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Good morning and happy Sunday. Today's resource is an audio one, as I started writing such a dense and specific script, that to film me saying it would be somewhat unnatural looking because I don't have a teleprompter or anything fancy like that. Usually my videos have a lot of spontaneity, functioning off a bullet point list. But if I'm just straight up reading most of it, then audio feels like the better format.

So, in my new year's poll about desired topics, "non hierarchy in practice" was overwhelmingly the top choice. It got me thinking about what hierarchy even means, and can we clarify that? Because doing something *other* than hierarchy means being clear on what it is exactly that we're departing from.

So let's explore today, what hierarchy is and is not.

I'll say up front that none of this is set in stone. It's still a very rich and hotly debated topic. My own understanding of hierarchy has shifted a lot, even within my practice of it since 2014. So I'll share how I currently view things, as a person who evolved from a hierarchical point of view in the beginning, to a goal of non hierarchy (or maybe it's more accurate to say anti-hierarchical practices).

Hierarchy is, broadly, a structure with a ranking system of status or authority. Maybe there's explicit 1st, 2nd, 3rd place. Maybe some people have direct power over others. We see hierarchy everywhere, in teachers directing students, a Dom directing a sub, employers deciding how much to pay staff, judges deciding if laws are upheld. Some hierarchies are imposed on us at an institutional level, others are smaller at the community or individual level, maybe negotiable or even optional. In polyamory, hierarchy broadly refers to the placement of some partners' wants, needs or powers above those of other partners. It can look a lot of ways.

I don't carry default judgment toward polyamorous hierarchies because I have seen people enjoy them. I've talked to enough secondaries who were genuinely relieved at the set up, feeling grateful to have less responsibility and fine with having less power, not desiring something different. I've seen plenty of people in a primary position be warm and accommodating if the secondary was upset, and be collaborative in how to make adjustments as needed.

For that reason, I don't see hierarchy at the individual level to be synonymous with harm. I do encourage everyone to unpack mononormativity – I think it's even good

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for monogamous people to do so – because we always want to be sure we're consciously choosing our structure, not just acting on autopilot. And hierarchy definitely is the default norm we're given. When we do consider alternatives, it creates space for negotiation and understanding our own motives. It allows clarification of terms and boundaries. If everyone is aware of the structure and feels it suits them, they're adults and can agree to their own situation. If someone says they feel relief at being a secondary, who am I to be patronizing, like "no you actually are oppressed and suffering." They're grown and I'm not their mama.

And even if they were to realize later, "oh that was oppressive" or "I was harmed", I still don't want to be an asshole while they figure it out. We each discover our needs in our own time. Depending on how close I am to the secondary, or if I'm actively witnessing abusive behavior toward them, I might ask if they feel safe. I might say "hey if things ever feel not ok anymore, I hope you know you can come to me." or something like that. But again, it's all context dependent, and I'm not trying to convince people of a path they say they don't want or need. It'd be a little ironic if in trying to "liberate" them I didn't respect their agency over their own lives.

For people who want non hierarchy, I encourage to avoid just broadly condemning all hierarchical people. If what someone does is directly impacting us, or we're asked for our opinion, then sure we can challenge flaws or harms we see. I just don't think acting holier than thou is the move. It not only makes us an unsafe person to come to if they ever do want support transitioning their structure, but that attitude can also make us less able to see our own internalized hierarchical mentality. Ranking people is how we're socialized to build relationships from the earliest days on the playground, naming our "best" friends. We can still fall into this practice despite not wanting to anymore, and give power or status to one partner over others. Even if we call it non-hierarchy, that doesn't mean we're immune from ever doing it. This sometimes gets called "sneakiarchy", when we claim faux egalitarianism. When that happens, it is not only disorienting to people we date, but it can outright rob a person of their ability to consent to the true dynamic. I see a lot of people turning their nose up at voluntary hierarchies while not examining their own hierarchical practices, just saying.

Before going into what Hierarchy is Not, I'll touch briefly on my own experience and evolution with the structure. I personally clung to hierarchy out of fear in the beginning – like 2012 to 2014. it sounded like the more familiar path, and I still really derived my sense of emotional security from locking down that primary label. I wasn't rigorously negotiating the hierarchy either, so we did hurt people. My comfort always came at the expense of others we claimed to care about. So after seeing metas cry, or seeing my own secondaries unhappy in that position, it became clear

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the way we practiced wasn't actually in line with my values. and in talking about the harm caused, I also realized ranking people is not even what I want, it's not even how I love. My hierarchy was chosen out of fear and control, which is not the headspace we ever want to be in when designing our boundaries.

If I did express love in a more tiered way, I've thought at length about how I'd do it differently. I'd probably only date people who were also in hierarchies, though that's never fool proof. But it would feel a bit more equitable. Or friends with benefits who aren't bothered and don't desire consistency or interdependence, that can also be a safer way where everyone stays feeling like their needs are met. But yeah, up front, everyone would have to be fully aware of the ceilings and limitations of their own power or status. And, that needs ongoing check-ins and continued consent, without any mixed messages.

So for example, if I were hierarchical and I said to a new date, "oh you'll always be secondary and this is what that means to me" and she's like "ok, I'm fine with all that". but then a year later, I'm introducing her to friends and family, and including her in holiday events, or other gestures that historically get associated with heightened commitment... I'd need to proactively revisit that hierarchy conversation. Because actions may be communicating something different than words. so if she's to remain secondary in power or status despite all that, I'd check in again to avoid confusion. And if she gets reminded "no meeting my family doesn't make you more important to me," I mean, it's harsh but could be an important context for her to choose her own path. maybe she would want to refuse participating in those kind of activities, or be a bit more self protective to avoid getting confused, to avoid wanting a different structure. You know what I mean?

Consent isn't just a contract we sign once and are done with it. We have to continue talking about boundaries, especially as relationships grow or change. There can't be this attitude, like "well its their fault for being confused or hurt because they agreed on day 1". I see so much of that, and its a bit disingenuous. yes, sometimes people can agree to something while not really wanting to, and you're not a mind reader. Sometimes people silently hope you'll change your position, despite you being consistently clear. But most of the time, if there's any confusion of expectations, the person with more power in that situation has to take accountability for their role in how that happened.

So yeah, I'll end this section by offering a few check-in questions for anyone who is in a hierarchy and intends to keep it that way. — do your agreements have the capacity to hurt anyone? if you were in the shoes of someone that either of you date, would any of your agreements feel shitty? if you say yes, ok: is there flexibility? if a person

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does eventually come to you and say “I’m harmed by this”, what would you do? Functional hierarchies usually have flexibility to accommodate other people in the polycule. If there is a militant rigidity to uphold strict rules despite seeing harm caused, that would concern me. If the reaction to non-primary partnerships is “well they get what they get, its what they signed up for, too bad no negotiation”, thats a rather zero-sum approach to love. it treats having their needs met as inherently opposing to having yours met, which usually isn’t such a black and white, binary thing. and if one persons emotional security is fundamentally dependent on another staying insecure, I see that as recreating oppressive systems by another name. i empathize with the usually fearful place from which that harsher attitude originates, but its unfortunately an approach to polyamorous practice that i cant cosign.

So those are some thoughts about what hierarchy is. Now let’s consider what hierarchy is not. Often the existence of imbalance can be conflated with having a primary. How do we tell the difference? And again I don’t consider myself the arbiter of all polyamorous truths. Just sharing my thoughts and experiences.

So if hierarchy is about ranking status and authority, to depart from it we’ll need to investigate both.

to inquire about authority in our polycule, some questions I ask are — who can weigh in on decisions that will impact them? vs being told “take it or leave it”. who can speak up when harm is caused, and then participate in negotiation of their own care? whose decisions or needs might impact relationships that they’re not in? in general, does anyone carry more weight and influence in how things ultimately play out?

to inquire about status — thats a blurrier one. Let’s say you coparent with a nesting partner, which means that person gets certain privileges because of that position. does that make it a hierarchy? some say the only true non hierarchy is to just not have any imbalance, or to live in a group housing situation with more egalitarian distribution of resources.

others (myself included) see a lot more nuance there, especially around what is logistically possible under capitalist and colonial infrastructure. how many of us would absolutely live in a walkable village where children are raised by a dozen different adults, if that was possible? how many of us would prefer to live alone but feel forced to cohabitate for financial reasons? some people feel like they have no option but to marry or adopt each other because of local housing laws that require a nuclear family, or because it’s the only way to access healthcare. so, we cannot build a utopia while living under systems that fight us every step of the way. i find it

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reductive when people see the optics of participating in hierarchical structures, and blame the individual. So the longer I'm polyamorous, the more grace I offer to people who aim for non hierarchy but still have to make compromises to survive.

In those cases, I usually just ask, what are you doing with what you *do* have power over? Is there a good faith attempt to otherwise level the playing field the best you can?

In the spirit of not getting it twisted, let's talk about things that can look like hierarchy but in my opinion aren't synonymous with it.

A big one is asymmetrical distribution of resources. I briefly touched on this just now, but let's flip perspectives — let's say your partner lives with someone, so that meta gets a lot more time and access to them. Their presence in the shared home also plays a role in how or when you're able to have dates with your partner there. it's imbalanced for sure, so we can't act like that doesn't exist. But context matters. And a nested meta who is supportive and eager to accommodate whenever possible is very different from a meta who uses that role to restrict or control your relationship.

I'll share an example of when my nesting partner's long distance relationship came to visit from New York. They were only in town for 3 days, so it was really important for him to see them as much as possible. I usually get an abundance of time with him, so it felt fair they get 100% of his romantic and sexual attention while they were here. This acknowledges an asymmetry in my favor, and offers an asymmetry in theirs to counteract it to the best of our ability under all these limitations. We don't have to divide time perfectly evenly for everyone to still feel like they matter, that their needs are just as valid.

Continuing with this example, let's talk about the resource of shelter. His partner had the option of sleeping on a friends' sofa when they were in town, or staying at our place. Neither of them could afford a hotel room for 3 nights. So, their friends sofa wouldn't allow for privacy. And our home isn't big enough for me to stay there and give them privacy. I had more secure shelter options than them, and had default access to a private space, where they didn't. My partner didn't want to just kick me out, he was worried of resolving one stressor by creating another. so he was thinking of ways to stay out of the house and like, have sex with them outdoors? I said "don't be silly". My presence was the easiest part of the puzzle to move around, so I started collaborating with him on solutions that could help meet everyone's needs.

At the time, Germany had a flat rate 9 euro train ticket nationwide. so I decided to take a little day trip exploring some more of Germany, which made me feel like I was

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out having my own adventure, not just leaving the house so they can have fun. and when I came back to Berlin I stayed with a friend for a couple nights, which was also a great time. It was a lovely experience for all of us because it was collaborative. I could have easily said, “no I don't want to be bothered, so you both need to figure it out.” And if accommodating them would have harmed me, maybe that is a boundary I would set. But the reality is that there were mutually beneficial solutions that could counterbalance the asymmetry for a few days. If it's possible, I want to make that happen. I expect the same team player attitude from partners and metas toward me, too.

But harmonious solutions aren't always possible, and sometimes one party does feel more inconvenienced than another. It can be frustrating that a meta's presence in their shared home puts logistical limits on where you can have dates. but the same would be true if they had children or if their elderly family members lived with them. It's not always romantic primacy that creates an asymmetry. Life happens. And while logistics can limit options, it doesn't automatically mean that person is wielding power over you.

Now I say all that to show how anti-hierarchy can be practiced despite imbalance. But unfortunately it can sometimes happen, that a person weaponizes their position. If I had resented his partner, for example, and refused to help them connect despite fully being able to, if my intent was basically sabotage and get in the way of them having a nice time, I'd view that as me trying to control a relationship I'm not in. If that's the vibe, if you notice that you, a partner or metamour appear to be doing such a thing, I think it's fair to call that out.

On the topic of resources, it's important to say that not everyone has identical needs. Like if an able bodied person said “equality means I have the exact same accommodations as my disabled metamour”, depending on what it is we're talking about, that could be pretty ignorant and dismissive of their situation. in some cases, giving “more” to a person is actually the way to build a more balanced and just environment. Context is everything. Who is involved is a really important factor.

Other times, it's less clear cut. Like maybe your schedule is such that you're just not as available for a newer person, compared to existing commitments. Maybe it's on the table to change some of those commitments, to make it feel more balanced – if that's even what you want, right? We'll talk about priority in a bit. But yeah if everyone wants that, to have a bit more symmetrical distribution of things, and it's unfortunately not possible, there can be creative ways to boost the quality of time, if quantity must stay the same. Going on special outings, having more intense experiences, putting more intentionality and energy into your time together. There

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can be trial and error and collaboration on solutions. It's only when someone insists that an asymmetry always be in their favor – like “you can't go on more dates with them, I want to have the most time with you” – that's a bit closer to hierarchy, to me.

Ok so that feels like a good segway into couples privilege. I made an earlier video on types of couples privileges, but I'll briefly summarize the concept again here. It's any social or institutional benefit that a duo gets, that others don't.

Institutional benefits are ones given out by governments or other systems, like how legally married couples get tax breaks. sometimes a marriage happens in an active non hierarchical polycule, in order to provide a benefit to someone who is in greater need. Most of you know I got married because a partner needed to get on my visa, and no one else needed that. I've seen people marry relatively newer partners because that person was chronically ill and in urgent need to get on their health insurance. It goes back to what I was saying about factoring in disproportionate abilities and needs. As long as the decision to pursue an institutional privilege includes input from everyone who would be impacted, in my experience, it can still feel equal and fair.

Quick caveat on that part, sometimes people are already deeply embedded in these institutions when they discover their non monogamy. They're already married, already have a business together or shared bank accounts. I don't think the move is to pressure people to get divorced or dissolve corporate partnership in an attempt to start fresh with non hierarchy. Those things are expensive, often inaccessible and can ironically cause new harms. So I don't condemn people in that position to just “well non hierarchy is impossible for you”, I just encourage them to be more cautious with describing themselves as such. There will just be a lot more leg work to make experiences with less advantaged partners feel equitable.

So that's institutional, but what about the softer social benefits? Let's say, it's unsafe for you to be out, that your employer has a morality clause which could make polyamory grounds for getting fired. then only one partner gets to be public-facing, to go to company events as the +1, or get the validation of being on your social media. despite everyone understanding why, other partners could still feel sad at being hidden and excluded. It's definitely a social privilege, but does that mean it's a hierarchy?

Those things do often correlate, but I don't see them as interchangeable. Especially if everyone is invested in changing what they can. Like what if behind the scenes, special celebrations of the other partners could be negotiated? or those relationships could be announced offline to the friends you are out to? What are ways we can

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offset harm caused by situations outside our control? if everyone is invested in acknowledging and minimizing inequalities, I do think that matters.

Social privileges are usually the more malleable ones, especially if the stakes aren't so high like your job is on the line. So a lower stakes example of social couples privilege could be — let's say you date someone new, who's with a partner for 8 years. when hanging out together, they have all these inside jokes, so you feel like an outsider, not included. That's a subtle way their coupleship gives them a comfort that isn't afforded to you. It can be awkward or even annoying, but it doesn't automatically mean the longer term partner is more important, or has more power. It could mean you're not being considered in that moment, so it's fair to address that. Asking for more awareness around privilege can help everyone have a better night. But the existence of privilege, to say it's automatically a sign of hierarchy, that's not always the case.

The final point I'll touch on today, something that gets confused a lot with hierarchy, is the existence of priorities. Sometimes we just want to hang out with a person more often, or we want to prioritize finding a coparent, or finding a kink partner. Things like that. We feel a desire for asymmetry which sometimes hurts the feelings of a partner who wants something different. Does that automatically mean we rank our partners though?

Look sometimes priority does go hand in hand with a person unilaterally mattering more, which I think is why it can be so easy to confuse. And I think, for that reason, it's fair to ask ourselves and our partners if there is any ranking of partners based on those priorities.

Because while it can be painful to be on the receiving end of that – of wanting more time with someone who would rather not – that choice still comes from your partner. Maybe that choice results in a metamour getting more of their time, but I don't see that as the metamour having power over you. They're not the mastermind controlling what your shared partner would rather do. (If they are, well, that's a different conversation. I usually get skeptical of a hinge partner that claims such a thing though, like, are you really powerless or is it just easier to put the blame on them right now?)

To that end, I would really, really caution hinge partners to be clear on when an imbalance is expressly your choice. Sometimes, what we want hurts someones feelings. And that's uncomfortable to take responsibility for. But if we do use language to imply our other partner is the reason, that their needs or desires are just so big that you can't possibly give more to this person right now, well now you've pit

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partners against each other. Now you've implied hierarchy. And especially if both partners stay in the polycule, or exist in community together, you've potentially planted the seeds for unnecessary conflict between them. So, gotta watch that.

But yes, voluntary asymmetry is not the same as a tiered power structure. And it also doesn't automatically mean the person getting more has higher status. Because saying "I currently want to spend more time with this partner, " is not the same thing as "this partner's needs always matter more than yours." Again, it's fair to ask these questions because status and priority often do correlate, I just don't use those terms interchangeably.

And imbalance, sometimes, is a dealbreaker. A shift in priority could make someone feel like their needs legitimately aren't being met anymore. I don't think the move is to just suppress unhappiness or power through. We don't have to restructure, we can break up. I think sometimes we can talk ourselves into staying in situations that don't feel good, just because no one means harm. Even if it's not hierarchy, it can still be unsatisfying. It's ok to walk away.

So those are my thoughts on that topic. I've considered making public, short form videos with these same sentiments, and maybe I will eventually. I do know a lot of people are eager to hear this stuff addressed. It's just so hard to speak with nuance in 90 seconds. And if the main problem with discourse on hierarchy is a lack of nuance, I feel a bit trapped by the medium itself. That's another reason I'm so glad this space exists, and that you are here. I welcome your feedback or suggestions. I hope you have a beautiful week and I'll see you next Sunday. Bye bye