Network of the European Sociological Association between 2012 and 2016, since 2013 she is also Co-Director of the International PhD Programme Human Rights in Contemporary Societies. Significant publications include *Social Movements and Sexual Citizenship in Southern Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Sexualities Research: Critical Interjections, Diverse Methodologies, and Practical Applications* (Routledge, 2017, with A. King and I. Crowhurst), as well as the Special Issue ‘Trans\* Policy and Practice’ of *Critical Social Policy* (2018, vol 38, n.1, with S. Hines, Z. Davy, S. Monro, J. Motmans, and J. Van Der Ros).

Beatrice Gusmano is a sociologist engaged in the European project ‘DomeQUAL: A Global Approach to Paid Domestic Work and Global Inequalities’ at the University of Cà Foscari (Venice). She defended her PhD dissertation at the University of Trento (Italy) in 2009, with a thesis on the construction and management of non-heterosexual identities at work. Her recent focus was on LGBTQ relationships, lesbian motherhood through ARTs, and LGB friendship/cohabitation within the project ‘INTIMATE – Citizenship, Care and Choice: The Micropolitics of Intimacy in Southern Europe’ (2014–2019) based at CES – Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra (Portugal). She also worked on LGBT local public policies in Europe, work access networks for ex-convicts, bullying and gender education, and diversity management. She is a board member of the RN 23 on Sexualities of ESA and coordinator of the research group *DECIDE* on Democracy, citizenship, law, and justice at CES.

Pablo Pérez Navarro is a researcher of the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and a visiting professor of Queer and LGBTI Studies – Gender and Sexualities of the Centre for Human Rights and LGBT Studies (NUH) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (Brazil). He holds a PhD in Philosophy by the University of La Laguna (Spain) and he was a research visitor at the Centre for LGBTQ studies (CLAGS) of the City University of New York. He has conducted postdoctoral research at the Carlos III University of Madrid and as a member of the project ‘INTIMATE – Citizenship, Care and Choice. The Micro-Politics of Intimacy in Southern Europe’, coordinated at CES by Ana Cristina Santos. He is the author of *Del texto al sexo: Judith Butler y la performatividad* (Egales, Madrid, 2008), and he has published widely in the intersections among philosophy, gender, and queer studies. His recent work addresses coalitional politics of gender and sexual dissidence and the emerging biopolitics of gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

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