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Beyond romantic love – an analysis of how the dilemma of closeness vs. autonomy is handled in relationship anarchy discourse

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Supervisor: David Wästerfors

Abstract

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In recent years, romantic love has been problematized and questioned by sociologists and activists. Part of this questioning comes from relationship anarchy, a phenomenon which can be described partly as a critical school of social philosophy, partly as a comparably small-sized social movement. Sociologists such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that romantic love suffers from a conflict between closeness and autonomy. The aim of this thesis is to investigate how this closeness vs. autonomy dilemma is handled in relationships among five relationship anarchists. I use qualitative interview methods to collect data, which I then analyze within a discourse analytical framework using an adapted version of Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory. I argue that while relationship anarchy may appear as an expression of individualism, it is more accurately interpreted as a new paradigm in which closeness and autonomy no longer is a dilemma to be solved.

Keywords: relationship anarchy, paradigm, discourse analysis, love, closeness, autonomy

Populärvetenskaplig presentation

Sociologer hävdar ibland att kärlek i det senmoderna samhället genomgår en kris. En del av krisen handlar om en till synes svårlöst konflikt mellan närhet och självbestämmande. Människor vill å ena sidan stå varandra nära. Samtidigt kan närhet upplevas både kravfyllt och kvävande, men också riskabelt i den mån ett relationsval utestänger alternativa möjligheter. Frågan som ställer saken på sin spets är: hur står vi andra nära utan att tappa bort oss själva? På senare år har relationsaktivister riktat kritik gentemot de samhälleliga normer som reglerar hur relationer ser ut. En del av den kritiken står relationsanarki för. Relationsanarki kan delvis sägas vara en än så länge liten social rörelse, delvis en tankeskola. Dess syfte är att luckra upp föreställningar som råder kring hur kärlek kan se ut, hur vi kategoriserar relationer och vilka möjligheter till handling som knyts till dessa.

Hur ser då konflikten mellan närhet och självbestämmande ut hos de som lever med en relationsanarkistisk övertygelse? Den relationsanarkistiska diskursen betonar ju ifrågasättandet av regler, snarare än att föreslå nya regler. I den här uppsatsen hävdar jag att det ändå är möjligt att vaska fram hur konflikten mellan närhet och självbestämmande hanteras i en relationsanarkistisk världsbild. För att undersöka detta intervjuade jag fem personer. Urvalskriteriet var att dessa, via fråga på en social medieplattform, svarat ja angående att ha levt med en ”relationsanarkistisk medvetenhet” i minst fem år. Jag analyserade sedan intervjuutskriften med hjälp av diskursanalys – en metod som ställer språket och mönster i språket i centrum. Jag använde också en för syftet anpassad version av Thomas Kuhns teori om vetenskapliga paradig, ett val som både möjliggjorde och begränsade vilka egenskaper jag kunde se i mina intervjuutskrifter.

I de berättelser mina intervjuer producerade är konflikten mellan närhet och distans inte längre ett problem på samma sätt som i traditionella kärleksrelationer. Inte för att problemet ignoreras, tonats ner, eller löses inom ramen för det paradigm som romantisk kärlek är inbäddat i. Istället verkar ifrågasättandet av relationsnormer möjliggöra en rekonstruktion av praktiker och idéer på relationsområdet. Denna rekonstruktion pusslar om det sociala landskapet så pass mycket, att de premisser som problemet bygger på inte längre gäller. Dilemmat löses med andra ord inte med samma tänkande som skapar problemet. Det är istället när relationskartan ändras som problemet tappar sin relevans och blir, kort och gott, inaktuellt.

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1 Introduction

In the industrialized world, an ongoing process of individualization has gradually disentangled love from the burdens of economic and logistics. Contrary the life circumstances in pre-modern society, when marriages were typically “contracted, not on the basis of mutual sexual attraction, but economic circumstance” (Giddens, 1992, p. 38), relationships have moved in to the domain of choice. They have become increasingly disposable, or “top-pocket”, as Bauman refers to them (Bauman, 2003, p. 21). According to Beck (1999, p. 9), the central characters of our time are “choosing, deciding, shaping individuals who aspire to be the authors of their lives, the creators of their identities”. One of the central problems of modern love is that closeness and autonomy, in many ways, seem to be at odds (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, pp. 44, 65, 70-71, 77, 97, 145, 197). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim puts it: “*are love and freedom irreconcilable opposites?*” (Ibid., p. 65, italics in the original text).

In this context, new discourses¹ of relationships have emerged. One of them is relationship anarchy. Similar to contemporary discourses of romantic relationships, relationship anarchy deals with individuals and their bonds in the private sphere. But rather than constituting a new relationship model, relationship anarchy revolves around *deconstruction*. It questions taken-for-granted narratives and practices about how relationships are to be done.

Although inspired by developments in academia such as queer theory and discourse analysis, relationship anarchy typically flourishes on blogs and out there among a young, urban, intellectual and alternative middle class, eager to think outside the box about their relationships. In Sweden, an association called *Relationsinstitutet* which I would locate in a similar lineage as relationship anarchy, describes its mission as to “drive and promote development in the field of relationships”, something which is done “with curiosity, philosophy and interest in norms” (Relationsinstitutet, 2018). There are also a few print-on-demand books about relationship anarchy, though none from any large publisher.

¹ By discourse, I am here referring to an analytically outlined web of concepts and rules which structure meaning and social action.

Besides questioning contemporary relationship models, the tenets of this social philosophy are few. At a first glance, they appear to revolve around individual autonomy, at least in two ways. In one blog, the author (Our Better Natures, 2016, August 8th) states that:

[Relationship anarchy] means that no one has any power over anyone else at a fundamental level. We each get to choose what is right for us, the agreements we enter into, and the commitments we're willing to make, and if and how we'll uphold them.

Relationship anarchy is here said to be about autonomy at the interpersonal level. Basically, you don't owe anyone anything. Another way it is commonly articulated is about autonomy at a cultural level. Andie Nordgren (Nordgren, 2006), whose instructional manifesto for relationship anarchy is referred to in blogs, Wikipedia, and websites about relationship anarchy, writes in this manifesto that:

Remember that there is a very powerful normative system in play that dictates what real love is, and how people should live. Many will question you and the validity of your relationships when you don't follow these norms. Work with the people you love to find escapes and tricks to counter the worst of the problematic norms.

Here, an instruction is issued, meant to help individuals break with norms without forgetting that these norms exist, and that they too, in a way, can be seen as a threat to individual autonomy.

In the context of developments in late modernity sketched earlier, how can we make sense of relationship anarchy? At the individual level: is this an extreme expression of individualism, an exaggeration of what Giddens call confluent love – relationships that only last as long as partners find it satisfying, without the sense of duty or economic dependence that previously glued relationships together? (Giddens, 1992p. 63ff); Bauman's dystopia fully developed in which "connections are entered on demand, and can be broken at will" (Bauman, 2003p. xii)? Is relationship anarchy a deepening of the "ego epidemic" Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 4) fear, or rather, "pioneering into new territory, a quest for better, if unfamiliar solutions" (Ibid.) and a sign of "deeper transformation" (Ibid.)?

1.1 Project aim and research questions

My aim is to examine how paradoxes, problems and contradictions that Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, Giddens and Bauman find when investigating modern love, are handled in the discursive

formation² of relationship anarchy. My primary interest is the question about closeness vs. autonomy, and I will direct my attention on this conflict by studying how emotional safety, trust-building and commitment are articulated in oral relationship anarchy discourse.

My research questions are: how is the dilemma of closeness vs. autonomy handled in oral relationship anarchy discourse? A sub-question, aimed to help me answer my main research question is: how is emotional safety accounted for in oral relationship anarchy discourse?

1.2 Delineations

The word *polyamory* is sometimes used as an umbrella term for several subtypes of consensual non-monogamous relating, such as open relationship, swinging, polyfidelity³, etc. I regard relationship anarchy as distinct from these. While different schools of non-monogamy resemble relationship anarchy in so far that they too part with one of the main pillars of romantic love – the idea that real and committed love is only possible between two persons at one time (Finn, 2010) – these schools of thought generally settle there. What they retain from romantic love is the distinction between friendship and romantic relationships, as well as other social practices which Ben-Ze’ev and Goussinsky (2008) summarizes as “romantic ideology”. Among these are, for instance, performing public rituals on social media announcing becoming a couple, assuming that jealousy is fundamental to intimate relationships and something one has to deal with in one or another way, etc. In fact, these schools may even introduce new ad-hoc patches, fixes and solutions to current discourses on romantic love, such as ranking one’s romantic relationships in terms of primary and secondary partners.

Relationship anarchy, on the other hand, can be said to be about deconstructing models of romantic love altogether. One of my interviewees, for instance, defined it as “a way to criticize all kinds of relational models”, thereby aspiring to create circumstances which allow individuals to use their imagination on how to relate beyond what is seen as oppressive social practices and norms.

² I define a discursive formation as a cluster of overlapping, related discourses. Consequently, I understand relationship anarchy not as one discourse, but as a formation containing elements from different discourses.

³ Polyfidelity is a form of group relationship between three or more persons, in which all partners agree to restrict their sexual activity to other members of the group only.

For this study, I will not discuss polyamory or other variations of non-monogamy, as they do not particularly interest me. In order to economize with time and resources, I will also abstain from looking at how institutional politics, the labor market, or having children affect relating with a relationship anarchy world view. Although much of relationship anarchy springs from a queer feminist critique of heteronormative norms, I will refrain from looking into relationship anarchy from a perspectives of class, gender, racism, power, inclusion, equality, or intersectionality, other than when my material navigates these perspectives. Although relationship anarchy certainly is about emancipation and critique of power relations, I am here more concerned with the reconstructive consequences of this phenomenon.

1.3 Thesis outline

After this introduction, I will provide an overview of previous research that may be of interest in regard to my research question. In **section 2**, I will give a brief overview of the theoretical perspectives which I am using throughout this thesis. In **section 3**, I will describe how I went about in unfolding this thesis, and explore the methodological, ethical and philosophical rationale behind my choices. **Section 4** contains the main analysis of my material. Here, I will review my material using my theoretical framework, and argue for possible interpretations. In **section 5** I will summarize what I've learned so far, discuss what I could have done differently, as well as suggest future lines of research.

1.4 Previous research of relevance

Within sociology, love, marriage, the family, and individualization have all received considerable scrutiny. In particular, much of the canonized research dwells on major trends in modern love as society changes. Notable works in this context include Anthony Giddens 1992 book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's 1995 book *The Normal Chaos of Love*, as well as Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* from 2003, which I will be referring to later. More recently, in 2012 Eva Illouz published a popular scientific book entitled *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (See e.g. Rusu, 2017, p. 3, who provides a brief overview of this sociological literature on love). What these writings have in common is that they focus on how individualization and major changes in modern society has affected the domain of love.

When it comes to non-monogamy, a rising amount of research has been done on polyamory. In academia, the field is relatively new and under-researched, and there appears to be some lack of consensus regarding meanings of some concepts. Barker, Heckert, and Wilkinson (2013), for instance, use the term polyamory, and when defining their understanding of it, add that “This way of relating has been termed ‘relationship anarchy’” (Barker et al., 2013, p. 191), thus articulating the distinction between relationship anarchy and polyamory in a different way from what I do. Over all, the research on polyamory so far has been polarized between on the one hand, researchers who critique or deconstruct romantic love (such as Ben-Ze’ev & Goussinsky, 2008), and on the other, researchers who targets what they see as dangers or pitfalls with this phenomenon. Moreover, according to Christian Klesse (Klesse, 2011, p. 7), several authors on polyamory have personal experiences with polyamory themselves.

Klesse is among the more cited researchers on polyamory. Much of Klesse’s research has been committed to the task of providing a basic understanding of polyamory as social phenomenon, such as how polyamory practitioners position their practice in relationship to other variants of non-monogamy (Klesse, 2006), how polyamorists view what they do (Klesse, 2014). Klesse also investigated polyamory as a discourse as well as traced its historic developments (Klesse, 2011). Another frequently cited researcher is Meg-John Barker. Barker and Langdridge (2010) edited *Understanding non-monogamies*, containing various chapters with different perspectives on polyamory.

Compared with the academic production on polyamory, research on relationship anarchy is even more scant. A reasonable explanation for this is that relationship anarchy is a fairly new phenomenon. Looking at Google Trends as shown in Figure 1 to the right, for instance, few but increasing searches are done for relationship anarchy, implying its novelty.

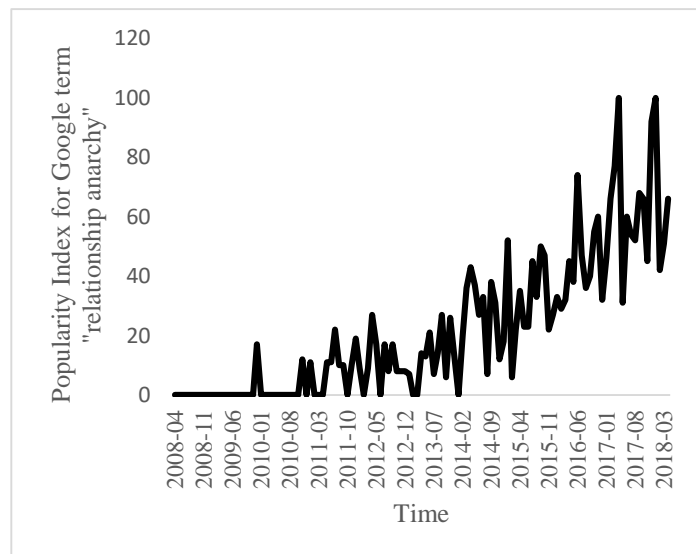


Figure 1. Popularity Index for Google search term “relationship anarchy” worldwide. A value of 100 means the peak popularity for the term. Fetched from <https://goo.gl/MmPvXE> on April 22nd, 2018.

At the time of writing, a search for “relationship anarchy” in 43 different databases, all times, using EBSCOhost yields only one search result, for a conference paper.⁴ Google scholar, on the other hand, returns 61 results for the same term. But most of these are not scientific papers, and some of these results are not about “relationship anarchy”, but are included in the search results because of sentences containing the two words “relationship” and “anarchy” in close proximity. The remaining results refer to peer reviewed articles which, while mentioning relationship anarchy, they do so only in passing, or lumped together with polyamory without distinction. In summary, very little research has previously been done on this topic.

Although I found no substantial research on relationship anarchy, I found five bachelors’ theses, two of which I will mention given that other research is lacking. Jacob Strandell’s bachelor’s thesis *The discourse of the autonomous subject. An analysis of the discourses which enable the discourse and practices of relationship anarchy*⁵ (Strandell, 2011) is about discursive intertextuality. Interestingly, he finds that “Relationship anarchy is discursively not particularly deviant but based on well-established discourses that operate within several social normative fields such as monogamous relationships, gender and sexuality, the composition of the family and tradition” (Ibid., p. 24, my translation). He also finds that discursively, relationship anarchy is closely related to discourses on individual freedom and transparent communication (Ibid., p. 26).

Another thesis is Sam Bäfvenberg’s *No mono: norms, power and politics in relationship anarchy*⁶ (Bäfvenberg, 2014). Bäfvenberg interviewed seven self-reported relationship anarchists in

⁴ Search performed April 22nd, 2018. EBSCOhost submitted my search in the the following databases: Academic Search Complete, AMED - The Allied and Complementary Medicine Database, OpenDissertations, Art & Architecture Source, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals, Bibliography of Asian Studies, Business Source Complete, CINAHL Complete, Communication Source, Criminal Justice Abstracts with Full Text, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EconLit, ERIC, European Views of the Americas: 1493 to 1750, FSTA - Food Science and Technology Abstracts, GeoRef, GeoRef In Process, GreenFILE, Humanities International Complete, Inspec, LGBT Life with Full Text, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text, Literary Reference Center, MathSciNet via EBSCOhost, MEDLINE, MLA Directory of Periodicals, MLA International Bibliography, New Testament Abstracts, Newswires, Old Testament Abstracts, Philosopher's Index, Political Science Complete, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycINFO, PsycTESTS, Regional Business News, RILM Abstracts of Music Literature (1967 to Present only), Short Story Index (H.W. Wilson), SocINDEX with Full Text, Teacher Reference Center, Urban Studies Abstracts.

⁵ This is my translation from the Swedish original title: Det fria subjektets diskurs. En analys av de diskurser som möjliggör relationsanarkins diskurs och praktik (Strandell, 2011).

⁶ This is also my translation from the Swedish title: No mono: normer, makt och politik inom relationsanarki (Bäfvenberg, 2014).

the Stockholm area. Bäfvenberg's primary concern is the emancipatory aspects of relationship anarchy. Among other things, they conclude that (Ibid., pp. 23-24, my translation from Swedish):

While the interviewees see relationship anarchy as liberating, hegemonic norms constrict how relations can be pursued: these norms affect how some of the interviewees think, talk and behave in their relationships. These frames are also affected by sexuality and gender. Finally, I have highlighted a problem associated with racification and class, where most of the interviewees possess whiteness and middle class privileges. Many of relationship anarchy's ideals coincide with the white middle classes image of itself.

Bäfvenberg argues that despite the emancipatory aspects of relationship anarchy, the persons they interviewed may nevertheless be unable to disembed themselves from norms. They also point out that relationship anarchy fits well in a middle class project of distinguishing oneself by cultivating a self-image as more enlightened and intellectually refined than those who remain unknowingly embedded in traditional ways of relating.

The fact that four out of the five bachelor theses I found on relationship anarchy can be traced to Sweden doesn't surprise me, as this phenomenon has its roots in Sweden.

One final touchdown in this literature review are self-help books. While there is an excess of these for polyamorists, there are very few on relationship anarchy, the most notable in Sweden being Karolina Bång's (2013) comic book *Alternativet*, i.e., "The Alternative".

2 Theoretical perspectives

2.1 Perspectives on love in late modernity

I will here portray some features of love in late modernity, referring to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Bauman (2003) and Giddens (1992) as their respective analyses will be useful to use as a contrast to my material. These thinkers investigate modern love from different vantage points. While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim tend to emphasize on dilemmas and contradictions of individualization as well as the limitations and possibilities of change, Bauman's analysis can be said to be slightly dystopian, primarily concerned with the loss of what glues people together. Giddens, on the other hand, could be described as optimistic about how an increased freedom in the relationship field could spill on to democratize other domains as well. Since my main interest here is to describe some major trends in late modernity using broad brush strokes, and since their respective arguments share some similarities, I will take love in late modernity as my starting point in this section, referring to these sociologists along the way.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that previously, relationships were a matter of circumstance, that is, bonds that people entered into without questioning. Today, in consonance with the process of individualization, relationships have increasingly become a matter of choice (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 1). But this freedom is not just a blessing, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Rather, it's a call for an increased amount of choices to be made, mixed with internalized demands as well as dependence on circumstances on which one cannot control, such as the labor market (Ibid., p. 7).

When families were founded on work, they were larger and provided a sense of community. Without this extra buffer between the family and society, fear of being alone becomes a significant part of the glue keeping couples and families together. Paradoxically, at the same time, monogamy is a high risk project (Bauman, 2003, p. 11; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 83). Making a choice rules other options out, and the person one choose may turn out to be a disappointment (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 88). This sense of disappointment coupled with high expectations of what a partner is to provide, tends to make relationships episodic, at least compared with previous eras (Ibid., p. 185). Many couples don't survive transcending the phase of infatuation to everyday life (Bauman, 2003, p. 8; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 87). Relationships have become fuzzy, unpredictable, and more fragile. The thought that the next love

will be more exhilarating than the current one is often hard to resist, relationships are broken up with at will, but the next love often turns out to be a disappointment as well. On the plus side, individuals can enjoy more variation, but this variation cannot substitute a safe relationship (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 33).

One crux with modern love is a perceived conflict between that of closeness and autonomy; being an individual yet embedded in the social; coupling the drive to self-actualize but at the same time maintaining bonds (Bauman, 2003, p. 34; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, pp. 43-44, 65-77). As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 68) puts it, “it’s no good with you and no good without you”. Giddens is somewhat more optimistic compared to Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and Bauman. He finds hope in what he calls *confluent love*, characterized as two equal individuals who can be there for each other but without assuming responsibility for one another (Giddens, 1992, p. 94). Giddens argues that it’s easier to create and maintain a healthy bond after you’re actualized as an individual (Ibid., p. 88).

2.2 Theoretical assumptions of discourse analysis

Although discourse analysis tends to be seen as a method, all methods involve certain theoretical assumptions (Potter, 1996, p. 8). This is, in a strong sense, also true with discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 4). I will therefore here sketch on some of the theoretical and epistemological consequences of choosing discourse analysis as one of my methods.

Discourse analysis is a generic name of several approaches that have in common that they focus on studying how language constructs social reality. What is presupposed here is that language does not simply reflect the world, or represent a world assumed to be out there, but rather, is constituent of it (Ibid., pp. 1, 9-10). Discourses, then, are not to be investigated as either true or false, but rather, they have the effect of constructing what is to be seen as truth (Ibid., p. 14). With discourse, I am referring to a researcher-delineated web of concepts, categories and rules structuring meaning and social action. I do not regard discourses as existing out there independently. Rather, as a researcher, I use the concept of discourse in order to delineate a certain social area, contain or delineate a certain logic, in order to make sense phenomena.

Rather than staying faithful to a particular line of discourse analysis, I have created a toolbox so to speak, using concepts from different schools. As opposed to, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe

(2001, p. 93ff), who see discourses as encompassing the whole social field, I regard discourses as one dimension among other ways to approach the social world.

I also use “web of concepts” as a metaphor for how signs, concepts, categories, rules and logic relate to one another in a system which organizes meaning and social behavior. The central component of the discourse is the *statement*, a function with constitutive effects (Graham, 2011, p. 7, 10). They limit as well as enable what can be reasonably uttered in a given context.

To make this less abstract, I’ll provide an example. In discursive formations of romantic love, you tend to find statements such as “love has no logic”. The fact that love has no logic becomes intelligible by virtue of a sign – love – and how it’s connected to logic by virtue of resisting the latter. It evokes a discursive formation – that of romantic love, which both enables what can be said and what cannot be meaningfully said. But love is a polysemic element (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 27), that is, a sign with multiple potential meanings, such in for instance romantic love, sibling love, love as when “I love to hike”. But it is only in the domain of romantic love in which love can meaningfully be said to have no logic. This is because in discourses of *romantic* love, it is often stressed that this type of love somehow tends to become so passionate that it disavows other considerations than its realization between two individuals.

If one steps out from the discursive embedding in which “love has no logic” is intelligible, and step into the domain called sociology, one could find a seemingly contrary statement, such as “love is saturated with social logic”. Since the discursive context is another, this latter statement doesn’t mean the opposite than “love has no logic” but rather, evokes “logic” in the Bourdieusian sense. What I intend show with these examples is that meaning is contextual, and as soon as a word is put into a context, it is no longer just a word, but a referent to a way to view and understand the social world.

As a discourse analyst, my job is to disentangle myself from the web of concepts and try seeing it from a vantage point which enables me to study statements as functions with constitutive effects (Graham, 2011, p. 7, 10). This doesn’t mean there is a place outside of discourse. There is no God trick, as Donna Haraway (1988) calls it. All seeing is done from a certain embeddedness, so part of the challenge is to become aware of what glasses I am using, so to speak (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 21). I will discuss this further in my methodology section.

Besides statements and discourses, I am using term *discursive formation* to differentiate between different discursive scales. While a discourse consist of statements, a discursive formation can be said to consist of several discourses which together constitute a domain of knowledge (See e.g. Sally, 2005, p. 1534). In this thesis, I will use discursive formation as synonym for paradigm. I will return to the concept of paradigm below.

From Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. 93ff), I have borrowed the concept of *hegemony*. The assumption here is that different discourses compete for dominance in a particular domain of knowledge. When one discourse achieves hegemony it means that it has temporarily fixed how meaning is produced. But discourses can also co-exist side by side. I will also use the concept of *modality*, which refers to the degree of emphasis or assertiveness that is attributed to a particular statement (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 83).

2.3 Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory

I will now walk you through the main tenets in Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory. As this theory is about how science develops over time, I will first review it, then extract some features which will be useful for my analysis.

Kuhn's paradigm theory describes the development of science as an iterative process. Briefly, what Kuhn called normal science runs into an increasing amount of anomalies creating a crisis, which leads to a scientific revolution replacing a paradigm with another. Science is here understood in terms of not only an intellectual or cognitive endeavor, but also as a social practice.

During periods, science is running business as usual. In academia, students and new scientists are socialized into a particular way to think and do science (Kuhn, 1996, pp. 23-34). Science is working within the box so to speak, not breaking any major grounds on the fundamental understanding on how the world works, but rather, filling in details in an otherwise relatively stable understanding of how everything fits together. This is what Kuhn calls normal science.

The main container of these tacit as well as explicit rules for how science operates, is the paradigm (Ibid., p. 10). A paradigm is a system of conceptual schemes which together form a world-view, supporting basic assumptions for all activity in a particular scientific field.

Paradigms provide rules which both enable as well as limit what gets to be articulated as a scientific problem or not, as well as plausible solutions, methods etc. (Ibid., pp. 37, 42).

When in it, a paradigm has a quality of subliminality, a tacitness, as it is not easily identifiable or possible to narrow down to an explicit set of rules. It is more of a *Geist*, a shared world-view which is not explicitly seen (Ibid., p. 136ff). It is only after shifting to a new paradigm that it becomes possible to “look back” so to speak, and see one’s previous embeddedness.

When a paradigm is new, it is quite limited in its granularity and precision. While doing normal science, most scientists are therefore occupied with redetermination of facts already known, but at a higher level of detail (Ibid., pp. 26-27). Kuhn likens this activity as solving puzzles – a metaphor for a very specific way of solving specific problems – and this is what most scientists do throughout their careers (Ibid., p. 37).

Sooner or later, paradigms are confronted with observations or problems which they cannot fit into the given conceptual framework. Kuhn call these anomalies. Anomalies are failures, problems or contradictions for which the current paradigm has no satisfying answers. They thereby threaten the current logic of operation, so they need solution. But it cannot include them in the current conceptual scheme without one or more pillars of the current paradigm being rocked (Ibid., pp. 62-64). Anomalies become like a thorn in the side, so to speak, which the scientific community then either ignore for as long as possible (Ibid., p. 24), or try to create ad hoc solutions for. But this only works to certain extent. Eventually, anomalies mount up to become the expected, and there are more ad hoc solutions and unsolved problems than what can be tolerated without the current paradigm losing its foothold.

The paradigm then enters a state of crisis. In this process, members of the scientific community may go all the way back to the philosophical underpinnings of their paradigm in order to see what changes there could yield a solution. This leads to a “reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals” (Ibid., p. 85). And it is in this process that radical shifts can occur allowing for a new paradigm to replace the old one, an event which Kuhn calls scientific revolution.

Scientific revolutions, then, are radical transformations of consciousness in the scientific community. New paradigms help resolving problems that were unsolvable in the previous paradigm. In this conceptual transformation, previous dichotomies around which much thought is organized are overcome by a new paradigm which orders the worldview of the scientific community in a way in which these dichotomies are either transcended, no longer seen as relevant, suited, or important (Preston, 2008, p. 20). While some concepts from previous

paradigms are discarded, some concepts may be kept, but given new meanings (Kuhn, 1996, p. 128, 149). Yet other concepts are invented. Scientific revolutions are irreversible in the sense that, when things are understood in new ways, there is no going back to the old ways (Ibid., pp. 85, 111ff).

My rationale for my choosing of Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory did not come from lengthy consideration. Rather, it dawned upon me that this framework of concepts and ways to understand change could be used to highlight some aspects of my interview transcripts. What Kuhn can bring into this analysis is that, not only can *world views* differ. They also have a temporal relationship to one another where one is succeeded by another, as well as theoretical concepts describing how this transition occurs.

Kuhn's theory pertains to the domain of science. In order for his theory to be useful for examining discourses in the context of relationship anarchy, I will abstract some of the general features of his theory in order to untangle them from the specificities of the history of science, so they can be applied in the domain of relationships.

For Kuhn, a paradigm was a large-scale container of knowledge, much like the discourse theoretical concept of domain of knowledge. In order to make the concept of paradigm useful, I will downgrade its scale and use it similar to discursive formation instead. The framework of iterative development which Kuhn introduces could then be generalized as follows:

- 1) *Normal relating*. Here, the proceedings and logics of how relationships are done are relatively stable. Discourses and discursive formations have achieved *hegemony*. No widespread discussions occur regarding the world-view, rather, everyday problem solving is done within the box, using the logic provided by the current world view. In this phase, subjects don't discuss how one could fundamentally understand relationships or concepts differently. Rather, one simply acts within the given world view, unconsciously categorizing ones' relationships according to the offered conceptual scheme (such as, friend, romantic partner, etc.). One accepts the implicit, invisible yet highly restricting as well as enabling rules as part of what simply is, without questioning.
- 2) *Crisis*. In this phase, the dominance of the leading perspectives are challenged and the *discursive struggle* (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 6) for hegemony becomes accentuated. The perceived problem between closeness and autonomy Beck and Beck-Gernsheim

(1995, pp. 44, 65, 70-71, 77, 97, 145, 197) articulate could here serve as an example. While romantic love keeps promising eternal happiness, many couples could describe their dilemmas in terms of “it’s no good with you and no good without you” (Ibid., p. 68). One could imagine polyamory as an ad hoc solution to patch this problem or anomaly. Most of the current paradigm is retained, but now one can have several partners, which kind of resolves some issues while maintaining the bulk of the domain of knowledge intact.

- 3) *Revolution*. Here, the problems, anomalies and dilemmas have the paradigm fail completely. Patching is no longer sufficient, relatants therefore go back to the philosophical foundations of the conceptual schemes offered, in order to investigate how these could be rearticulated completely in order to resolve the problems that were previously unsolvable within the previous paradigm. A new relationship paradigm emerges, with fewer rules, fewer tenets, which more elegantly fits together the world in ways which resolve both the old problems and new ones. The logic of this new paradigm is incommensurable compared to the previous one.

Below, when I use the above concepts of *paradigm*, *normal relating*, *anomaly*, *crisis*, *revolution*, and *incommensurability*, I am not using them in the way Kuhn used them to describe the development of science, but rather, as this above abstracted theoretical framework. As a consequence, you will see very few citations to Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Kuhn, 1996) below. I will also be referring to the contemporary, traditional hegemonic model of conventional romantic love as “the paradigm of romantic love”. Similarly, I will refer to relationship anarchy mainly as a paradigm as well.

2.4 Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development

Using Jean Piaget’s work as his starting point, Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981; Kohlberg, Levine, & Hower, 1983) developed a stage taxonomy of human development in the moral justice area, coarsely divided into three categories of morality:

- pre-conventional
- conventional, and
- post-conventional

The pre-conventional stage in which one's actions aren't guided by societal norms, but rather, self-interest or even hedonism. When individuals start adapting to societal norms, they exhibit what Kohlberg called conventional morality. Here, behavior takes society and its social rules and norms as a yardstick for how to act, yet the behavior is not particularly reflexive. When individuals learn to reflect on their choices independently of societal norms, they have reached the post-conventional stage. Here individuals may choose to act in ways contrary to societal norms. But contrary to the pre-conventional stage, this deviation is not because they have yet to learn relating to societal norms, but rather, because they actively reflect on them and make choices based on higher principles.

3 Methodological considerations

I will here describe not only what methods I employed, but rather, how I went about doing this study. I have organized this section chronologically.

3.1 From initial idea to finished field studies

My initial research idea was rather crude compared to what it ended up being developed to. I wanted to learn the social practices by which relationship anarchists took care of emotional safety in their relationships. I tried finding texts to analyze in order to answer this research question, but the more I read, the more it became clear I wasn't going to find the rich descriptions I needed. What was available was mainly critique of contemporary discourse of love, that is, deconstruction but no reconstruction; no rich suggestions on how to relate differently. What I found was mostly hints or advice phrased in general terms, such as "Work with the people you love to find escapes and tricks to counter the worst of the problematic norms" (Nordgren, 2006).

This led me away from textual analysis of relationship anarchy texts. I quickly ruled out participant observations among relationship anarchists, as the types of social interactions that would have helped me would occur too infrequently to be effectively observed. I therefore decided for qualitative interviews. My choice fell on unstandardized as opposed to standardized (see e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 7), as I wanted to remain open to where my interviewees would take me, rather than be asking from a vantage point of assuming to already know parts of the terrain (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 121; May, 2001, p. 149ff).

I suspected that people who just recently got into relationship anarchy might be too absorbed by an initial exhilaration over finding out about this way of relating, and may therefore merely reproduce the texts I was finding online. Since I wanted rich descriptions on how relating was actually done within what I thought of as a relationship model, I decided to look for interviewees who had at least five years of experience living a relationship anarchy life. I did this by asking for participants in relevant groups in a social media platform. I offered to do interviews in my home town, Malmö, Sweden, or to travel to whichever part of Sweden necessary to conduct interviews.

Unfortunately, it was hard to get interviewees with five years of experience, and I had to post the question several times. Out of six planned interviews, one interviewee did a last minute cancellation, so I ended up with five interviews. I was able to do two of these in my home town.

In two other cases, I took day long trips to the cities where these interviewees lived. And in one case, we did the interview over the phone. To compensate for the low number of participants, I took care to perform the interviews with as much depth as possible.

After the data collection process, I ended up having five interview transcripts of 8, 12, 13, 19, 32 pages' length, totaling 84 two-column pages. While the shortest interview, with an interviewee I have given the pseudonym Andrea, lasted for 30 minutes, the longest, with one I have named Jenny, lasted for more than two hours. I've given the remaining interviewees the pseudonyms Mattias, Pia and Robin. All interviews were performed in Swedish, so I have translated all excerpts.

As Kuhn (Kuhn, 1996, p. 46) points out is the case in the domain of science, the problems researchers see and questions they ask are governed by the paradigm in which they are embedded. When I started talking with actual relationship anarchists, it became apparent to me that my approach was begging a few questions. I had been assuming that an accurate understanding of relationship anarchy was that it was a model of relating. Therefore, I thought I only needed to figure out how this model worked. Consequently, I had also taken for granted that "relationship anarchist" was an unproblematic identity. Furthermore, from the paradigm of romantic love, I had brought with me the unreflected assumption that relationship anarchy had an unsolved problem with emotional safety in need of solution. But as soon as I actually engaged with the field, I understood that unless I reframed my research questions, I would be trying to answer my research question from a location of embedding in the world view of romantic love.

Metaphorically speaking, as long as I wasn't seeing the glasses I had on, my questions as well as interpretations were going to be inadequately adapted to the social terrain. I therefore went back to the drawing board, and refitted my research question to become more abstract, and less saturated with assumptions from the romantic world view I had been assuming. In practice, this meant downgrading the question of emotional safety to become a secondary question, while my main concern now was the problem of closeness vs. autonomy.

One of the consequences of this development is that, while the first interview was very useful for fine-tuning my research approach, it didn't give me the rich, personal descriptions I was looking for. The remaining four interviews were more useful in this respect.

Since the supply of experienced relationship anarchists – as I now call them – who were willing to participate was limited, it was important for me to ensure that they found it meaningful and motivating to participate, in order for the interviews to be sufficiently long and rich. I also wanted to ensure my integrity as a researcher so as to secure validity. While this suggests a somewhat distant, analytical approach, I nevertheless chose a compassionate, close and personal approach, revealing my own thoughts, ideas, and experiences during the interviews. Partly, I am inspired by Ann Oakley (1986, cited in May 2001, pp. 164-167) who argues for a personal, engaged approach in order to honor mutuality. I was asking people to tell me about their relationship lives, which is something personal. This empathetic, and open approach became a matter of valuing respect, equality and mutuality.

I estimated that even if I were to somehow lose myself in the narratives we were co-creating, I would later be able to take a few steps back and analyze both my own and my interviewees words from a theoretical vantage point, thereby honoring validity (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; May, 2001, pp. 155-157). This also implies that similar to Talja (1999, p. 2, 13), I see the interview, not as an attempt to access an unbiased, uncontaminated reality out there, but rather, as a collaborative effort during which meaning is produced (see e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). I did not presume there to be another, more true story behind the words of my interviewees which I was to uncover. Rather, the interview situation was, itself, the locus of meaning production, producing a very specific type of interview discourse (Cruickshank, 2012, p. 45). With this view, thinking around validity and reliability partly becomes a question of accounting for methodological choices as well as my interpretations (Talja, 1999, p. 13), something which I will adhere to as I proceed in my analysis. Since there is no out-of-embeddedness view, or God trick, part of the process of honoring validity also requires me to reflect upon my perspective here.

Besides looking at these discourses from the vantage point of my abstracted framework inspired by Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory, and briefly evoking Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development in my discussion, I am also highly inspired by the work in adult development done by Jane Loevinger and Susanne Cook-Greuter, both of which have formulated stage models of adult development. Like Kohlberg, their work is heavily indebted to Jean Piaget, whom also Kuhn mentions as a source of inspiration (Kuhn, 1996, p. viii). Although I haven't explicitly

made use of neither Loevinger nor Cook-Greuter, I am indebted to them for much of my implicit adult developmental perspective when analyzing my material.

3.2 Coding and analyzing my material

After transcribing my interviews, I printed the transcripts out and read them, alternating between summary reading and close reading, in order to get a grip of what I was dealing with. As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015, p. 80ff) suggest, I made sure to spend time with my material in order to get to know it. In the beginning, this process was painfully anxiety-ridden, as I was worried I wouldn't succeed in making sense of it. But I persisted, and in line with what Saldaña (2015, pp. 20-21) calls pre-coding, I soon, intuitively, started applying manual coding⁷ with color markers. At this stage, similar to the process of brainstorming, I tried to fight the temptation to get it right from the beginning, but rather, to trying different ways of coding and seeing my material. After some time, I had a rough picture of what interpretations I could reasonably do and what lines of conclusions could be worked on. One day I incidentally read a passage reminding me of Thomas Kuhn (1996) in a book on adult development (Stålne, 2018), and this helped me suddenly “see” my material through Kuhn's conceptual framework. Again, choosing Kuhn, then, wasn't the result of lengthy reflection. It was more of a sudden vision that I then chose to go along with.

After deciding to stick with Kuhn as a theoretical perspective, I again went back to spend more time with my material, now seeing it in a different light. This further helped me consolidate what I was going to make use of, and what I was to leave out. In a sense, organically I managed to somehow integrate empirically grounded thematization together with a theoretically founded choosing of analysis themes (Widerberg, 2002, pp. 144-145).

In general, there seems to be a bit of a lack of methodological guidelines on how to perform discourse analysis (Graham, 2011, p. 4; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 24; Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 25). In my case, most of the reflection process that constitutes my analysis, I did by writing and rewriting the analysis chapter draft. In other words, the very process of working with different drafts of the analysis became an integral part of reflecting and doing the analysis itself.

⁷ As opposed to using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, i.e., CAQDAS.

Note that, when showing excerpts, I have applied some stylistic changes to the transcripts, removing “uhs” and similar to make them more readable while retaining the message intended. I have also sometimes removed my own affirmations that I am following along, such as “yes”, “aha”, “mhmm”.

3.3 Ethical considerations

The integrity, autonomy and care of my interviewees is important for me. I put these values into practice by following the customary practice of informing them that they were allowed to stop the interview at any time without providing any reason. I also asked them what pronoun they wanted me to use when I cite them, and I have granted them anonymity. I have changed their names, so every name presented below is an alias. I’ve also refrained from disclosing events, phrasings, or details which could identify them. Before recording, I asked for their approval, and immediately after defending this thesis, I will destroy my interview recordings. The most challenging dilemma I experienced was: how do I show care and respect for my interviewees, while at the same time, attempting to conduct rigorous sociological analysis? How do I go about asking them about personal issues which I would later draw conclusions about, while still honoring their voices? The way I’ve tried to balance sociological stringency with care for my interviewees is to keep my interpretations close to what I believe they would have felt was the truest to what they were saying. In other words, by carefully adhering to the principle of charity and reading the best out of their statements.

In regards to the research process and society, there are a few ethical considerations I’d like to discuss as well. Within contemporary discourses in science and analytic philosophy, it’s customary to differ between descriptive and normative utterances (see for instance May, 2001, p. 64). While I will follow May’s (Ibid., p. 64) suggestion and remain in the realm of the descriptive, I don’t see this as sufficient to avoid problems of normativity. My values have an impact in many aspects of this project, such as, why I chose this particular project in the first place, how I interpret data, etc (Ibid., p. 68). In line with Sandra Harding’s (1992) notion of strong objectivity – briefly; to reflect transparently about one’s values rather than write under the pretense of neutrality – I will here briefly discuss my rationale for choosing to do this project (see also Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 202).

When I started out, I had a partly positive attitude towards relationship anarchy because I liked its emancipatory potential. I was also somewhat critical as my preconceptions had it appear somewhat individualistic. By investigating it, I had the not fully conscious idea that I wanted to contribute to the development of this philosophy. But my ideas about relationship anarchy changed along the way. As I was humbled, this agenda to contribute to this school of thought faded away, and my interest moved a bit closer to the traditional notion of the exploring researcher.

4 Analysis

In the following presentation, I have chosen to allow some features in my material to guide the disposition of my analysis. I've been inspired by the fragmented puzzle strategy outlined by Nylén (2005, p. 73ff). It aims at showing a variety of themes as a starting point for the analysis. I've chosen four themes, and these are, in order of appearance:

- disowning and reframing the concept of jealousy
- acceptance of “what is”
- decentering sex
- best practices for securing emotional safety in relationships

I will now turn to the first theme revolving around jealousy.

4.1 Disavowing and reframing the concept of jealousy

Jealousy is an interesting theme as this painful mix of cognition and emotion intersects emotional safety in relationships, while discursive strategies suggested for its alleviation can be studied in order to cast light over the underlying paradigm. In general, my interview subjects had an approach to jealousy which shared similarities. In the context of relationship anarchy, jealousy was portrayed as obsolete, irrelevant, or rearticulated in a way which lessened the emphasis on sex. Instead, the concept of jealousy was reconnected to other activities than sex or romance.

Below is an example of how jealousy is disavowed. When discussing jealousy, one of my interview subjects explains the following:

JENNY: When you meet people like, who live within the norm. ”Aren't you jealous? Are you-”, and I'm like, what? [Laugh]. Can't, can't relate [to that] at all.

Jenny says she cannot relate to jealousy at all. The reference to “people who live within the norm” implies not only a distinction between them and the speaker Jenny, thereby positioning herself in opposition to this, but also experience in what they usually ask – “aren't you jealous?”, and where that question comes from – the assumption that non-monogamy is inherently unsafe, or impossible without causing extreme outbursts of jealousy. To this question, she says “what?” and although she refers to it and has at least superficial knowledge about the underlying logic behind the question, she explains she cannot relate to this convention at all. One way to make

sense of this is that Jenny does relationships in a different paradigm than “people who live within the norm”. Jenny continues:

JENNY: I feel that I do not fully understand that concept. But for me, jealousy is about being-, about a fear of being abandoned, forgotten, or so. But when I talk to others about it, [they say] ”no, jealousy has of a life of its own, it’s something quite-, it’s much bigger than that”.

RICARDO: Mhmm?

JENNY: I don’t get it! Well, how? [laugh] They’re like, ”jealousy is a basic feeling!” and I’m like, that, that’s like, for some, it seems to be something bigger, something more that I don’t-, I have no idea about it. [Laugh]. I’d like them to write down very clearly what they mean [laugh].

Jenny reiterates she doesn’t understand the concept. In Kuhn’s words, the concept of jealousy is incommensurable with the world in which Jenny understands her relating. It can be said not to make sense in that context. Note that Jenny isn’t saying “I’m not jealous”. Rather, her statement disowns the concept altogether. The subject is here positioned outside of the dichotomy jealous-not jealous.

In an exchange with Mattias, also on the topic of jealousy, he says something resembling the words of Jenny:

MATTIAS: I also find it incredibly difficult to feel jealousy. I may have felt it perhaps once in my life. So I can’t really relate to the safety model in monogamy. Because it doesn’t affect me.

RICARDO: It doesn’t speak to you?

MATTIAS: Mhm.

RICARDO: Okej. Cool [laugh]. Or, how nice.

MATTIAS: It is, it’s really nice. Sounds very painful when people explain their jealousy to me.

The common theme in the above excerpts is how they mention jealousy as something one cannot relate to. The narrative includes how other persons try to explain jealousy, and my interview subjects not getting it. It is articulated as unintelligible in the context of relationship anarchy, or only understandable in a shallow way. As Mattias puts it, he cannot “relate to the safety model in monogamy. Because it doesn’t affect [him]”. Monogamy is here implicated here as a paradigm related to from outside. While it is disidentified with, Mattias does seem to have some superficial knowledge of this system or model of relationships and its answers to maintaining cohesion in relationships.

This tacit referencing to differing paradigms is also present in other interviews I did. When discussing the benefits of relationship anarchy, Pia says:

PIA: You avoid so many pitfalls. You avoid the whole concept of infidelity. Because it, it *isn't* part of the concept. (...) I mean, people can be douchebags anyway, but you don't have to lie, you don't have to double-cross, you don't have to lie. You don't have to worry about someone lying or deceiving you.

Here, jealousy and also unfaithfulness are both said to be missing from the “concept” of relationship anarchy. This “concept” resolves several anomalies, that is, problems for which the relationship system she was previously embedded in lacked satisfying answers: lying, unfaithfulness, jealousy, sneaky behavior, or worrying about that kind of behavior because of competing claims for one's partner. Relationship anarchy is articulated as implying a different relationship world view, one in which you no longer need to worry about these issues.

In similar ways, Jenny relegates the concept of jealousy to a previous point in time when she did “couples' relationships”. When making sense of jealousy, it is in this context – the previous paradigm in which she did her relating – that it becomes intelligible:

JENNY: So that is really no problem, but, of course, that feeling might have been there before when I had couples' relationships.

RICARDO: Was it more like that previously then?

JENNY: Yes. Mmm. Mmm. Yeah like, then there was a-, then there was also a-, that is, when you had couples' relationships there was a real threat, from the outside. Other people were a threat. Others, that is-, it was an ongoing threat.

Having “couples' relationships”, then was something she did previously. When discussing jealousy, the relation she remembers actually having to it, was when she had “couples' relationships”, which temporally was something from before. She also acknowledges that this feeling was rational in that logic: “other people were a threat”. In a relationship model where seeing someone new could cause you to leave someone you love for someone to which you can project greater hopes from the future, it was logical to feel jealousy, the logic goes. As Bauman reminds, if you aren't happy with one relationship, you can throw it away for another (Bauman, 2003, p. 13) – at least if the system you are embedded in presupposes that you can only have one at a time. Whereas now, jealousy is no longer part of the picture. Again, these statements don't seem to be about not being jealous, rather, about having a hard time relating to the concept. This is a subtle but important difference.

These anomalies described by Pia and Jenny remind me of the findings of Bauman (2003) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995). Relationships are a promise of emotional safety, but may turn out to actually increase anxiety. You don't know if the person you chose is the right one, and that person can, at any point, leave you (Bauman, 2003, p. 15). The option in the paradigm Bauman and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim investigates is, of course, to stay what is commonly known as "single". But while being single resolves the problems of uncertainty, it is at the cost of a sense of connection and togetherness (Ibid., p. 15). In total, the system both Beck, Bauman and my interview persons relate to are in short, systems of either-or. You can't have both. I argue that the discourses produced during my interviews construct a logic in which you, in a way, *can* have both. I will return to this later in my discussion.

Another aspect of jealousy is about what gets to be seen as a source of jealousy. When asked to say more around the theme of emotional safety in relationships, Robin says the following:

RICARDO: What thoughts do you have around the topic, kind of, or, is there more that spontaneously comes to mind?

ROBIN: There is. (...) When I tell [my colleagues] how I do [relationships], they laugh, partly because, I (...) think they find me adorable somehow. But (...) they also say, "I would never-, I could never live that way, don't you get jealous?" and so on. And that, then, they may also tell me about their own relationships, which they have had before, and, compare with that. It's like, I notice that they think like this: "If I were to live like that, if the man I was together with (...) would [see someone else], then I would feel so extremely jealous", or like, "when he was cheating", kind of, "then I became-, then I felt so incredibly, like, intense". And (...) they make it sound like they themselves aren't strong enough to cope with having open relationships, or not enough, like, not having enough control over their feelings (...). And that, (...) I sometimes try to question. Not that I want to recruit everyone, I really think that everyone needs to develop in their own way. But. Eh, but I think that jealousy, uncertainty and insecurity, as well as safety, are like something you create together in different ways. That it is not one who is-

RICARDO: Ahaaa.

ROBIN: It arises from the sum of both persons and their behaviors. (...) Many believe that jealousy is something that is inevitable, but also something that-, so, if I manage to somehow avoid it in many of my relationships, then it must be me, as a person, who is of another kind somehow.

RICARDO: Like, as if it was a personal trait, rather than something that happens in a relationship?

ROBIN: *Mmm!* Mm! [nods]. Exactly. (...) They usually ask, "don't you get jealous?". And then I usually explain that yes, maybe I do a little. But that for me maybe it's more of a process, or like, that I usually try different things and see (...) what happens then. See if one can create greater [emotional] safety kind of, in that relationship. And for me it is usually about meeting the other person. And see, like, "you're a human being. You wish me well". (...) And I usually talk quite thoroughly with the one I have a relationship with. It's like, *as long as I allowed to be part of it [I'm fine]!* Kind of. [As long as I get to] get involved in what they are doing, (...) what my partner feels for the other person, (...) [being included in] all these good stuff that makes *them* wanting to be together. And, and that for me it is about being *let in* in some way.

What is interesting with this excerpt is that, on the one hand, Robin narrates how, just like Jenny is asked, people may ask Robin “aren’t you jealous?”. Robin is used to being told about how just the thought of one’s partner seeing others would create an immense sense of uncertainty. And in the world described the narratives Robin gets to hear, being jealous or not appears to be constructed as a personal trait, rather than something that depends on how emotional safety is handled in a relationship. This may seem like a subtle difference, but seen in a larger context, I argue that this can be seen as a sign of a perspective on relationships which is not individualistic, nor collectivistic, but the integration of both. Or to phrase it differently, neither independent or dependent, but interdependent.

From the perspective of the paradigm of romantic love, much of the utterances found in a relationship anarchy discourse can sound like expressions of individualism. As I hope to show, much of what is said can easily be interpreted as if relationship anarchy requires a reliance on one’s own capacity to live with what is, rather than to relying on promises from your partner, that being the end of story.

And this apparent reliance on the individual doesn’t exactly sound like relationship cohesion. It therefore makes sense that this worldview, when shallowly understood or seen from an embeddedness of the paradigm of romantic love, is quite frightening and produces all these questions – “but aren’t you jealous?” – that my interview subjects are getting. But reliance on the individual isn’t the whole picture. I argue that there is a bigger, more complex image to grasp.

Seen together with other utterances my interview subjects kept making which, at first, appeared as contradictions to me, or at least quite the opposite: how we humans are interconnected, how the human condition is all about relationships, and how much we depend on them, I will argue that the relationship life described by my interviewees can be seen as an integration of individualism *and* relationship cohesion. I will return to this argument later. For now, there is more to say about the excerpt above. When discussing safety in relationships, its reframed from being a property of an individual, to a property of the relationship. It is relinked from its given locus of inevitability in a logic in which emotional safety is hard-knit to sexual and romantic exclusivity, which offers a static world view in which jealousy is naturally occurring under certain circumstances, as well as a personal trait, to a dynamic language with words such as “process”, “try different things and see, see what happens then”. Jealousy is made contingent on the qualities of the relationship, the

responsibility not of one person, but both, and their capacity for cooperation, so to speak. Safety is in the hands of the collective, and different things can be tried to mitigate jealousy. This is far from the co-dependent relationship patterns described by Giddens (1992, pp. 84-85), and close to his ideal of confluent love, characterized as two equal individuals who can be there for each other but without assuming responsibility for one another (Ibid., p. 94).

A similar discursive trait – sort of an explicit cooperation stance when it comes to care for emotional safety in relationships – appeared in another of my interviews. When discussing emotional safety, this came up:

MATTIAS: So there is something, when you build up the relationship, kind of, when you establish, how is it that we work. (...) Then the other person can say that, but this... this is what works for me. If they know. Otherwise one might need to figure it out together.

Also here, emotional safety is not something you are – “emotionally safe” as a person, but rather, a process that happens when cooperating in a relationship. But cooperation does not mean dependency. The excerpt above continues with the immediate:

RICARDO: I think that a prejudice around, that is, relationship anarchy, is kind of like this, that one should take care of oneself, that one shouldn't help the other person, that one shouldn't take any help.

MATTIAS: Mmm. To some extent, it's a good rule of thumb. (...) Also, if one wants to be intimate with someone, then one must take responsibility for the fact that one's actions, words, and behavior affect this other human being. (...) And if you want to make this other person feel good, then you can show consideration and be sensitive and responsive.

Taken out of context, this may seem contradictory. On the one hand, “it's a good rule of thumb” to “take care of oneself, that one shouldn't help the other person, that one shouldn't take any help”. On the other, “if one wants to be intimate with someone, then one must take responsibility for the fact that one's actions, words, and behavior affect this other human being.” What is said here is that one is responsible for one's own actions, and one's actions have consequences for others. But at the same time, it is postulated that as individuals, we are better off not depending on others to provide for us, or have others depend on us. One way to understand this excerpt is that it also isn't really suitable to place along a continuum where dependency is in one end, and independency in the other. Rather, I see it as the integration of these two poles, which is something different than either/or. As Giddens (1992, p. 88) argues, it's easier to create a strong,

healthy bond after you're actualized as an individual. I will argue for this interpretation after discussing a few more excerpts.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim postulate a conflict between individuality and commonness (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, pp. 44, 65, 70-71, 77, 97, 145, 197). Apparently, this conflict makes sense in a certain paradigm. The world view expressed in my interviews doesn't seem to carry this along as a particularly difficult issue.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim as well as Bauman argue that committing to a relationship is high risk business (Bauman, 2003, pp. 1-15; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 83). But here, it appears that the anomaly of infidelity is mitigated, not by virtue of social control or by making infidelity unattractive, but by actively engaging with the philosophical foundations of how relationships are done, disembedding oneself from contemporary relationship norms in order to create something that works. Using Kohlberg's terminology (Kohlberg et al., 1983), this disembedding, as Mattias puts it, "when you build up the relationship, kind of, when you establish, how is it that we work" can be seen as post-conventional approach to societal norms, as opposed to the rudimentary ignorance of norms, as in pre-conventional stages. It appears to be a critical engagement with norms according to higher principles.

The fact that the discourse produced disavows jealousy, doesn't imply that relationships aren't of importance, and certainly doesn't imply lack of commitment. Several of my interview subjects repeatedly stressed how crucial their relationships were for them. For instance, Jenny says this about her close relationships: someone is an "incredibly close personal relationship", or a "very important person [in my life]", and that the relationship is "worth unbelievably much":

JENNY: Thanks to these closest ones, who think roughly like I do, whom I therefore value incredibly much, there is kind of, (...) I usually say they're my foundation. Or my anchor. (...) Because, they are there, there's always a place to come home and *land*. If you've been out in the ordinary world [laugh], and kind of battled with norms and people who do not understand then you can kind of, one has somewhere to come home and land so it is okay. (...) Then, then it's all right even if the 90 % [of people out there] think you're weird.

When you live in a different social world than the hegemonic one, the need for supportive relationships is even greater. Here, Jenny says her closest relationships are her "foundation", which is a metaphor with strong modality. A foundation is something you stand on, that is, when everything is moving, at least you know where you have the ground. The same can be said about the other metaphors, anchor, home. These are ways of saying that these are relationships she

trusts in a strong sense. Pia puts it this way, after having talked about the need to accept when things don't go as you plan, and relationships end or fade:

PIA: So, I really care a lot about them I have relationship with, I care about them a lot. They are the most important to me.

RICARDO: You don't want to be understood as if they don't matter?

PIA: No! It-, of course they matter a lot!

Here, after a long passage where Pia discusses how jealousy was no longer an issue in the way it was previously, she adds that the absence of the concept of jealousy doesn't mean that relationships or persons standing close to her are not important. Helping Pia clarifying this, she insists she doesn't want to be interpreted as indifferent. Relationships and persons around one do "matter a lot". When asked to say more about what maybe can be called one of her anchor relationships, Jenny adds:

JENNY: We share a lot. It's like, we have a shared soul, that's what it feels like. It's like, and also, this is a person who will always be there. It goes without saying. And also this demandless, that is, you know that you meet regularly, you do not have to decide. Don't have to meet every week, it doesn't have to be that rigid.

RICARDO: Mmm.

JENNY: But rather, you are in each other's life and then it varies how often you meet, but there is a givenness, eh, so [I have] a few of these [relationships].

They share "a lot", their soul is one and the same, and this person is one of the kind that "will always be there", and this is just "goes without saying". In addition, it is based on willingness. The bond is here not secured by coercion, but is free from it. Still, it is there. These relationships are described as free – they are "free of demands", yet you still "know you meet regularly" and are described as very safe. Freedom here doesn't seem to be in conflict with commitment. On the contrary, freedom and the closeness of the bond somehow appears to go hand in hand, one presupposing the latter. But apparently this way of committing is often misunderstood from the vantage point of romantic relationships, as a low level of commitment. Robin explains:

ROBIN: Another thing that my colleagues sometimes say, or something that can come, is that like, but (...) it's implied as like, superficial relationships, relationships that aren't committed. (...) Someone may have asked the question like, do you think you'll ever-

RICARDO: Become a serious couple?

ROBIN: Yeah, (...) maybe they are waiting for it to happen. (...) I don't want a lot of superficial

relationships that don't require anything from me emotionally. Rather, I want to be part of (...) someone's life, and that that person can feel, feel better and better, or, like, feel like this works, or, um, that they⁸ have agency and can do things and feel free in the world kind of. And there you are in different places and bring different things with you. Eh, but, (...) this balance when you want to make someone feel safe, but still, but keep on making oneself feel safe as well. It was difficult, (...) it was really hard to keep up sometimes. Now it's a little easier.

Robin says that their explanations of how they do relationships tend to get mixed up with having superficial relationships, or relationships which aren't committed. Which makes sense, given the difference in underlying logics of what commitment is, in the paradigm of romantic love and that of relationship anarchy.

But akin to how Jenny emphasizes her level of commitment in her relationships, Robin explains they "don't want a lot of superficial relationships that don't require anything from me emotionally". They want to be part of someone's life while this other person also feels they are free, free to be themselves. They also say "there you are in different places and bring different things with you", and in this context it means they want to be flexible – as opposed to rigid – regarding allowing this other person to go where they want and do what they want depending on where they are in their development, and depending on their will. Robin also wants to help the other person feel safe in the relationship, while also working on making themselves feel safe. Balancing all this used to be hard, but now it's a bit easier. Maybe this present tense and past tense reflections can be seen as pre- and post revolution, in paradigm theoretical terms.

Another thing my interview subjects said was that trust grows over time:

JENNY: Eh, so *incredibly* important person. And then there is, may [sic] think there is a *value* in knowing someone for a *long time*. Having a very long relationship because we've gone through a *whole* lot together, we've followed each other in kind of, highs and lows, development and all, and that, it, is absolutely *amazing*. We just *know*, and (...) something I think is so nice with relationships, when you get to this point when you can sit and talk about memories. And somewhere, there's a five-year threshold I think. It's after *that* that you, kind of, harvest the reward.

She later adds:

JENNY: I have an intention to have responsible relationships, to care for my relationships, that is. And it's something that, so, talk is cheap, but when some time has passed it kind of shows what you've done. Somehow that's what counts counts, I think.

⁸ Swedish pronoun "den".

Here, longevity is implicitly honored as what really makes relationships go around. Growing a track record over time is what shows what a relationship is really worth. My subject is here articulating one person as “*incredibly* important”, emphasizing that having that relationship is “absolutely *amazing*”. At the same time, Jenny also claims she doesn’t really need anyone:

JENNY: Well, strictly speaking I need very little validation⁹ from other people. (...) I need very little social time, (...) I am, [sic] usually say that I have solitary skills [laugh], I enjoy my company very well most of the time, (...) I don’t need much, I’m happy with quite like, if someone gets in touch every now and then and wants to meet up, then I’ve got enough social validation and even some to spare.

So despite ascertaining that she does not need anyone, another person can still be very important. Seeing relationships as utterly important while at the same time saying she doesn’t need much acknowledgement from other relationships, can again seem contradictory. How would emotional labor get to be done if no one has to? How could one feel emotionally safe, without promises about the future? How would we know that someone would stay, if they were allowed to leave whenever they wanted? I argue that these types of questions arrive when presuming the paradigm of romantic love, and therefore miss the point.

My interpretation of the excerpts above is that they pertain to a relationship paradigm different from the ones in which above questions make sense. The statement about an “*incredibly* important person”, taken together with other statements, construct a discourse in which trust is based on track record. I regard this discourse as not only compatible with the discourse of solitary competence, but even logically interconnected.

It is because one has “solitary skills” that one can afford to allow one’s relationships to be exactly where they are, what they are, and go where they need to go, rather than try coercing them into a certain way, model, or confinement. It is the very individualistic component – the “solitary skills”, the lack of concept of jealousy – of this discursive formation which allow for bonds to be maintained, not by rules, controlling or coercing, but out of willingness and a sort of an acceptance of what goes on in the other person, acceptance of that “you are in different places and bring different things with you” as Robin puts it. In this paradigm, then, autonomy doesn’t seem to be in opposition to closeness. Rather, it appears to be part of the puzzle of what makes closeness and profound connection possible.

⁹ Swedish word, ”bekräftelse”.

In this subsection, I hope I have shown that the interview discourse produced during my interviews disowns jealousy. Disowning jealousy is different than not being jealous. This disowning of jealousy does not mean that one never commits to relationships or that relationships are unimportant. The resolution of the problem of jealousy, then, comes with a different world view compared to that of romantic love. In this world view, accepting everyone's freedom of choice, including sexual freedom, is part of the puzzle piece of the larger picture. This way of organically "being there" with what is really going on, rather than measure one's relationships according to a predefined set of roles and rules, permeates the discourses produced during my interviews. I will now focus more on this theme.

4.2 Acceptance of "what is"

In different ways, and often articulated as in opposition to the paradigm of romantic love, the discourses produced during my interviews emphasized the importance of acceptance of that over which one cannot control, acceptance of people's most genuine will and seeing them beyond their expected behavioral roles, as well as discouraging making promises which one cannot realistically uphold. Below, I will show some examples of these features and discuss them.

In general, the discourses produced under my interviews highlighted several ways in which the paradigm of romantic love was seen as inflexible, simultaneously implying the inherent flexibility of relationship anarchy. While discussing the benefits of relationship anarchy, my interview subjects uttered statements such as:

PIA: There is no point in getting all stressing out about something you cannot influence anyway. That's so unconstructive.

(...)

PIA: To depend on one person for your feeling of emotional safety, when in reality anything can happen.

What is articulated here is a call for making a distinction in how to manage one's worries. Some factors – such as another person's actions – are outside of one's scope of control. Therefore, rather than trying to rely on those, or on events to proceed in a certain way, one is better off putting one's trust in one's own ability to live with whatever comes, or as Robin put it in the excerpt earlier, "making oneself feel safe as well". Since "anything can happen", anyway, an integral part of relating in this paradigm is to make sure to speak one's truth:

PIA: you don't have to lie, you don't have to double-cross, you don't have to lie. You don't have to worry about someone lying or deceiving you.

Instead of relying one person to meet your needs, or on things out of your control, what is articulated is that one is more prone to successfully meet one's needs for emotional safety and closeness with one's partner if one constantly adapts to what is actually going on. Since one is free to do and choose how one wish, lying becomes obsolete in this paradigm. When there are no pre-set expectations or rules to break, or when any rules you have are created by you, rather than culturally inherited, the rationale behind occasionally maintaining a discrepancy between what one says, and what one really wants, disappears. Because of this, from a moral development perspective, the paradigm of relationship anarchy can be described as post-conventional, as formulated by Kohlberg et al. (1983).

In my transcripts, relationship anarchy is in different ways articulated as being about taking down masks and seeing things and persons "as they are" so to speak, and then designing relationships out of this, rather than from a culturally provided blueprint. Below is one example of this:

MATTIAS: And if you want to make this other person feel good, then you can show consideration and be sensitive and responsive. And, really, these rules are something that, which I think, also, monogamous people should also be doing. Build [their relationships] from scratch and say, okay, we are monogamous, but we cannot lean on these existing models, because then it crashes after two years, or after two kids and five love affairs.

RICARDO: So, (...) to design one's relationship so one can change it if needed?

MATTIAS: Yes. (...) It is, of course, a pity (...) that this relationship form, that is, uh, relationship anarchy, is really only taken up by "radical people". Em, because I think they are just, life stuff, which like, are about seeing humans for who they are.

If you want someone you are in a relationship with to "feel good", you want to show care and pay attention and design your relationship in a way that works for both of you. In the end, this way of relating is about "seeing humans for who they are", beyond roles, culturally provided roles and expectations. This goes hand in hand with how Jenny explains what relationship anarchy is about for her. She says:

JENNY: It is much about me being allowed to be who *I* am.

Also, when relating to the paradigm of romantic love, or as Jenny herself puts it – "people who live within the norm" – she articulates this paradigm as the opposite:

JENNY: That people should go against, eh, act against who they actually *are*.

Relationship anarchy, then, is said to be about her being allowed – or allowing herself – to genuinely “be who [she] is”, without having to pretend to be someone she isn’t or act in ways she doesn’t like, or uphold practices that don’t serve her or others. Again, this is implied as pertaining to a separate system of thought, and contrasted against the system which it replaces, in which on the contrary, people are to “act against who they actually *are*.”

As I argued earlier, this paradigmatic logic which allows people to let go of trying to control, coerce or force relationships or persons into certain roles or norms, requires that trust is invested not in how other persons’ act, but rather, on one’s own capacity to “making oneself feel safe”, as Robin explains in the transcript shown earlier. But it also articulated as presupposing a sort of optimism, or resource abundance consciousness in which one believes there is love, care and connections for everyone to go around. Thereby, strategies of hoarding, guarding or controlling become less compelling. Robin phrases this by enlisting an attachment theory discourse:

ROBIN: those [of us] who are trying to have, having open relationships (...) like, we may actually carry with us quite secure attachment patterns. Kind of like, we put quite a lot of trust on the world, and (...) this openness kind of becomes possible because of that

Trusting the world, that one will be all right, and that one will personally be able to handle whatever comes, is here articulated as a prerequisite to being able to maintain an “openness” towards the world.

Another related feature of my material I’d like to point our attention to is how closely tied this discursive formation is to discourses which emphasize individual freedom. The autonomy of the individual seems in fact to be so fundamental to relationship anarchy, that it wasn’t even explicitly spelled out, rather, simply presupposed. It is more by paradigmatic context that its centrality becomes evident, as for instance when Pia says the following:

PIA: And then. I don’t have to think, if I like someone that I’m interested in or attracted to, I don’t even have to think about if it, if it’s forbidden. Ofcourse [not].

What Pia says is that if it would occur that she meets someone she becomes interested in engaging with, or attracted to, she doesn’t need to consider whether it’s allowed or not – “of course” she does what she wants. Being in a relationship with someone does in no way imply limiting one’s freedom of choice. One isn’t expected to do certain routines or scripts or follow

certain roles, and this includes having sex in a relationship. Below, I have provided a slightly longer excerpt in order to give a wider view of how my interview discourse looked like. In the context of sex in relationships, Jenny says:

JENNY: If you are two. Eh, hell [sic] is it likely that you have exactly the same [level of sexual] desire, and at the same time, all the time? It doesn't happen. (...) It was some TV show I saw, [one partner was] a bit depressed, (...) and the other worried about the [slightly depressed partner] not having any sex drive then. And then got the advice to get some sex toy to brighten things up a bit. If someone doesn't, then, if I was depressed! (...) And would come with some sex toy, (...) I would kill the person with it, then it would be like

RICARDO: yeah, yeah

JENNY: "Give me a hug and make me a cup of tea for fucks sake, and go and have sex with someone else!" [laugh]. So, it is so, it is *terrible*, and I think that it can kill a rela-, that is, it becomes a demand, thing. And i-, just that *it's not a problem*, you've *created* a problem that really isn't one. (...) And it's been such a, uh, like, really a problem for me, because as a person I'm quite irregular [in my sex drive] so, (...) some periods I'm very on to it, and certain periods I'm in to something *else*. And then that interest disappears altogether, and I want to be able to really get in to [hobbies] or in something. Then, everything else [including my sex drive] disappears. And it must be allowed to *be* like that. If I sense demands, "but we haven't had sex in a month" or something. It's so-, "don't come to me with that!" (...) I can't-, like, it's not a problem. (...) You don't even have to *say* anything, it can just sensing some sort of hope, or expectation and *frustration* in the air for me to turn off. Then we're like, done. Then I don't want to tag along anymore. (...) So, it kills me. That just doesn't work. It takes a toll on the other person as well. It just gets, [laugh]. So it's one like, another part that hasn't worked, which now works great.

Here, multiple things are said. First of all, a view of a dynamic, flexible and responsive attitude towards individual autonomy and will is given precedence over a view represented by culturally inherited ideas about what subjects are to expect from one another in a relationship. An anomaly – sexless relationships – is relegated to a paradigm which offers ad hoc solutions such as “the advice to get some sex toy to brighten things up a bit”, which in turn is articulated not only as ineffective, but even offensive. Maybe from the paradigm of relationship anarchy, lack of sex in a relationship can be seen as an example of a non-issue. The anomaly is relegated to a paradigm of scarcity, one in which you are supposed to meet your sexual needs with one person only, a setup which is said to create the problem. The logic goes that, in the paradigm Jenny relates within, one's partners' sexual needs are easily met, “give me a hug and make me a cup of tea for fucks sake, and go and have sex with someone else!”. What is a problem in one paradigm is here articulated as not even conceived as a problem in another, to summarize this. Jenny doesn't see herself as responsible for another persons' sexual drives in a relationship. She mocks how the mono-normative paradigm keeps dwelling on this problem, engaging a whole school of sexologists and experts in order to resolve this, but from her vantage point, it is a non-issue. Her

main issue with this may be with experiencing understanding for her own position, which, in relationship with people in the previous paradigm, turn out to be quite a challenge, as she is the one expected to explain herself, even when in fact, from her vantage point, it is the logic of the paradigm of romantic love, which is in question because it “*created* a problem that really isn’t one”. And this is “another part that hasn’t worked, which now works great”.

Relationship anarchy can here be seen as much of an anti stance, defined much by being in opposition to what is seen as normative, traditional. In this opposition, romantic love is sometimes portrayed at its worst, almost somewhat compulsively. Almost as if to compensate for how anomalies are ignored in the paradigm of romantic love, its very worst features tend to get highlighted, such as when a TV show host suggests “to get some sex toy to brighten things up a bit”.

Even when trying to dig dig deeper into rich everyday descriptions, our conversations tended to slip back down this discursive furrow of opposition towards what is seen as oppressive, problematic relationship norms. In that sense, although containing statements stressing freedom, relationship anarchy seen as a discursive formation, doesn’t appear particularly free from the paradigm of romantic love. On the contrary, although obviously enabling a wide range of new relationship practices, seen as a discursive formation it is mainly defined by its preoccupation with romantic love. This is in line with how one of my interview subjects argue:

ANDREA: I myself, I’m a bit critical to describing relationship anarchy as a relationship model. Rather, like a me-, as a way to criticize all kinds of relational models. (...) However, there are (...) often critical approaches to norms when it comes to relationships. And these often lead different ways to handle [things in practice].

Relationship anarchy, then, is not set out to stand on its own feet so to speak, but rather, as a way to question models of romantic love, careful not to dictate a right way to relate. But this has social consequences in practice.

Willingness is also central in other aspects of relating, such as in how to manage when to get in touch:

JENNY: There is a matter of taken-for-grantedness. One can always get in touch even though sometimes we haven’t been in touch for several months, but it [the relationship] is just right there. (...) And then we may meet all the time, and then, there’s never any, there is no guilt tripping because one hasn’t stayed in touch, there’s like, nothing like that.

Seeing someone doesn't automatically imply an agreement to meet so and so often according to a pre-expected quota. Rather, it is based on when one wants to meet:

JENNY: [I] had some friend many years ago, and it gets so tricky, because she wanted us to meet once a week and that we would take turns calling each other. And I get, I feel like I feel strangled then, it can't. I had to break up with her.

Fixed or static routines trigger feelings of "I feel strangled", and the solution to this problem was breaking up.

Another aspect of willingness is how it served to grow trust and emotional safety:

JENNY: [Emotional safety] isn't like, spelling out that now it is only you and me, because, like, what? But, emotional safety for me is that, when someone gets in touch and wants to meet me, I know they do it because they want it. Not because we have promised each other that, not like, because there is some expectation or demand but, but, it's pure will.

RICARDO: Mhm.

JENNY: Because you want to meet and because you care. And then it becomes very easy. I think that I've found, I have found emotional safety in that way. Err, even though it from the outside can appear to be, a bit unclear.

Allowing persons to do as they choose becomes not a source of distress or lack of control, but on the contrary – a source of emotional safety and trust. The more you trust in people doing as they wish, the more you can trust that whatever affection you receive will be given because the person in question genuinely cares about you, wants to relate to you, rather than providing to you from a sense of duty or obligation. In this sense, freedom is not postulated as being in opposition to caring. On the contrary, the former presupposes the latter, and this is articulated as a simple and effective way of bonding. But as I've argued earlier, this logic presupposes that each individual cultivates her or his capacity to "making oneself feel safe" as Robin put it earlier. Without that buffer of "solitary skills", as phrased by Jenny, this "openness" to the world as phrased by Robin, becomes hard to maintain. And dealing with persons who cannot do this is thought of as inherently challenging:

JENNY: Yeah, and especially now when it's gone so far so that somebody, kind of, you repeatedly says, "I wouldn't have any life without you, I wouldn't make it without [you]", (...) it is like asking me to run as fast as I can from there.

If someone expected Jenny to provide for him or her, Jenny would "run as fast as [she] can from there".

There are more aspects to this fundament of willingness. When relationships are allowed to unfold organically, rather than forced to conform to a predefined model, the logic goes that they also become more safe and long-term:

PIA: And then I also think that there is a greater sense of [emotional] safety, if the love or the attraction, the physical attraction would... if you were to be at different levels there, then, there is absolutely not as a great risk that that person disappears from my life.

RICARDO: No, right.

PIA: Because it builds on, it's a balance there between friendship and total love, passion. (...) If for some reason, (...) there is a lower attraction, then this foundation is still in the warmth of friendship. In community. In liking each other.

When relationships are built on what works, rather than ideas of how they should work, chances are they will survive change.

Another way in which the discourse produced can be said to represent this willingness, or avoidance of demands, is in how commitments of the future are handled. In short, they are disavowed. For instance, Pia puts it like this:

PIA: you shouldn't promise more than what you can keep.

RICARDO: No...

PIA: I think many do that. "I promise I will never-". But then when you utter those marriage vows. I ca-, play with the thought here, uh, now, I have never married, in church, but say you promise to be faithful in all your days. us separately. "Forsaking all others" and "faithful until death do us apart". Horrible situation!

Promising each other to stay together is here seen as inherently unrealistic, a tension waiting to be resolved. Rather than the promise of a strong bond, it is seen as the promise of, or at least, the reminiscence of the likely forthcoming collapse of the bond. And this is seen as inherently unsafe. This is similar to what another of my interview subjects, Jenny, had to say, also in the context of marriage:

JENNY: somehow you've promised each other stuff, even if you haven't said it plainly, but "now it's us", and we, and, like, it's some kind of, guarantee, you have, you have, and, and, it can never be true. One can never promise anything a hundred percent, it's not possible. Eh. And that made me very unsafe knowing that somewhere now that, we've promised each other here, and, I know, yes, I know that none of us will be able to keep it, I know it, that it will be a lie from the beginning to the end, and there, uh, there I felt pretty bad. So, I don't think I felt, good, psychologically, until I decommissioned that couple relationships thing [laugh]. So for me, that has been the biggest upheaval in my life. (...) I feel more emotionally safe when we have no guarantees, we haven't promised anything. (...) Eh. So, for me, that, it may sound paradoxical but, not having any guarantees [is] giving me emotional safety because it feels *honest*.

Again, this can be seen as an expression of a paradigmatic logic in which emotional safety is not a result of making mutual promises, but rather, disavowing promises altogether. Jenny here postulates two different worlds, or as I see them, paradigms. One in which you “promised each other stuff”, and one after she “decommissioned that couple relationships thing”, which – in revolutionary terms – was “the biggest upheaval in [her] life”. She declares that the world in which you promise each other stuff, “made me very unsafe”, whereas now, “when we have no guarantees”, she feels more safe, because promises about the future tend to turn out as “a lie from the beginning to the end”.

The logic behind this way of honoring emotional safety lies in rather than trying to rely on something out of one’s control – such as the future, or someone else’s promise – emotional safety is instead gained through focusing on what one can control, which is, how one reacts to what is actually going on in every present moment. This shift from one system of emotional safety to another, can also be understood in terms of paradigms. In the previous paradigm, her emotional safety laid in the hands of another person’s ability to keep commitments. In the new paradigm, her emotional safety becomes her own responsibility. From this, it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t matter what the other person does. What people do does indeed matter. But emotional safety is gained by focusing on what one can control, and relinquishing trying to control what is out of reach from one’s personal power anyway.

According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), modern society has provided the field of love with increased freedom but at the cost of safety. Where material, social and economic circumstances previously held families together, that glue has slowly withered as a mechanism for keeping relationships together (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, pp. 80-81). This argument, popularized by Eva Illouz in her popular scientific book *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Illouz, 2012) where one of her main arguments is that a de-regulation of the love market and increased freedom of choice is behind much of the pains lived by couples, stands in contrast to what my interview transcripts suggest.

Certainly, the discourses produced during my interviews show that in the paradigm of relationship anarchy, the development towards individual freedom of choice has been taken to an extreme. But in a – in the Kuhnian sense – revolutionary opposition to Beck & Beck-Gernsheim’s, Illouz’ and Bauman’s dystopic predictions, this does not lead to an ego epidemic

nightmare (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 4), or responsible-free top-pocket relationships (Bauman, 2003, p. 21). On the contrary, this freedom appears to go hand in hand with an increased sense of responsibility. Or to put it in Kohlberg's terms, growth from pre-conventional or conventional logics of acting, to a critical, post-conventional, responsible relating in accordance with higher principles such as trust-building, mutuality and interdependency.

In the discourse of relationship anarchy, autonomy and closeness aren't seen as ends of two poles in a continuum. Rather than this either-or, it's a logic of both-and. Or as Mattias puts it, it's about:

MATTIAS: You have someone in your life-

RICARDO: yes

MATTIAS: yet, you are an individual human.

Another example of this both-and logic can be seen in this excerpt:

ROBIN: This safety, it's most of all about, like, that I can trust myself as well.

RICARDO: Right, that you take care of yourself if needed?

ROBIN: Yes Yes. That, that's also very important. At the same time want [sic] somebody, taking care of eachouther, kind of.

Feeling safe in a relationship requires self-trust. But this isn't articulated as in opposition to also caring for one another.

This isn't to imply that the analyses of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Illouz and Bauman are fully inadequate. Rather, I regard their them to be accurately applicable to the paradigm of romantic love. When bonds are maintained, not because of a deep sense of respect for each other's ultimate will, but because of tradition or even worse, a logic of self-interest and therefore, compliance from a sense of duty and obligation, it follows that increased freedom means the end of such bonds. But as I hope to have shown, things work different in this new relationship paradigm, where freedom becomes integral to maintaining bonds.

4.3 Decentering sex

I showed earlier how my interview subjects refer to jealousy in a disowning way, maintaining it only made sense to them in the paradigm of romantic love. I argued that jealousy, with its

traditional meaning, is incommensurable with the paradigm of relationship anarchy. Yet, my interview subjects did speak about jealousy in the context of that paradigm, but in a different way than how it's regularly understood in the paradigm of romantic love. Jealousy can thus be seen as a polysemic term, that is, an element with multiple potential meanings depending on the discursive logic in which it is embedded (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 27). More specifically, the way jealousy is made sense of in the paradigm of relationship anarchy is by disconnecting it from romance and sexuality, and instead, relating it to other types of activities:

JENNY: I don't emphasize sexual activity in the way that I find that many in traditional couple relationships do, that's like the glue in the whole relationship, (...) I cannot have it as my main glue in a *relationship*. It doesn't work then kind of, but, then it's gotta be the conversation, intimacy (...). For me, the activity is the primary thing (...). People usually talk a lot about jealousy and that whole thing. I don't have that, [it's] not like I'm specifically against it, but when it comes to intimacy and stuff like that, [I'm not jealous] (...). I can become jealous, (...) because of something completely different, it might as well, I have a yoga buddy for example, we goes on yoga regularly, but if she would stop getting in touch and start going to yoga with someone else and just like, "you can't come", it would't be very nice.

RICARDO: Mhmm.

JENNY: [Laugh] Then I would be a little sad. But it's not like, it can be just about anything. It can be you, you might be watching TV shows together and then they start to watch with someone else and you're not invited anymore, and, it is more like that. So I haven't been able to relate to jealousy, just, kind of, it's about, if, about, sex or that you fall in love, kind of, that thing, at all, I feel completely alienated to it.

Jealousy is here disconnected from "intimacy" (i.e., sex), and then explicitly articulated as a reasonable sensation when it comes to any other activity that the relationship is centered around, such as yoga, watching TV shows, "it can be just about anything". The logic of jealousy – understood as strong, unpleasant fears of being left out – is thus retained. But as sex has its status downgraded from being part of the necessary fundament of relationships, to becoming optional, the vehicle for jealousy is no longer sex, but can in fact be any type of activity. It is what one usually does in a relationship, that is articulated as the pillars, and this is not necessarily sex.

In my interview with Pia, she says similar things:

PIA: It boils down to sex. I don't understand, sex has such a special position. (...) Why is it so much more, surrounded about how, norms, than for example who you have dinner with? Or, the one you talk to when you are sad? Or the one you borrow clothes from? Why has it just become what is so tremendously, yes (...) I had a boyfriend I was with, he had a female friend who he talked to on the phone, all the time. I think that I felt worse than (...) if he had had sex with her. Because it is about a trust [inaudible], which, like, makes her more important to [inaudible].

Here romantic love is questioned as to why sex is such a focal point. Pia then provides an example in which jealousy did make sense, but it wasn't because of sex, but rather, because of intense communication, which Pia deems as "felt worse than (...) if he had had sex with her". Pia also says:

PIA: And if someone I love stops loving me, then it's a bit sad. But I am still quite sure that he won't disappear from my life. Because we have so much else in common. Then it is also the fact that you don't make everything depend on having sex. One builds a relationship on laughs and such things. On having similar interests. Things one, well, like with each others as persons. It doesn't change if you stop loving someone.

When relationships are flexible as to what they are centered around, not having sex isn't a problem as the relationship can be centered around anything else. This makes it easier to keep connections, rather than throw them away in search for another, as Bauman maintains is the case for the contemporary way of doing love (Bauman, 2003, pp. 5, 13).

Sex is not the only relationship practice which is downgraded. Also other relationship practices which are said to be central in the paradigm of romantic love are decentered:

JENNY: If I were to live with some people, it would be with those [I know since long ago]. It's not obvious that just because I am physically attracted to someone so it doesn't mean that I want to live with them, I don't make that connection at all. It's completely, (...) different things.

Having a sexual attraction to somebody doesn't imply a certain succession of events in a relationship, such as eventually moving together.

Not only jealousy can be seen as a polysemic term, as described above. Also the very concept of relationship has different meanings depending on what paradigm one the word is used in. For instance, Robin states:

ROBIN: It's not only (...) romantic relationships that are (...) relationships. (...) I've (...) noticed (...) something I find very safe. Is that I'm politically organized, in a group that meets very regularly. And that also has a physical place. And that means that it is like, like, the (...) the form of organization (...) is also a kind of relationship that, which for me almost becomes part of some sort of non-monogamy, (...) we are around 20 members too, and it's happened that someone, like, moves [abroad], and it's so, sad, but at the same time, so it is so safe to know that there are always people there, like me. Whom I like a lot, and whom I can trust, (...) [it] has been such a surprisingly positive experience.

In the excerpt above, Robin uses the term to describe bonds in a social movement, and likens them to non-monogamy. Where relationship in the paradigm of romantic love means, simply, a love relationship, the concept of relationship in the paradigm of relationship anarchy, is by

definition less saturated with pre-conceptions and thus, is more open for interpretation. Here, relationship is reclaimed from a context of romance, and instead used to describe a social movement context. One way to interpret this is that universal relationship needs – such as for safety, closeness and community – are set free from the taken for granted strategy of resolving these in a romantic context consisting of two, enabling them to be met in multiple ways, one of which is in a social movement group.

Below is another example of how relationship needs can be met by a flexibility in what gets to count as a relationship. Mattias says:

MATTIAS: if you want to be the one most prioritized in someone else's life, it's like, the most important person, people usually have friend relationships that last, like, 10-20 years longer than their [romantic] relationships. And that lasts longer.

Considering that friendship relationships tend to last quite longer than romantic relationships, maybe traditional romantic relationships aren't the way to go, if one wants to meet needs for longevity, goes the argument.

The larger picture in these excerpts, I argue, is that decentering sex, and disavowing jealousy are logically interconnected with other reformulations or translations of concepts from a paradigm of romantic love, to a new paradigm. Rather than bonds being thrown under the bus, what happens is that strategies which, in romantic love, are connected to trust, longevity, and bonding, are here disconnected from these functions, and reconnected to other practices.

In this section, I hope to have shown how jealousy is made sense of in the paradigm of relationship anarchy. While it is disowned when it comes to sex, my interview subjects use jealousy in a weak sense, by relating it to other types of activities than sex, put the activity itself at the centre. As I've argued, relationship anarchy is defined much by being in opposition to the paradigm of romantic love. Logically, if you can become a bit sad when your yoga relationship stops taking you to yoga classes, because they prefer doing yoga with someone else, then you would think you can also become a bit sad if someone you are having sex with no longer wants to do so anymore because they prefer having sex with someone else. But the discursive formation of relationship anarchy is so preoccupied with being in opposition to romantic love, that to distinguish itself from the possessiveness of that paradigm, maybe repeated assertions have to be made there is little or no discomfort when one's loved one as sex with others. I wouldn't be

surprised if a more mature paradigm, when becoming more separated from its close relationship to romantic love, sharpening its own contours, could reclaim the concept of jealousy – or come up with a concept of its own, yet revolutionary distinct from how jealousy is understood in the paradigm of romantic love. That would make the paradigm of relationship anarchy more logically coherent, and increase the granularity of its formulation, much like Kuhn argues how normal science over time, increases the level of detail of its facts (Kuhn, 1996, p. 26-27).

On the other hand, part of the point made by my interviewees is that the examples with yoga and with sex mentioned above don't really make sense, as they presuppose a paradigm of resource scarcity. In reality, it doesn't make sense that someone would want to stop having sex with you only because they started doing so with someone else. Unless, of course, that someone lives in the paradigm of romantic love.

4.4 Best practices securing emotional safety in relationships

Another theme I sifted out in my interview transcripts was how best practices for creating emotional safety in relationships were described. A key differentiation was done between securing emotional safety by means of obscuring what is really going on, versus, full transparency. Transparency and talking straight is here formulated as an improvement of, and in opposition to not talking straight, even though both strategies are meant to aid emotional safety and relationship longevity. Robin puts it this way:

ROBIN: [Robins' partner] probably became quite scared of how I would react, if I were to feel unsafe, so she was kind of sneaking with details [about how she related to others], or like, was imprecise-

RICARDO: Like, to protect you?

ROBIN: *Like, to protect me! Exactly!* And it was the completely, completely wrong way, it was quite the opposite [from what] was supposed to be!

Robin was in a relationship in which the other person was walking on eggshells in order not to disclose details about relating with others, which might upset Robin. But this strategy is eschewed with high modality, as “completely, completely wrong”. The very opposite – transparency – is what's “supposed to be”, for the same aim, emotional protection. Mattias mentions this like this:

MATTIAS: in that relationship I learned some bad communication habits. (...) this openness I try to have in all relationships, (...) it fell a little to the side, because the other person in [this]

relationship felt very insecure, and couldn't always hear that I was talking about the person I live with, or people I want to have sex with. And couldn't stand listening to any sexual details, or anything like that. (...) I kind of learned to be silent about things, and it caused a little rift, a little tear, even in relation-, like, the relationship, the friendship with this other person (...). Neither of us wants to feel that the other hides something to protect, or, to (...) tuck part of one's life away, kind of.

Mattias here then postulates "bad communication habits", specifically, to obscure certain facts as it was painful for his partner to hear these. A conclusion drawn is that the strategy of withholding information in order to protect is dismissed as ineffective, in the long run and when a bigger picture is taken into the account. In the paradigm of relationship anarchy, the strategy of sparing someone details isn't functional for increasing emotional safety. It, in fact, only makes things worse as it's incommensurable with the logics of how this paradigm works. In a world view in which sex with others isn't seen as a threat to the relationship, it doesn't make sense to be secretive about it. It's not that one is required to confess sexual acts with others. It's not about being accused and then admitting, it's not about being required to disclose one's whereabouts. It's about being included in each others' life. But when relating to persons whose understanding of emotional security is built on another paradigm, these difficulties of inter-paradigmatic integration arise. Mattias continues:

MATTIAS: In that relationship where we broke up, it ended it because I couldn't talk about [sex with, or desires with others]. And, because that [silence], it, (...) gave me incredibly much self-hatred.

RICARDO: You didn't like yourself when you weren't honestly telling everything to everyone involved?

MATTIAS: No, exactly, because then it was like I was walking around lying a lot, and (...) [That's] one of the hardest feelings I know, to feel that I am lying to someone I love.

Withholding information is articulated as tried and dismissed, as it was a costly strategy in terms of self-image, as withholding information does not meet Mattias' core values. This withholding is also condemned when one is the third party. Pia says:

PIA: He did it the coward way. She didn't know about me. I didn't like that. (...) I think that if one had been honest from the outset, then it would probably have passed. But you can't, (...), especially towards her, she was really jealousy. He was down in [location] when I lived there and went to [sports] and she was called all the time and, it was like really [inaudible], "aren't you with that [Pia]"? Like that. And then he *lied!* It gets so *hard*, it gets so *complicated* if you do it that way.

RICARDO: Mhmm.

PIA: Yeah, but then, but, you don't have to complicate it. "This is how it is, this is how I live. If

you don't like it then we'll discuss it, see if we can come up with something that we both can enjoy." (...) One mustn't lie to each other.

Saying other than what is true is not only strongly condemned. There is also a category for it – it is the “coward way”, implying it's not the first time the withholding of information variation is experienced. It is then articulated as “complicate it”, making it harder than necessary. The resolution lies in simply standing up for how one wants to live. “This is how I live”.

Robin puts it this way, in the context of discussing strategies to increase emotional safety in relationships:

ROBIN: for me it is usually about meeting the other person. And see, kind of, “you're one is a human being. You want me well. You want to want my, kind of, partner, or my date, well”. Like that. And then I usually talk quite thoroughly with the one I have a relationship with, it's like, just *as long as I get to be involved*, kind of! Get involved in what they are doing, get, follow along in what what my partner feels for the other person, (...) as well as, all the good stuff that makes them want to be together kind of. And, and that for me it is about being admitted in some way.

Here, being invited to follow along in how one's partners' relationships develop, is articulated as the solution to emotional safety. What is implied is that, it is when one is not exposed to the third party, when one is not allowed to have insight to what is going on, that it becomes hard to trust. It's not learning everything as in surveying or controlling. It's about being invited to one's partners' life, in the same way as one is allowed to know how other areas in life are going. It's not only when to parties are discussing a third party, that this transparency is articulated as crucial. It also applies in other time dimensions, and while involving different persons. Jenny for instance expresses that she likes to learn about a new partners' previous partners, as it's part of the new partners' history:

JENNY: And then you meet someone new, then you're supposed not to talk about the one you dated previously, then it's sposed to be like this, big *no-no* [laugh]. Although it may have been a person who has been a big part of one's life for several years. And then you just supposed to bury it and then, it's *really weird!* (...) Maybe [your ex] is *exactly* what to talk about when you enter a relationship, then you for sure want to know what kind of relationships did this person have previously? One might almost want to interview their ex as well, kind of [laugh]. (...) You might want to be friends with her/him, you might want like, it's still a considerable part of who you are, your personality, and you want to like the whole person. And then you want, like, I want to get the context. (...) And, that, I think people find hard.

So, when meeting a new partner, one does not only want to learn a new partners' history except for details from previous relationships; on the contrary. It's articulated as part of the person one is trying to get to know. This transparency and seeing things for what they are is seen as important

when meeting people in person. Jenny here rants about demands to withhold her feelings for one person when they were seeing this person and this person's other partner at the same time:

JENNY: she had like this, "I don't want the two of you to kiss when I'm with you". And I felt *fake!* No, we don't have to kiss all the time, but, but if that impulse comes, I want it to come! (...) So that gets hard, because I mean, I only-, if there is someone I like, and they kiss someone else, I get really happy, it's like that's just really nice! So I don't have that [problem], it just feels, good inside [laugh]. And I wish that, that those around me could feel somewhat like that sometimes too. (...) [When] somebody starts setting up rules like, "I don't want you to", it feels like it's not honest because I mean, she knows that we-, that we did [kiss and make out] when she wasn't with [us] anyway. It gets so-

RICARDO: It becomes like an irritation [for you], (...) that it "works" just by not seeing?

JENNY: Yes, yes. Yes. So that, yes, it-, I just quit that project with them, because I, I couldn't handle that, I can't, I can't like-, totally allergic to living some sort of double life or that it's not like-, to be restrained, it doesn't feel natural, it's, it gets stiff, and it doesn't work.

So, obscuring kisses and tucking away other intimate behaviors that everyone involved is well aware of are happening anyway, is seen as being fake. Part of wanting to see two persons, one of which oneself loves, is that one enjoys their happiness. This open love way is not articulated as built around the concept of blinders, on the contrary, it is articulated as foundational, to accept what really is going on and learning to enjoy it.

In this section, I've hoped to show a few more features in the paradigm of relationship anarchy. Closeness of bonds is aided by full transparency. This full transparency is, in a Kuhnian sense, revolutionary distinct from full control. It's not about surveying each other, it's about the inadequacy of secrecy in a paradigm that relies on you "being allowed to be who [you are]". Emotional safety is honored by inviting your relationships to learn about all aspects of your life – including your love life and relationships with others. These become not a threat, as in the paradigm of romantic love, but the very opposite: an opportunity to confide each other with even more aspects of one's life, share more experiences and thereby, strengthening one's relationship.

5 Conclusion

In this section, I will conclude what we've learned so far, and also discuss some implications of this as well as possible objections to my analysis.

In several passages of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's book *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that one of the crucial problems faced by modern love, is the perceived conflict between autonomy and closeness. It's about "finding a balance between being yourself and being a part of a lasting togetherness" (Ibid., p. 77). They ask questions such as: "are love and freedom irreconcilable opposites?" (Ibid., p. 65). "How can you develop your own potential while remaining a social being?" (Ibid., p. 44). In several passages, they state that modern love is riddled with contradictions and problems which remain to be solved.

When seen through the lens of Kuhn's paradigm theory, the paradigm of romantic love appears to be in a crisis. Maybe reconciling autonomy with freedom is one of the anomalies that romantic love doesn't do very well solving? On the other hand, in the narratives my interviews produced, the conflict between closeness and autonomy is no longer a problem in the same way as in the paradigm of romantic love. It's not because the problem is ignored, patched, or resolved within the paradigm that romantic love is embedded in. Rather, the questioning of relationship norms appears to allow reconstruction of relational practices and ideas. This reconstruction of the social landscape is so thorough that the premises on which the problem is based, no longer apply. In other words, the dilemma isn't solved with the same thinking that creates the problem. Rather, it's when the relationship map changes that the problem loses its relevance and becomes obsolete.

The discursive formation of relationship anarchy is repeatedly articulated in opposition to the paradigm of romantic love. In that sense, the paradigm of relationship anarchy, although having the social consequences that new strategies, ways and – yes, even new relationship norms – arise, still depends on what it is being opposed to for its definition. It doesn't stand on its own feet, so to speak. Yet, it inevitably tends to become systematic in its social doing, performativity and articulation. Even though it discursively aims to disavow modelling and norms, disowning norms and a DIY approach to constructing one's relationships somehow appears to become a norm. How can this logical inconsistency be handled?

One way is to see it through the concept of anomaly. As mentioned, one way to manage anomalies is by ignoring them. Maybe this is how relationship anarchy maintains its stability as a discursive formation – by maintaining a preoccupation with romantic love, while ignoring the philosophical question of whether relating beyond norms is even possible. Another way to manage this anomaly is of course to provide an ad hoc solution: maybe some norms – such as the norm of finding “escapes and tricks to counter the worst of the problematic norms” (Nordgren, 2006), or norms of interdependency or of resource abundance consciousness – could be articulated as helpful, while other norms are simultaneously questioned? With this solution, maybe a branch of relationship anarchy could be developed, and discursive constructions seen as “best practices” for DIY relationships could be articulated.

That would, of course, render these as targets of further deconstruction and questioning. But then, using a paradigm theory framework, that’s how development can be argued to happen, in dialectic shifts and episodes, from one normal relating, through acknowledging anomalies, to deconstructive with a systems’ main tenets, past a revolution, to a new paradigm. A suggestion for future research is: what problems, anomalies, or unexpected events is a mature relationship anarchy prone to become riddled with? What problems does relationship anarchy stumble upon if it solidifies to become a model of its own, albeit with extremely few tenets?

Another discussion which may arise from my investigation is how I spell out my view on causality. Kuhn studied the history of science. Studying history implies looking at phenomena during different time periods. I have only looked at the narratives produced during one slice of time. I can therefore only imply, but by no means, argue, that the discourse formation of relationship anarchy, indeed, is the result of social or historical transformation in this group, in a sense comparable with how Kuhn argued was the case for science. Certainly, as I have shown, the narratives of my interview persons generally imply that their collective understanding of the matters at hand did happen a process over time, ignited by problems which romantic love didn’t resolve, followed by philosophical reflection leading to radical shifts and to their current way of understanding relationships. And while I can’t say that this wasn’t how it happened, in a strict sense, I cannot say that was how it did happen either. The methods I’ve used don’t allow me to make any such claims.

To put this differently: now in hindsight, in the way I've performed this study, I cannot claim – assuming a realist ontology – that these narratives are signs of deeper, underlying shifts. What my methodology allows me to say is that by looking at the discursive formation of relationship anarchy through the lens of this adapted paradigm theory, it certainly looks that way. But this is also somehow begging the question. Applying paradigm theory on any phenomenon will help us imagine it in a developmental path occurring in the Kuhnian way. On the other hand, this befalls to all theoretical choices – all theories do, by definition, help us make sense of phenomena in their particular way.

In my introduction, I asked whether relationship anarchy could be seen as a deepening of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, p. 4) call an “ego epidemic”, or rather, “pioneering into new territory, a quest for better, if unfamiliar solutions” (Ibid.) and a sign of “deeper transformation” (Ibid.). As I've already implied, these questions can be answered in different ways depending on what theoretical and methodological choices one makes. With this thesis, I hope to have provided a compelling way to understand contemporary developments in the field of relationships.

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Appendix A: Interview guide, translated from scribble in Swedish

- Focus: learn how relationship anarchists meet their needs for emotional safety, intimacy, longevity, commitment, trust. Interested in deconstruction, reconstruction. How did you become a relationship anarchist? What circumstances made it happen? Focus on emotion.

Beginning of interview (reminders)

- Practical details. Anonymity, stopping the interview, ask if recording is OK.
- Mention my approach. More interested in the explorative, than to get ready-made answers
- Say something about my intention, it's to understand, rather than question "from the outside". Not to question if it's possible having safe, committed, long-lived relationship with emotional intimacy, that, I presuppose. But rather, find out how it's done in practice. I'll be happy to share how I think about it, if it helps interviewer-interviewee trust.
- Ask: is there something you want to know about me before we proceed?

Starting points

- Relationship anarchy
- How do you practice relationship anarchy?
- What does relationship anarchy mean to you?
- My thesis subject: emotional safety, relationship longevity, commitment, trust, attachment. Any reaction or anything to say about how the subject itself affects you?
- Tell me about your current (and past?) relationships
- How do you do to take care about emotional safety, commitment, emotional intimacy?
 - Yours?
 - Your partners'?
- Do you sometimes experience a discrepancy between how you think about it, and how you actually live it?

Ending the interview

- Is there anything you'd like to address, that we haven't spoken about yet, in this context?
- What pronoun do you prefer in text?