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Co-Becomings of Companionships

Affective Negotiations With the Couple-Form

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which the couple-form and its normativity take part in the everyday life of companionships that are "other than couple" relationships. I develop the concept of affective negotiation to analyze the processes in which the companionships are experienced, practiced, and acknowledged. I study the affective negotiations particularly in relation to naming practices and comparisons and expectations around the relationship categories. The article is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with individuals who have important life companion(s) that they refer to as, for example, friends, flat-mates, animal companions, and ex-partners, or fields of multiple relationships. I analyze the data using feminist materialist methodologies and affect theories. Trough reading the data with the concept of co-becoming, I develop an understanding of companionships as dynamic processes lived and experienced in everyday life through entangled affective negotiations. I argue that the couple-form takes part in the co-becomings of companionships in multiple and often contradictory ways. The normativity of the couple-form emerges through affective tensions that may limit the possibilities of these co-becomings, for example by troubling the processes of "making sense" of the intimacies. The co-becomings are also world-making practices where new ways of relating are created and imagined; they include the potential to move away from the normative power of the couple-form and materialize in unexpected ways.

Keywords: affective negotiations, co-becoming, companionships, couple-form

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lambda nordica **ONLINE FIRST**

> Things we have been connecting before only to a romantic couple relationship, things such as prioritization, putting yourself out for the other, having meta-conversations, and thinking about the direction, the future… We have now realized you can do all that in other relationships, too. It has been, like, pretty mind blowing. – Maria

GIVEN THE DOMINANT role of the couple-form in the shared imaginaries of intimacy, it is not surprising that attuning to companionships other than couple relationships often occurs in connection with, or in comparison to, romantic partnerships. Important and life-defining experiences of sharing life – referred to here as companionship – can develop both within and outside culturally recognized relationship categories. These experiences can emerge through processes of making and breaking the lines between different forms of intimacy or through adapting the couple-form to companionships beyond romantic relationships. Desired, experienced, material, and imagined non-romantic companionships may also take shape through practices such as turning away from the normative understandings of family and creating alternatives to the couple-form. Affective negotiations with the couple-form do not necessarily follow carefully considered logic but may instead take shape through complex and situated social and material entanglements.

Even though the societal, cultural and political conditions for arranging intimate relations have undergone significant changes during the last decades, the normative status of the couple relationship continues to shape the practices, experiences, and understandings of intimate relationships. In societies like Finland, for example, where intimate relationships are increasingly arranged in ways that diverge from the model of the heterosexual nuclear family (Juvonen 2019, 6; Pirskanen, Eerola & Jokinen 2020, 127), and where solo living has become more common (Kolehmainen, Lahti & Kinnunen 2023, 4), the couple relationship remains both individually desired and socially supported. It is a marker of adulthood (Heinonen 2024) that holds a special status among all close relationships (Pirskanen & Eerola 2018; Kolehm-

ainen 2019). Roseneil et al. (2020, 4) state that the couple-form, "the structure of affinity that is composed of an intimate/sexual dyad," is "institutionalized, supported and mandated by a plethora of legal regulations, social policies and institutions, cultural traditions and everyday practices." This structure of affinity largely explains the clear disproportion between the cultural recognition of close relationships and the diverse reality of those that do not align with conventional relationship categories. I argue that this is also the case in Finland, and I further seek to understand the pervasive yet complex pull of the couple-form by investigating significant and life-defining experiences of companionships that do not fit into the categories of romantic and sexual couple relationships.

I specifically address how the couple-form and its normativity participate in the processes through which the companionships I study are experienced, practiced and acknowledged. I do this by highlighting affective negotiations with the couple-form, mapping how the practices and experiences of companionships break away from, align with or become fixed to the couple-form. I seek to capture the complexity of the lived realities of these affective negotiations through a methodological approach of co-becoming (Lykke 2019), inspired by posthumanist and feminist new materialist thinking. Through this lens, I view companionships as dynamic and situated processes that resist becoming a static state of affairs; they are entangled becomings with significant others and with the world, shaped by their situated everyday experiences and negotiations (Lykke 2021, 48–49).

I use the term "companionship" to conceptualize the experiences of relating that the interviewees in this study identified as particularly important in their lives. By focusing on everyday experiences rather than cultural categorizations, my broad definition of companionships extends to intimacies that may not fit within the existing terminology of close relationships. Furthermore, these companionships do not necessarily conform to the normative model of a reciprocal relationship, where two human individuals aim to form an equal, long-lasting, and dyadic bond. The common thread among the companionships in my

study is the experience of sharing life with someone or something of vital importance that is not a partner in a couple relationship.

Donna Haraway's (2008, 2016a) work on companion species and Nina Lykke's (2021) work on compassionate companionship have considerably influenced my understanding of companionship, broadening it beyond a relationship between two or more individuals. These works have prompted me to consider the evolvement of companionships within the nature–culture continuum. My posthuman approach thus extends beyond recognizing non-humans as important life companions, particularly since, with one exception, the companionships discussed in this article are based on interviews about human–human relationships. My contribution to feminist new materialist and posthuman discussions stems from efforts to make sense of the affective and non-compartmentalizable dynamics of companionships in relation to the couple-form, which challenge humanist notions of agency.

I begin my discussion with two theoretical sections. First, I introduce my approach to studying the couple-form and its normativity against the background of feminist and queer studies. Then, I outline the theoretical and methodological framework of my study, which is inspired by posthuman and new materialist thinking. Following this, I introduce my interview data and methods of analysis. The discussion then moves into two analytical sections: I examine how the couple-form flickers within the co-becomings of the companionships, focusing on naming, comparisons, and expectations around relationship categories. Finally, I conclude with reflections on confronting normativity in the lived realities of companionships in ways that open to their affective complexity.

The couple-form and its normativity

Within feminist and queer studies, there is a growing body of research on alternative kinships, chosen families, and various kinds of intimate relationships (Lahti, Aarnio, Moring & Kerppola 2020; Uibo 2021). There is also a growing number of studies on close relationships that discuss the blurred and shifting definitions of kinship and the practices of closeness, care, and commitment in non-romantic relationships

(Heinonen 2024; Kolehmainen, Lahti & Lahad 2022). Additionally, significant studies on couple normativity and singlehood have been conducted recently (Roseneil et al. 2020; Lahad 2017). These studies de-centre romantic love and sexual desire as constitutive elements of intimate relations and suggest that an incipient shift is occurring in the understanding of close relationships beyond couple normativity. My study contributes to this emerging field of studies on non-normative intimacies, addressing the need to question couple normativity and theoretically re-imagine companionship, while also challenging human-centeredness in the study of companionships.

Roseneil et al. (2020) understand the couple-form as a structure of intimacy that encompasses various cultural emphases and variations, such as the heterosexual or co-habiting couple-form. Couple normativity, on the other hand, is understood as the process by which the couple-form is promoted and enforced in societies. I reframe the concept of the couple-form by understanding it not as a fixed structure, but as something more open to affectivity, ambivalent desires, and practices of relating. Affective negotiations with the couple-form are thus not merely negotiations with particular and fixed types of relationship categories, institutions, and norms; they are also embodied practices of "doing" companionship that engage with vibrant and multifaceted imaginaries and experiences of sharing and togetherness. In my research setting, where companionships are studied as co-becomings, I examine how couple normativity, heteronormativity, and culturally shared imaginaries and terminology concerning relationship categories participate in the negotiations with the couple-form. Following Osella (2019), I view heteronormativity as operating in complex ways that do not originate in the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary but emerge in social and material entanglements of sexual and non-sexual practices and understandings. My emphasis is thus on the affective and ambiguous entanglements in which societal structures and the agency of individuals take shape through each other, assembling in dynamic ways.

The everyday practices and negotiations of companionships emerge through the understandings and definitions attributed to these relationships and vice versa (Juvonen 2019; Hammack et al. 2018). Hammack et

al. (2018, 583) argue for the need to further develop our understanding of relational practices and suggest that a queer paradigm can recognize "the diverse ways in which individuals engage with normative discourses of sex, romance, and relationships." Juvonen (2019, 16) also suggests that diversifying relational practices may in the near future lead to the creation and adaption of new terminology for both sexual and non-sexual practices. My analysis in this article demonstrates that this process is already underway and discusses the felt significance and ambiguous agency of terminology shaping the experiences of companionships.

Queer theories have offered illuminating analyses of how the (heterosexual) couple relationship holds a predominant status among all intimacies largely due to its association with happiness and the future (Halberstam 2005; Ahmed 2010). Companionships other than couple relationships may also develop a sense of meaningfulness through similar values and desires with which the couple-form is saddled. It is, however, a less straightforward task to define how the normativity of the couple-form affects companionships in which shared lives are built without romance and reproduction as building blocks. The companionships explored in this article, which fall outside of or in-between categories such as friendship and couple relationships, unfold with uncertainties and "ambivalences that may challenge and destabilize heteronormativity without questioning its status" (Kolehmainen 2019, 69). While some companionships may seek to build commitments that radically challenge the notion of romance as a "central and organizing affect for connection and belonging" (Uibo 2021, 39), others may reject entirely the imaginary of dyadic commitment. Moreover, this is not necessarily a choice of either/or. Expectations, terminologies, and tensions around relationship categories connect with the companionships through affective negotiations within matter and meaning that resist being organized as linear or logical.

Affective negotiations and co-becoming

I develop the concept of affective negotiation to emphasize the affective and material-discursive nature of bodies, events, and experiences through which the companionships co-become. Mol (2021, 128) sug-

gests that even though the term "negotiation" might not initially seem adequate for socio-material thinking, it can nevertheless serve as a useful term for understanding things that happen between human and non-human agency. On one hand, negotiation has been viewed as a fruitful term in responding to matters concerning the bridging of the gap between theory and practice in theoretical thinking (Craig 2006, 165–167). On the other hand, the term negotiation can emphasize cognitive, verbal, and conscious processes wherein an individual navigates between relatively clearly defined and pre-existing options. However, I follow Mol's (2021, 137) argument that some "negotiations do not hinge on arguments" but are "a matter of fine-tuning practices." I continue from Mol's concept of negotiation, plugging in affect theories and materialist ontologies "where discourse and matter are mutually implicated in the unfolding emergence of the world" (MacLure 2013, 659–660). Hence, negotiation does not refer to human individuals' cognitive practices, operating as a closed system, separate from affectivity. When combined with the notion of affectivity, negotiation expands to encompass more-than-human agency. Here, affective negotiation is understood as a world-making practice (Haraway 2016b), where representation and reflexivity merge with the material co-becomings of companionships, simultaneously relating to and producing realities. As Mol (2021, 128) suggests, "the negotiations that go into shaping socio-material worlds are not necessarily conducted verbally," but language and words play a role in ordering reality and world-making practices: matter and meaning entangle.

Relational affect theories allow for the study of companionships beyond the usual domains "such as sexuality, private life or interpersonal relations" (Kolehmainen, Lahti & Lahad 2022, 1). Drawing on affect theories, I approach companionships and their negotiations with the couple-form as affective processes – complex webs of relations involving both human and non-human agencies. In line with Kolehmainen, Lahti and Lahad (2022), I adopt the Deleuzo-Guattarian understanding of affectivity: affect emerges in relations beyond human bodies and interaction and thus does not originate in any specific body. The defining element of affect theories

is a broad interest in studying intensities, moods, flows, and atmospheres that circulate between bodies and within societies (Gregg & Seigworth 2010; Kolehmainen & Juvonen 2018). Affect is often studied by tracing its manifestation in subjectively felt emotions, but in Spinozian and Deleuzo-Guattarian theories, affect is considered distinct from human emotions due to its more-than-human, ontologically relational, and precognitive nature (Hickey-Moody 2019, 46–47; Clough 2010, 207). Consequently, I do not separate affect from embodied subjectivities or from cultural and political norms and discourses, as I understand affectivity to be a constitutive element of their entangled formations. In studying affectivity in the co-becomings of companionships, this approach involves paying attention to the material, emotional, discursive and situated relations through which experiences of companionship and relating take shape.

The concept of co-becoming (Innola 2024; Lykke 2019) is central to my methodological approach and plays an active role in attuning to the affective negotiations with the couple-form in the experiences, practices, and understandings of companionships. I conceptualize companionships as processes of co-becomings, where affective negotiations and material practices of becoming-together shape the experience of being and becoming in the world. Lykke (2019) introduces the concept of co-becoming in her poetic exploration of mourning and transforming with the altered physical state of existence of her late partner. In my work, I use the term co-becoming to emphasize the dynamic nature of relating, as I develop the concept for studying the affective negotiations with the couple-form through which companionships unfold. While Lykke's (2019, 2021) co-becoming delves into re-thinking the humanist life–death dichotomy and the questions of becoming-with through existential transformations, my methodological adaptation of co-becoming in this article is inevitably more limited, particularly in terms of not engaging with the profound spiritual and existential questions that Lykke ties to the concept of co-becoming.

Yet, drawing from Lykke's conceptual work, I shift my focus away from exhaustively humanist ways of understanding what is at stake in relations with significant others. The methodological-theoretical lens of

co-becoming enables me to tune into the complex affective elements in my mapping of companionships' negotiations with the couple-form, fostering an understanding of companionships that may or may not become experienced as reciprocally determined and clearly defined, yet remain life-sustaining.

Consequently, rather than aiming for a merely representative and explanatory analysis, the analysis presented here is part of a process in which the onto-epistemological lines and cartographies of feminist materialist thought, affect theories and post-qualitative methodologies co-become with my process of thinking about companionships in relation to the data. The process of knowledge production is a co-becoming, where my researcher body becomes part of the assemblage of the research, thinking with theory and with the data (Mazzei 2013, 732).

Data and methods

The data for this article is drawn from a larger dataset of twenty semi-structured interviews that I conducted between 2020 and 2022 as part of my ongoing research. The total number of interviewees is twenty-seven, with each interview involving either one or two interviewees. I recruited the interviewees through social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and public notice board announcements (e.g., in public libraries and meeting places), inviting participants to discuss their experiences of sharing everyday life with important companions in other than couple relationships. I crafted my Finnish-language call for interviews with the goal of being as open as possible to the participants' own ways of understanding companionship and sharing. I used the Finnish terms for "companion" (*kumppani*) and "life companionship" (*elämänkumppanuus*) in the call, noting that it was not necessary for the interviewees to define their relationships using these exact terms. I also explained that the companions could be non-human and that they did not have to live together in a shared household, as the emphasis was on the interviewees' own experiences of sharing life.

The interviewees are involved in diverse family and close relationship arrangements and have different ways of living and understand-

ing companionships. The companionships discussed in the interviews included friends, relatives, ex-partners, flatmates, as well as dog and horse companions. Most of the interviewees focused on a specific companion, although some understood companionship as a broader web of relations. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, and all the interviewees are native Finnish speakers. The majority of the interviewees are young women under the age of 40. Two of the interviewees were in the 20–24 age group, six in the 25–29 group, seven in the 30–34 group, seven in the 35–39 group, two in the 40–44 group, one in the 50–54 group, and two were 65 or older. Of the twenty-seven interviewees, twenty-one identify as women, two as gender-non-conforming women, two as men, and two as non-binary.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour, with the shortest being an individual interview of 49 minutes and the longest, an interview with two participants, lasting 1 hour and 39 minutes. I began each interview by asking the interviewees to introduce their companionships in their own terms and to describe how their connection had begun and evolved. This opening question often led to long, in-depth conversations about the meanings and practicalities of sharing life. Although I did not directly ask how the interviewees named their companionships, questions about terminology and naming emerged early in some of the interviews. I asked the interviewees what constitutes the everyday life of their companionships, what aspects of the companionships are the most important to them, and how they envision the future of these relationships. I also inquired about any difficulties related to the companionships, though responses to this question were often brief and did not include accounts of major conflicts or experiences of discrimination. These issues, however, frequently emerged more subtly as the conversation evolved beyond the initial questions.

In this article I focus specifically on analyzing those interviews where the interviewees discuss the connections between their companionships and couple relationships. Most of these companionships involve relatively close-knit everyday sharing with human companion(s), such as sharing housing or frequently visiting each other, though this is not the

case for all interviewees. Additionally, most of the interviewees mentioned being, or having been, involved in culturally recognized forms of intimacy, such as couple relationships, dating, and/or traditional family arrangements, alongside the companionship(s) I interviewed them about. In my interview questions I did not explicitly ask participants to compare different types of relationships. Nevertheless, more than half of the interviewees reflected on their relationships in relation to cultural imaginaries, personal views, and/or lived experiences concerning couple relationships.

I approach the data with an orientation informed by feminist new materialist methodologies (Coleman & Ringrose 2013; Fox & Alldred 2016; MacLure 2013). These methodologies share an interest in creating concepts and moving beyond the logics of representation and interpretation. According to MacLure (2013, 660), these logics imply a "critical, intentional subject standing separate and outside of 'the data', digging behind or beyond or beneath it, to identify higher order meanings, themes or categories." My analysis focuses on interviewees' discussions of everyday practices and the ways they make sense of their companionships with explicit references to couple relationships. Furthermore, I draw from parts of the interviews that I interpret as affective negotiations with the couple-form in less explicit ways; I map how the couple-form is both rejected and adapted in the co-becomings, and how these affective negotiations unfold in non-linear ways. In doing so, I highlight how ambivalences and tensions produce both limiting and enabling potentialities. In line with feminist new materialist methodologies, my analysis seeks to capture the movements and fixity in affective relations by acknowledging complex realities that cannot be fully explained by categorizations and causal logics alone (Kolehmainen 2019; Coleman & Ringrose 2013).

In the following sections, I map out the affective negotiations with the couple-form through analytical emphases on naming, comparison, and expectations related to relationship categories. I begin the analysis by examining the practices of boundary-making and boundary-breaking in naming.

Co-becomings through naming practices

Discussions about how existing relationship terminology, such as "friendship," "couple relationship," or "ex-partner," does not adequately capture the participants' experiences recur throughout the interviews. Many of the interviewees express that they cannot fully convey the everyday practices or the depth of their companionships using these terms. The lack of a specific name for their way of experiencing companionship emerges as a particularly troubling issue for some, if not all, interviewees, especially when their close relationships blur the normative boundaries between "types" of intimate relations. Sometimes the issue of naming is mentioned only briefly, but particularly in the three interviews I analyze next, the question of naming becomes a pivotal factor in the co-becoming of the companionships.

Maria and Laura, women in their mid- to late twenties, have recently gone through a process of contemplating and re-defining their relationship. They have come up with a term, "platonic life companions,"[1] independent of the similar wording I used in my call for interviewees. Maria and Laura are the only interviewees who specifically chose the word "companionship" to describe their relationship – other interviewees used this word occasionally alongside other alternatives and were possibly influenced by my initial wording choices.

> MARIA: We just like a month ago decided that we will no longer talk about each other as best friends, but… Because it isn't exactly, it feels like it lacks something. If I talk to, like, some stranger who doesn't know me or Laura, and I say Laura is my best friend, then that doesn't convey what we really are. So, we then decided that we will call each other platonic life companions, it comes much closer to that. […]
>
> LAURA: […] But if we talk about life companionship, it's much more like looking towards the future and like, we are best friends, but we also have made a decision in a way. That our relationship will continue far into the future, and precisely as a companionship and not like on a level of friendship. Not like we go to the theatre together from time to

> time when we're in our fifties. But like in a way that we are constantly involved in each other's lives.

Finding a suitable word for an important companionship can create a sense of agency and ability to let go of restrictive boundaries. Maria and Laura no longer wish to call each other best friends because the term feels misleading to them. If they used the term "best friends", it would in their view primarily refer to their shared history and carry connotations of teenage friendship, rather than address a deeply meaningful relationship that includes shared plans for the future. They also associate the term with a relationship they envision as insufficient, a friendship built on occasional activities, such as "going to the theatre." Maria and Laura reject this notion, as they see it as lacking an essential everyday orientation toward each other. The significance of the re-naming process also demonstrates how being defined and seen by others may become a limiting factor in the co-becoming. Naming their relationship in a new way allows Maria and Laura to break free from the affective boundaries associated with the category of "best friends" and orient toward each other in a way that feels right for them. By calling each other platonic life companions, Maria and Laura can build a committed closeness and connect their friendship with the couple-form and the future trajectories involved (Halberstam 2005; Kolehmainen, Lahti & Kinnunen 2023). This affective negotiation with the couple-form shapes the possibilities of how they experience companionship and share their lives.

While creating a name for a way of relating can be experienced as important and affirming, the absence of a suitable word can keep co-becomings in a constant state of tension with the boundaries of relationship categories. Such tensions are evident in the everyday life of Emilia, a woman in her early thirties, who talks about Markus, an important life companion. Emilia has remained emotionally and physically close to Markus for years after they split up as a couple. She often refers to him and the dogs they care for together as her "family" or "pack", and they are a source of security, intimacy, and love in her life. Emilia mostly

refers to her and Markus's companionship simply as a "relationship," but she struggles with the appropriate term to use when referring to him directly. "Ex-partner" feels inadequate, as they have continued to share their lives. Their everyday practices of emotional and physical closeness – spending a lot of time together, having sleepovers, and their shared commitment to each other and their dogs – combined with their history as a couple, blur the normative boundaries between friendship and coupledom. The challenge of "not having the language to fully encompass 'shorthand' understandings" (Almack 2019, 164) of non-normative relationships is a recurring issue in Emilia's everyday life:

> What has been coming up as problematic is that sometimes it feels a bit difficult, in a way, that our relationship doesn't have a word. Like, I wonder when I talk about him, do I talk about my ex-partner? But soon it will be longer since our break-up than the time we were in this normally perceived couple relationship. So, it somehow feels silly to talk about my ex. Because that doesn't describe it. So, then I often talk about my best friend or my friend, but still, I acknowledge that it's not, well, it's so different.

Naming her life companions as a "relationship," "family," or "pack" does not free Emilia from the troubles of "not having a word." When talking about Markus with others, the recurring need to refer to their relationship continues to involve challenging affectivity due to the inadequacy of existing terminology. As Mol (2021, 128) writes, "the terms, models, and metaphors that we use to speak and write allow some things to be remarked on, some questions to be asked, some suggestions to be formulated, while hiding or foreclosing others." This underscores the significant agency that words have when it comes to shaping realities and terminology concerning intimacy matters. Without a suitable word for her companionship, Emilia's everyday experiences of relating continue to clash with the boundaries of friendship and couple relationship categories, sometimes intensifying into feelings that "come up as problematic." The absence of a suitable word, and the resulting lack of

recognition, does not prevent the companionship from being felt and perceived as important. However, it keeps the relationship in a state of constant affective negotiation with the couple-form which Emilia finds troublesome and "silly."

Questions about naming can also be significant for someone who is not pursuing a committed relationship. Vuokko, a gender-nonconforming woman in her forties, has long struggled with the feeling that she does not fit into the normative models of intimacy. She tells me that she once tried hard to stay in a couple relationship from which she has a child. For most of her life, she has wondered if her struggles stem from personal failures and from not being good enough to make a relationship last, and she has fought against such accusations from others. She explains: "For decades I fought against the people that were like, 'you cannot commit, you're selfish, you're this and that'." Only recently has she come to understand "what it's all about" – that her ways of experiencing companionship simply deviate from culturally regulated couple and mono-normativity. Her way of doing intimacy is not easily put into words because it does not fit into a "cultural image".

> VUOKKO: We really don't have a cultural image for someone not in a couple relationship.

Vuokko describes her experiences of companionship as consisting of several different kinds of important connections and ways of relating that diverge from the couple-form. These include, for example, regular phone calls with friends, accidental meetings with like-minded people in places such as art museums, and having non-monogamous sexual partners with whom she has been meeting infrequently over the course of years or even decades. After the interview, Vuokko asked me to let her know if my research uncovers "what it is that she is."

Vuokko has tried to adapt various terms to describe her ways of doing companionships, but is not satisfied with any of them. She tells me that "Now my latest attempt is just this term polyamory, for me, but well…" While she connects some of her experiences with the term polyamory,

she explains why she does not adopt it as a marker of her identity. She sees it as, in spite of everything, emphasizing "traditional couple relationships," with the expectation of having several couple relationships instead of just one. She sees herself rather as someone who does not pursue couple relationships at all, and continues to struggle with the lack of terminology for such a way of life. The struggle is illustrative of the ambiguousness of naming, and of the demanding, or even violent, affectivity through which the negotiations with the couple-form may materialize.

Building an understanding of oneself and making sense of the experiences of relating through practices of naming can be felt as extremely needed and include empowering potentials. However, naming can also become part of affective negotiations in a demanding and limiting way. As Juvonen (2019, 18) points out, no matter how liberating and important terms may become, the need to find exact language to express one's experiences in order to "find" oneself can also become an obligation. Practices of naming operate within their situated relations, and thus do not necessarily produce straightforward effects that affirm well-being or create a "bloom space" (Kasmani 2022) for diverse ways of relating. Both naming and the absence of a name can limit the possibilities for co-becomings to thrive when companionships become fixed by the boundaries of cultural imaginaries concerning close relationships.

As I observe above, terms and practices of naming are intertwined with the affective negotiations with the couple-form in ways that both enable and limit the co-becomings of the companionships. Naming practices are connected to the struggles around the normative boundaries of relationship categories and these practices are entangled with the process of building worlds and future trajectories for companionships. However, not all negotiations with the normative cultural imaginaries of the couple-form revolve around naming practices. Next, I explore how embodied and affective everyday practices of being together, as revealed in the data, emerge through comparisons and expectations surrounding couple relationships.

Comparisons and expectations around the couple-form

> KATARIINA: It's happened to me before. When I'm on my own, after a break-up or something, and I try to take a step back to think about myself and my dreams… Then horses always emerge.

Cherishing significant companionships outside the couple-form can serve as a way to negotiate the pressures and hopes associated with the heteronormative life course and the formation of a couple relationship. Katariina, a woman in her late thirties, decided to move to the countryside to live with her horses, explaining that she found the courage to do so after yet another break-up from a couple relationship. This lifestyle change can be seen as a way to resist the normative pull of the "happy objects" (Ahmed 2010) of romance and family. Additionally, turning away from romantic relationships opens up possibilities for other forms of intimate connection. As she explains: "I feel I have a purpose in my life and in the world, so that beats everything else and the idea of a couple relationship is a kind of a bonus then."

Living with the horses matters to Katariina's negotiations with couple normativity – not as a substitute for a couple relationship but as a way of shifting it from the centre to something that would be "a bonus." Embracing intimately entangled co-becomings with non-human companions can disrupt norms surrounding family formations that are based on traditional humanist views of kinship and couple relationships (Haraway 2016b; Riggs & Peel 2016, 14). While a human–horse companionship becomes through different material realities than a human–human companionship, they may converge in their potential to engage in world-making practices that reshape the couple-form, both intentionally and contingently (Latimer 2013).

On one hand, the affective negotiations with the couple-form and its normativity manifest as separation from the embodied practices, cultural imaginaries and expectations surrounding couple relationships. On the other hand, these affective negotiations, which separate companionships from the couple relationship, can simultaneously enable practices

of being together that are similar to those found within couple relationships. In this section, I explore this ambiguous movement around the couple-form. I analyze how companionships are experienced as pressure-free through practices of differentiation and comparison, while also examining how this movement creates tensions. I further demonstrate how the comparisons and expectations surrounding the couple-form do not rely on simple differentiation between clearly defined relationship types.

Communal practices can challenge couple normativity and disrupt the normative bond between committed companionship and a couple relationship (Heinonen 2024). Aaro, a non-binary person, and Sini, a woman, both in their twenties, live together in a committed small-scale commune with a third person, Antti, who was not present at the interview. Aaro and Sini express their determination to resist the dominant idea that a couple relationship should be the primary and most valued way of being close to someone. They have established common rules for their shared home, which include being committed to one another and spending a significant amount of time together, for example in their weekly meetings. They discuss the expectations placed on different types of relationships:

> SINI: I have been involved in conversations where people talk about things like what if your flat-mate started seeing someone and stopped hanging out at home. And I've said that I wouldn't tolerate that, or that I couldn't do that myself, because I've committed to this thing of ours. And people have reacted like, "you can't promise things like that," which I find totally weird, because I can promise whatever I want.
>
> AARO: Exactly. At the same time, well, the couple relationship always comes into mind, but two people can agree that they won't have sex with anyone else, and that's considered, like, totally fine. But if friends agree to spend a certain amount of time at home together, or that they won't be away all of the time, that's considered weird.

Sini and Aaro's practices of committed house meetings and spending time together form a web of political, material and emotional processes, in which their affective negotiations with the couple-form serve as acts of resistance, enabling their committed co-becoming. Sini and Aaro are acutely aware of breaking the rules and expectations surrounding relationship categories, and they are dedicated to building their companionship through resistance and by establishing their own rules: "I can promise whatever I want!" Adapting practices traditionally associated with couple relationships fosters feelings of belonging and trust. Sini explains how she has learned a "safe way of being together" in their commune. They engage in their co-becoming as a world-making practice, where their companionship not only resists existing imaginaries but also seeks to create new ways of living (Haraway 2016b).

World-making is also a process of persistence, with tensions arising when alternative ways of arranging close relations clash with normative expectations. Sini explains that others do not always recognize the importance of her commune with Aaro and Antti, and she often feels misunderstood when referring to her communal relationships in conversations. This difficulty in understanding can be linked to issues of lacking terminology that I analysed earlier. Additionally, the normative status of the couple relationship manifests affectively in moments of comparison. The following example illustrates a tension that emerges when Sini draws a parallel between her friend's couple relationship and her communal companionship. The comparison makes sense from the perspective of Sini's world-making but becomes tensioned through couple normativity:

> SINI: And I've had like, if we talk about life at home or something, then this friend talks about their boyfriend and how they have different habits with each other, and then I'm like yeah, I definitely know this, because Antti is this and that… And then, I might notice this kind of freezing, or that it's not taken as a natural part of the conversation. Something like that.

Sini's everyday life with Antti enables her to relate to her friend's experiences, but the shift in atmosphere that Sini describes prevents this moment of relating from becoming a shared experience among friends. The difference in how their relationships align with the normativity of the couple-form introduces a tension that alters the atmosphere. Sini's communal relationships become felt as an improper point of reference for a couple relationship, even if their everyday experiences of sharing may have significant similarities. Sini does not claim that her friend directly suggested that her experience was of lesser value or improper. The "freezing" she describes is a materialization of affective inequality (Kolehmainen & Juvonen 2018), felt between the bodies, that limits the recognition and value of Sini's communal companionship in this situated moment.

Some interviewees shared that what they particularly appreciate in their companionships is the lack of problems and pressures that they associate with couple relationships. This holds true even when their everyday experiences of companionship include social and material practices of intimacy that closely resemble those within the couple-form. Commitments to shared futures, closeness, and care are evident in the data through practices such as sharing a domestic space, preparing and sharing meals, touching and caressing, watching television or playing videogames together, or having in-depth conversations. While these companionships are not entirely free from pressures and challenges in their everyday co-becomings, the negotiations with the couple-form also enable co-becomings that are experienced as particularly good and problem-free.

This is the case for Saara and Kaisla, two women in their mid-twenties, who live together as flat-mates and spend most of their free time with each other – to the extent that their friends refer to them as "a package." The question of how their relationship differs from a couple relationship arises when they explain their earlier plans to move apart due to Kaisla's (unrealized) plans to move in with her boyfriend. They express a preference for cherishing and continuing what they describe as a balanced and valuable relationship of living together, at least for now.

> SAARA: It often feels like that in a couple relationship, you pile up unrealistic expectations about behaviour or something, at least in the couple relationships I've had. […] It would be good to remember, or you kind of learn this, here in our companionship, and the same could be made use of also in romantic relationships.

The interviewees portray a couple relationship as spaces where high expectations and demands often take over, leading to failures in compassion and kindness. The pressures associated with meeting all the partner's needs materialize in everyday situations, such as when one becomes upset or annoyed with the other. Turning away from the couple relationship can become an affective and embodied process of negotiation that paradoxically enables engagement in practices connected to the couple-form in meaningful ways. This negotiation creates space for committed compassion that can escape the affective pull of expectations and pressures. As Kaisla explains: "We have no phobia about commitment, because we have no pressure to stay together for years." I suggest that it is not the absence of pressures and obligations *per se* that makes companionships feel problem-free. For Sini and Aaro, obligations are not perceived as problematic "pressures" but as sustaining and strengthening resources. Problematic feelings arise when the companionship is shaped by its particular relation to couple normativity. The couple-form flickers in the process of allowing and avoiding commitments, where pressures become attached to and detached from the companionships.

Companionships other than couple relationships, as suggested by Saara's observations, have the potential to create ways of being together that could benefit couple relationships as well. However, since the negotiations with the couple-form arise through the situated, social, and material practices of not being in a couple relationship, it may not be possible to transfer these ways of being from one relationship to another. This illustrates how the couple-form matters both materially and symbolically to the co-becoming of companionships. Furthermore, co-becomings are not structured by clearly defined and separate "types"

of relationships, even in the context of comparison. Negotiating expectations and making comparisons are practices of boundary-making and boundary-breaking, in which the subject of negotiation constantly shifts and remains undefined:

> SAARA: We have sometimes talked about, like, what if we were a couple, for example. So, would that be different? I bet it would, certainly, maybe. Or, I don't know, but…(laughing) But still.

Saara's contradictory reflections on the significance of their relationship type reveal the impossibility of really "knowing" universally applicable truths about how relationship categories matter.

Conclusion

Dahl and Gabb (2019) argue that research too often begins in assumptions about a "shared unit of analysis" determined by demographic factors and categories related to gender and sexuality. As they state: "It is a model that clearly suits some bodies more than others" (Dahl & Gabb 2019, 214). This article has attempted to address this methodological challenge, by approaching companionships from the middle of everyday experiences and struggles. Additionally, I have tried to create ways of engaging with normativity that are sensitive to its entangled and dynamic becomings, which are embodied and virtually messy.

The conceptualizations for understanding and categorizing different relationships materialize in the lived realities of companionships. I argue that norms around close relationships operate through affective negotiations as they materialize in lived realities of companionships, such as in moments of "freezing", experiencing the companionship as problem-free, or being unable to name the relationship. The issue of naming can be especially significant for companionships that do not fit into existing categories.

Companionships that do not adhere to a normative life-course or possess a self-evident status – sometimes even for the individuals within the companionship – can be experienced as both empowering and

liberating, offering freedom from the heavily regulated hetero/mono-normative coupledom. However, they may also entail considerable vulnerabilities. The experience of not fitting into any shared cultural imaginary that can be easily expressed and named can both limit and enable the co-becoming of the companionships.

Addressing issues such as normativity and categorizations critically requires caution to avoid becoming stuck with the very discourses one seeks to critique. I have aimed to employ the concept of negotiation in ways that embrace the affective and ambiguous movements of relating, which allow us to envision worlds outside the normative imaginary. Negotiations with the couple-form can come to matter through processes of first explaining and defining its normativity, and then working to destabilize it – my analysis demonstrates how this kind of a critical approach is important for some co-becomings.

Furthermore, I have illustrated how the practices of naming and navigating the expectations through which companionships co-become involve negotiations that exceed normative categorizations and imaginaries of the couple-form. The affective negotiations with the couple-form, analysed in this paper, represent co-becomings that are continually on the verge of settling within pre-defined understandings of intimacy, as well as evolving differently.

My research design has relied on the understanding that knowledge production is a form of agency – always embedded, interconnected, and dynamic; a relational process that unfolds through situated connections, never settling into fixed and closed conclusions. I have sought to demonstrate that my methodological approach facilitates a way of thinking that blurs the boundaries between normativity and lived experiences, as well as between theory and practice. I have done this by examining the entanglements of material practices and meaning-making in companionships and by mapping how the couple-form becomes part of the co-becomings of companionships in multiple, often contradictory ways, both limiting and enabling these co-becomings.

My conclusion does not end with a definitive discovery of what "types" of affective negotiations with the couple-form occur within the

companionships I study. Instead, I suggest that the couple-form, in its unresolved and volatile shape, affects the ways companionships are experienced, understood, and researched, which in turn affects the couple-form itself. Importantly, I have demonstrated how affective negotiations with the couple-form have the potential to create cracks in couple normativity: the processes of negotiating with the couple-form do not simply establish new rules for practicing the couple-form in alternative ways. The co-becomings that emerge through affective negotiations with the couple-form, in situated practices such as naming and boundary-making and boundary-breaking, embody the power to move bodies and their relationships beyond the structuring hold of normativity. The couple-form itself is thus not merely a stable structure of intimacy, it is quivering – always ready to at least partly become something different and unexpected.

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NOTES

1. "Platonic life companion" is a direct translation of the Finnish term "*platoninen elämänkumppani*". Although the Finnish words for "companion" and "life companion" do not exclusively refer to a romantic or sexual partner, they are commonly used in that context. The addition of the word "platonic" helps Maria and Laura to distinguish their relationship from romantic or sexual relationships, which they both also have, alongside their mutual relationship.