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PATRON EXCLUSIVE: CAN HIERARCHY AND R.A. EVER COEXIST?

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I wonder, let me see if I can get a cool light going on back here. I don't know. I think it adds something. What do you think? Okay, yes, this is cute as hell. Anyway, Hello, happy Sunday, I hope you are having a beautiful day and I hope you're having a beautiful weekend.

Today is your bonus resource. As always, thank you for helping me pay my bills. And so making things that will hopefully be helpful for you. Today the video topic is going to be: can relationship anarchy ever coexist with any hierarchy? Now I had a knee jerk response to this question at first and I was like, "No, absolutely not. They're not compatible. I've never seen that work". But then we started asking more questions. And we're like, okay, but what does coexist mean? Like, as friends? as lovers? as family members? as neighbors? there's so many different ways that we can be aligned with people who approach relationships differently than us. And where is the line for each individual connection? Where is the line of how close or how far we want to be with someone who has a radically different sort of approach to how they position relationships in their life?

Some people might say "no, never. burn it with fire" in either direction. Fine. And can we continue to add some nuance? Can we continue to be thoughtful? I think that my videos on theory, as a non academic, are at their best when they are asking you questions.

So first up top, how these words are usually used: hierarchy, being ranked relationships in terms of power within larger group dynamics. Anarchy, being more equitable relationships, where we aim to have no one exerting power over each other. No one calling the shots on other people's lives or other people's relationships.

NUANCE OF EACH TERM

In non monogamy, hierarchy can look like the framing of primary and secondary partnerships, of just literally explicitly ranking people. It can look like one partner having non negotiable and default priority and privilege – non negotiable and default being the key parts to that. We can have priority and privilege outside of hierarchy as well, I'll get to that in a second.

As well, there can be social hierarchies. Sometimes we don't have control over those, because they are constructed often against our will. Friends, family, community, treating one partner differently, because they've been assigned a certain rank or

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status, like “oh, you are the real one, you are the special one, you're the one that gets included”. And then shunning or delegitimizing other people that you want to bring close, no matter how much you might tell them otherwise. There are also institutional and legal hierarchies. A marriage contract is a great example of this, right?

I alluded to this a bit ago, but hierarchy is not the same thing as priority. If a person wants to spend most of their time doing this hobby, or going to that location, or being with this person, instead of being with a new partner, those are priorities. It doesn't necessarily mean that any of those things have power over the newer partner. So let's be mindful of not mixing those things up. That, if a person is negotiating how they want to spend their own time according to their own desires, I think that's different than granting someone else power to dictate their time. And so I think it's always fair to ask, when there is an obvious priority, “does that person have more power?” let's just be mindful of not erasing the person's agency in choosing how they spend their own life, as if somebody else were doing it for them. Because that's not always the case.

As well, like I mentioned earlier, hierarchy is not the same thing as privilege. If you have a long distance partner and a local one, the local partner might see you more often. And so that is a privilege of sorts. And it doesn't mean that the local partner has power over the long distance one. Right? So just to be thoughtful about, are we conflating things that might not imply a power differential, but they might just be a painful reality that we don't have the relationship we were hoping to have with this person. Asking “who is calling the shots? who is making the decisions? and who has what power to negotiate their own position?”

Relationship anarchists seek to challenge hierarchy wherever possible – “wherever possible” being the operative words there – that we aim to push for relationship dynamics in which no one has power over each other, wherever we can help it.

What relationship anarchy is not, is chaos. a lot of people will even be drawn to the term RA with the mistaken belief that it just means anything goes, that no one is allowed to ask anything of you. And that is not what we're doing here, you know? RAs, we design our relationships together.

So that's why whenever people use the term RA, I always have more questions. is there a hyper individualistic or even self centered approach there, and they're misusing the term? Or are they using it to describe a community centered approach? because anarchy is about tearing it down, and then rebuilding it with a network of care and tailor made solutions. And a lot of people like the tearing it down part, and then don't want to have to do the rebuilding part.

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So yeah, not putting ourselves above community or our one to one dynamics above the needs of the community. I will add an asterisk to that: only if it is a community that you want to stay in, that is still aligned with you, and that you feel safe in. Being a cult survivor, there was a point where I realized, "I have 200 abusive relationships right now. And this community actually does not have my best interest in mind, they are financially profiting off of my subservience and off of keeping me dependent on them". So after I left, I went hyper individualistic, I was terrified and traumatized. And it took a long way to find my way back to being community centered again. but it's always very much with the caveat of: if the community is interested in you thriving too. And they are not, you know, systematically controlling or abusing anyone.

CAN RA COEXIST WITH HIERARCHY?

That said, can people who largely want hierarchy happily coexist with people who largely don't?

Can anarchists share a beer with a hierarchical neighbor? Could an anarchist hook up with a hierarchical couple at a party? Maybe, maybe not. maybe it's chill, and that's a fun time within this sort of contained environment. Or maybe during the hookup, one of the spouses is exerting hierarchical control and trying to say, "you're not allowed to do this, or do that" in a way that it is no longer fun for the anarchist, and they would like to leave. It's just about weighing what feels worth it. How much do I want to do this, based off of how emotionally risky it feels?

For a lot of people, when there's more emotionally intimate connections, if there is a kink dynamic, developing long term, if you are starting to be close friends and have sex, does that feel different than if you don't know each other in any other capacity, you just see each other at parties? So where's the line there? Is it about frequency? Is it about degree of vulnerability or emotional intimacy? Is it about someone's position in a community?

Can we coexist while building things together long term? Now, I personally don't anymore, like I said, in any area of my life, and that's a luxury. I have enough anti hierarchical people in my orbit, that I can opt out of reliance upon people who don't share my practice. But if you live in a conservative environment, where the polyamory community is small, let alone something a bit more anti hierarchical, you take what you can get in terms of local proximal people.

Or sometimes people are forced to build something together, that if someone accidentally gets pregnant, and we're like, "oh, well, you know, I wouldn't have chosen to do this with you. But if you're wanting to keep it, then let's talk about what co parenting could look like, especially if the two of you are hierarchical and I am

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not." Do we have the ability to opt out of it? And if no, then is there still a way to be teammates?

I personally think the hardest thing, something I've never really been able to reconcile, that I've never really seen reconciled, is long term life building together. Romantic or emotionally intimate life building in a very close way with someone who has a radically different perspective to relationships. You still can give it a shot. It's just like, walk in with eyes open, or walk in fully aware, and really critically thinking about all of the conflicts of interest, all of the ways that this might not work. And at least try and prepare for that, you know, so that it doesn't come out of nowhere, if that winds up being untenable in the long run.

HOW RISKY IS IT?

So in terms of compatibility, we keep coming back to this question of "how risky is it?" when I use risk in this context, it is about emotional risk. how willing are we, how much tolerance do we have for the chance that one or more people involved might be heartbroken? Or might be really hurt and emotionally injured by this?

A high risk situation could be you're on a first date with somebody and they say that their belief system is the opposite of yours. It could be like "I can't I can't, you know, I am unwilling to take that leap of faith again. I'm unwilling to be that hurt again. So I'm gonna have to walk away." So, we could walk away from risk at any point, it's why I also like to clarify as early on as possible what people's theoretical approach is.

But sometimes you might be the one walked away from. Somebody who's brand new to non monogamy who's like "maybe this could work for me," and is just very overwhelmed, walks into an anarchist polycule and is like, "I don't know, this is a lot for me to take in". Basically, it is a prompt to do some pretty radical work. And if they're going to be integrated into this polycule, that's a prompt to do that work quickly and thoroughly, and really make that a prime priority in their life. And if they don't have the time, energy or desire to do that work, then this is a risky situation. maybe they fall for someone, and they want to have a hierarchy with that person. And the person's like, "No, you knew up front, this is never gonna happen, I was not going to change my mind, I don't suddenly believe in hierarchy now that we love each other."

I've been walked away from too, for that reason. my inflexible commitment to this kind of dynamic, they were hoping it would be flexible, and then they leave. And so it's also why I need people who are very committed to my kind of structure, because I don't want to get heartbroken by somebody leaving, even if they aren't heartbroken, it is a risk in both directions, in my opinion.

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Sometimes the risk feels worth taking! because actually a person is growing and evolving and changing their mind actively. And so you're like, "Okay, we don't know where the chips are gonna land. So let's see what we see. Because I like you that much. And that feels like if I walked away from this, I would be kicking myself not finding out where this goes."

It is volatile to enter a dynamic with a person who has not yet decided, or a person who is still figuring out who they are or what they want. And that doesn't mean we just wait until we're done cooking to be able to have any kind of closeness.

Sometimes the closeness with people is what makes us realize who we are and what we want. I discovered that anti hierarchy best aligns with me by being challenged in relationships when I was in a hierarchy. And metamours would push back and say, "This is how I'm feeling harmed by you", or when a new partner would be like, "so wait, why does your other partner get to say what we do?" And I'm like, "Wait, why do they?" you know? and so all of that questioning and challenging helped me realize and land on what my approach actually is, if I'm not reaching for an approach from a fearful place. So yeah, I'm really glad that people took the leap of faith. And it's totally fair if people don't want to.

It's not like the only two options are: you go all in, or you walk away. You can absolutely say, "alright, if we're this different, then I can only have sex with you sometimes. Or we can just be friends who get a beer", there's plenty of ways that we can still know each other and again, coexist, while being radically different.

NOT A BINARY

So with all of that said, these two schools of thought are definitely not a binary. the most obvious way that hierarchy can still exist within an anti hierarchical environment is usually social and institutional, because those can be less within our immediate control to change. Or there might be very material consequences to pushing up against those things.

So for example, if you're married when you discover that you want something more anarchistic, but divorce is expensive, inaccessible, might create different problems as well. So maybe it's not always the move. so if there is this pre existing dynamic, where a legal contract gives one partner a lot more power than others, can there be a brainstorm? where it is as equitable as possible in all of the areas that we can control?

As well, we're often coerced into participating in hierarchical systems. If you go to a job with a boss, and a boss above that boss, you are participating in a hierarchical system. I imagine a lot of people would not choose to work that way, would not

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choose that relationship with labor, except you need money to survive. And maybe there's not many options. And so I see that as a form of coercion into participating in a hierarchical system. I signed a marriage contract, as a lot of you know, for a visa, for immigration purposes. And plenty of people will do that to get on people's health insurance, or to avoid eviction, or again deportation. We're using the tools of the state to reduce harm to vulnerable people. And, we are still participating in a hierarchy in that way. there are definitely some anarchist absolutists who will hear that I signed a marriage contract within a negotiated anarchistic framework and they're like, "Nope, you're a hypocrite. That's not anarchy", end of sentence. And then I'm like, "Okay, well, I guess we just won't be friends, because I don't like people who are militant and absolutist about stuff". So can we continue to see nuance there, and not blame individuals for coercion into hierarchical systems as a means of survival?

STUCK IN SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

Similarly, socially constructed hierarchies can kind of be hard to shake. Like, if a person needs to stay hidden about polyamory to their family, maybe they're financially dependent upon their family members. so a social taboo might materially risk their financial security. or if they have to stay only showing one partner on social media because their job has a morality clause, if they share it publicly about polyamory, maybe they risk getting fired. There is more than just a social taboo, or stigma, gossip, shame – which also is very real, that in and of itself can be a reason that somebody is not ready to tell people that they're not monogamous – But in addition to that, there can be very tangible threats for deviating from the norm.

In those cases, if everybody has already met one of the partners, then that is the partner on social media, that is the partner as a plus one to the events, and that can really make other partners feel marginalized and feel less important, and feel structural barriers to doing things and sharing all of their partner's life with them. And that is true.

What I've seen happen is sometimes negotiating offline ways to celebrate amongst people, that they do know about their polyamory, they celebrate with their other partners. They give visibility and platform their partners in a way that they might not be able to do publicly. But as well, there's often conversation about "Can we have a long term plan of what eventually having this change might entail?" And so if it is like, "well, I'm scared, my parents will find out about this because they help offset my rent. And so I can't risk that", then do we have a conversation about a path to financial autonomy, so that it becomes more tolerable to take that risk? there's often long term planning about how to steer the ship in a different direction. And we have patience and offer grace to each other. But can we navigate it very frankly, and directly, and talk about all the options that might be available?

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LOGISTICS CAN IMPACT POWER

Logistics can also blur the binary as well, right? Let's say you're co parenting with someone, or you have a business partner, there's this shared investment of time and energy into helping someone or something grow. And maybe there are shared finances, in some respects, there is an inter mingling of your calendars for that reason. so while pushing for anti hierarchy, if we are building things with people that our choice over here directly affects them, then yeah, checking with your spouse to see like, "I want to take a vacation with this partner. Can we talk about how much money is comfortable to spend?" Technically, that spouse has a say in what kind of vacation the other partner takes. You know? I think that's a really clear example.

It doesn't always mean that having that power means it will be abused, that having power means you're going to do something evil with it. It's just if there is anti hierarchy as an intention, can those little compartmentalized asymmetries of power, can they be named?

There's a term called sneakiarchy, which is basically if somebody says that they are against hierarchy, and then shit like this happens, where actually there are instances of hierarchy, and it can make you feel nuts, if you notice it. And everyone's saying, "no, no, but we wouldn't do that." again, can we shake the taboo of it and be able to speak frankly, because if it is taboo, then yeah, we won't be able to actually strategize solutions, or actually have a more effective application of anti hierarchy. we need to be able to talk about it. can we look for, is there collaboration? is there teamwork? is the spouse saying 'I am concerned about this money thing'. And then the hinge partner negotiates a different solution that will make sure everybody's needs are met, that could still exist in an anti hierarchical way. But if the spouse is also trying to wield control, and they are trying to inhibit the growth or the acceleration of this other relationship, but they're calling it a "money concern", then it gets a little trickier. Can we really be blunt and frank and honest with ourselves, especially the hinge partner in that situation – who is the most powerful to negotiate both relationships, if the metas are not in connection with each other – Can there be a thorough and thoughtful, gentle but challenging, investigation into the motives of why someone with a little bit more power in an area, why they might be using that power? what you're trying to do?

HINGE PASSIVITY

And I say power, not priority. The hinge partner sometimes can want – to continue with this example – maybe he doesn't want to go on the vacation. And so says, "My wife doesn't think it's a good idea". To say, "I would rather not do this, not go on this vacation with you", that is a negotiated one to one relationship of what you would

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like to do or not do with each other. That's fine and fair. But someone who's saying, "my wife says it's not a good idea". That is a way to throw the other partner under the bus. And that is a way to pit metamours against each other. Now, maybe the wife actually is saying, "I'm going to harm you in this way. In that way. I'm going to wield my own power over you and make it harder to see your kids or financially punish you." if that is happening, then that is structural power being abused.

But if the hinge partner is just saying, "Oh, my wife would rather we don't", then that is implying that the wife pulled rank, when really maybe the hinge just didn't want to have a hard conversation, and didn't want to admit their own desires. And so it really, hinges, that it is not a time to be passive, especially if you want relationship anarchy. can you be sure, can we all be sure – I'm also hinge – that we are taking responsibility, and not framing our preferences as if it's another partner exerting control?

INTERNALIZED HIERARCHY

Challenging internalized hierarchy, I believe is a lifelong process. Because most of us who were raised in colonized, so called Western spaces. We were given monogamous culture as not only the default, but the only acceptable socially tolerated option. From childhood, we're taught, "pick your five best friends to be in your wedding" – If we're talking about contemporary Christian weddings – "pick your five best people, and then of those, who's the best friend? to be your best man or your maid of honor. And all of those people are still underneath your spouse who is the most important", right?

And so we are absorbing these messages our entire life. Our brains literally form around these messages in environments that this is the only narrative. and so it would be naive to say we can just flip a switch and suddenly we never think like that anymore, that we never fall back into those old patterns, especially during times of fear or uncertainty.

Not if, but when, hierarchical impulses come up, or just default old thought patterns come up. I want to welcome people to speak up about it to challenge it, especially if they are feeling harmed by it.

IF YOU WANT HIERARCHY

Now, that's assuming that you want anti hierarchy. I have talked to plenty of people in predominantly hierarchical structures, who also are very anti veto power, who cannot fathom asking their partner to slow down their relationship or, or change their relationship with someone that they're not dating. there are some people who have cemented some rankings as inflexible, and they're trying not to be dicks about it. I do think there's something to the notion of "all power corrupts and absolute

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power corrupts absolutely”. I do think there's something in that. and so that is why I, especially towards people who want hierarchy, I continue to nudge them and ask about their motives, and their resources and and their value systems. Because there are some people who just inherently think that they're better than other people. There are some people where power over others is the point, unfortunately. there are some people who are like, “love is merit based and I have earned a higher position”. And there can be hostility and militance and just maybe even not wanting to practice non monogamy.

When we see that, I really encourage caution for anybody getting close, especially in a secondary or more powerless role. If there's that kind of energy happening, then there's a real high chance of abuse of power happening, there's a real high chance of any amount of progress or growth or enjoyment of this relationship to be clamped down out of fear.

So can we stay curious about the motives of what is being asked for, why is it being asked for, and does it cause harm, or no?

If you are interested in relationship anarchy as a concept, I can recommend this book Relationship Anarchy by Juan Carlos Perez Cortes. It exists in Spanish and in English, I believe other translations are on the way. And it does a pretty solid job at exploring how anarchistic relating can happen at the one to one level, at the community level and at the broader socio political, international level. So yeah, if you want a resource or if anything I've said today has sparked your interest. That is a place that you can start and can hopefully offer more tools and vocabulary for you to be able to express what you want to express.

Anyway, thank you for being here. I really appreciate your support. I'd love to know where you land in this and how you find where your line is. And if there are any questions that I missed aspects to this that I did not consider. I hope that you have a beautiful week and I will talk to you soon.

xxx