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Does Monogamy Harm Women? Deconstructing Monogamy with a Feminist Lens

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Comments

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Deconstructing Monogamy with a Feminist Lens

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Summary

In this paper, we utilize a critical feminist lens to analyze the advantages and disadvantages found within two different romantic relationship configurations: monogamy and polyamory. While visibility of polyamorous relationships has increased in recent years, there is still a lack of information and a plethora of misinformation concerning non-monogamous romantic relationship dynamics (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012; Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012). One such notion is that polyamory is differentially damaging to women vis-à-vis men. From a phenomenological perspective, sociocultural values dictate that women, unlike men, are prescribed to be dependent upon monogamy in order to define their selfhood; and indeed, research has provided evidence in support of this idea, as women are more apt to be offended by the idea of concurrent multiple relationships and are less likely to report a willingness to engage in these types of relationships than men are (Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, under review-a). Using a previous review of monogamy as a starting point (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012), we will reanalyze two major points from the review piece: sex benefits and jealousy in monogamous and polyamorous relationships. Throughout, we examine if the presumed benefits of monogamy extend to women or if alternative relationship structures, specifically polyamory, afford greater advantages. Additionally, we consider other benefits that may be unique to polyamory for women, including increased agency, financial resources, and extended social support.

Keywords: *gender, monogamy, polyamory, romantic relationships*

The ever-growing costs associated with the ritual of coupledness, including engagements and marriage ceremonies, highlight the economic and social expenses that solidify a lifelong monogamous commitment. The average cost of an engagement ring is at a record high of around \$2,100 (People Magazine, 2007), and the average commitment ceremony is estimated to be \$27,800 (theknot.com, 2010). Despite the current economic recession in the United States, research indicates that the wedding industry is still flourishing—the average cost of a wedding increased by 23% in 2010 (The Wedding Report, 2010). The fairy tale nature and hyper-consumerism of weddings continue to garner attention and celebration, seemingly without question. Engagements, weddings, and lifetime monogamous commitments (e.g., marriage, domestic partnerships) are portrayed as a milestone in one's life, especially for women.

Indeed, the celebratory spirit of «settling down» is greater for women than for men (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995). Unquestionably, media provide a clear demonstration of the gendered nature of life-long monogamous unions by portraying weddings as under the control of women. For instance, there are a myriad of television reality shows in the United States that focus on women's wedding planning, ranging from shows dedicated to finding the perfect wedding dress (e.g., *Say Yes to the Dress*; Park, Heng, Winston, & Broomhead, 2007) to more extreme competitive challenges to win plastic surgery prior to one's wedding day (*Bridalplasty*; Cronin, Rancic, & Abrego, 2010). Moreover, this genre of television has created new language surrounding women's involvement in the wedding industry, depicting women as frenzied, hyper-aggressive, and utterly consumed with their wedding day. One example of new language specifically associated with women (but not men) is the term «Bridezilla»—brides who are so consumed by wedding planning that they behave in extreme and socially inappropriate ways.

Taken together, the amount of money spent on weddings and the attention women receive in wedding-related television shows suggests that monogamy is not only a cultural gold standard but also that it is the *best* relationship option for women. In a recent review of the literature, Conley and colleagues critically examined the supposed advantages of monogamy by considering potential

ramifications for health and social relationships (Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012). Through an investigation of research on monogamy and consensual non-monogamy (relationships in which all partners agree to engage in more than one concurrent romantic and/or sexual relationship), Conley, Ziegler, et al. (2012) found that people's overwhelmingly positive perceptions of monogamy were not empirically justified. Despite this, research continues to find that women, compared to men, are more committed to monogamy and hold less positive attitudes toward consensually non-monogamous relationships (e.g., polyamory; Moors & Conley, in preparation; Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, under review-b).

For the purposes of the current piece, we apply a critical feminist lens to reanalyze two major points of the previous review: sex benefits and jealousy in monogamous and polyamorous relationships. Additionally, we consider other benefits that may be unique to polyamory for women, including financial resources, extended social support, and greater agency. While gender was not used as a tool of analysis in the review piece (Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012), we foreground the experiences of women in romantic relationships in response to Stewart's (1998) call for a feminist analysis of psychological research. Subsequently, we examine if the presumed benefits of monogamy extend to women or if alternative relationship structures, specifically polyamory, afford greater advantages. Next, we will describe how we conceptualize monogamy and polyamory.

Defining Monogamy and Polyamory

We acknowledge that there are complexities and nuances with how people practice and define monogamous and polyamorous relationships. For the purpose of our review, we conceptualize monogamy according to the definition offered by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2009). According to this definition, «mutual monogamy means that you agree to be sexually active with only one person, who has agreed to be sexually active only with you.» Likewise, we conceptualize polyamory as an agreement among all partners involved to engage in more than one concurrent relationship that is romantically and sexually intimate (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). In other words, we conceptualize monogamy as sexual/romantic relationship with one person; similarly, we conceptualize polyamory as sexual/romantic relationships with more than one concurrent partner.

While monogamy¹ and polyamory can both be implemented in a variety of ways, we limit our conversation primarily to the culture surrounding these two types of relationships. In doing so, we acknowledge that we are highlighting the stark contrasts despite similarities and differences shared between these two relationship types. Subsequently, our intentional focus on the cultures surrounding monogamy and polyamory is to emphasize the overarching norms and practices broadly associated with each type of relationship. In the next section, we critically reanalyze the presumed sex benefits afforded to women in monogamous relationships.

Monogamy:

A Lifetime of Sex Benefits for Women?

Research has found that both women and men believe that monogamy is a source of reliable and exciting sexual benefits (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012). However, media and research present a contradictory picture that illustrates sexual tedium within marriage (A Parent's Television Council, 2008; see Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012; for a review). Indeed, research shows that there are sexual disadvantages of monogamy, including lower sexual desire and dysfunction (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999). Statistics show that as many as 43 percent of American women suffer from sexual dysfunction (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) is one such disorder, and according to the DSM-IV includes a lack of sexual fantasies and desires, resulting in psychological distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While a diagnosis of HSDD is not limited to those involved in monogamous relationships, this diagnosis is *often* prompted by a discrepancy of sexual desire between monogamous partners (Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). Zilbergeld and Ellison (1980) identify desire discrepancies as the only couple-diagnosed (as opposed to individual-level) sexual complaint. Thus, this diagnosis links long-term monogamous relationships with a medical condition among women. Of importance, there is no equivalent medical condition that attributes lack of sexual desire among men to their female long-term partner.

While not all women experience a medical diagnosis of HSDD, many women experience low sexual desire in monogamous relationships. For instance, research has found that women's desire wanes at a greater rate than men's during

long-term monogamous romantic relationships (Brewis & Meyer, 2005; Clement, 2002; Levine, 2003). One reason for this discrepancy includes women's physiological sexual response; specifically, women's sexual arousal may be more attuned to relational cues and more strongly associated with relationship contexts than men (Chivers & Timmers, 2012). Recent research has found that women have a greater need than men for novel stimuli in order to maintain sexual arousal (for a discussion, see Bergner, 2013), and, without the introduction of new stimuli women's sexual arousal is likely to diminish. In other words, it is probable that women sexually habituate to their male partners in monogamous relationships; thus, the notion that monogamy affords women a lifetime of exciting sex seems empirically unfounded.

Given that women habituate to their monogamous partners, it is not surprising that research has found that women (and men) in polyamorous relationships report high sexual satisfaction (Sheff, 2005). Indeed, women in polyamorous relationships find the sexual diversity to be a particularly beneficial component of their relationships. And, furthermore, women cite the opportunity to explore the multifaceted nature of their sexuality, including a variety partners as well as genders, as contributing to their increased sexual satisfaction (Sheff, 2005).

In addition to sexual satisfaction, women in polyamorous relationships also experience greater sexual agency. Research shows that polyamorous relationships provide a space for women to exert sexual autonomy without risk of stigmatization (Sheff, 2005). This is a result of basic tenets of polyamory that conflict with traditional femininity, including the prescriptive stereotypes of women's sexual purity and inhibited sexual desire (Sheff, 2005). Within the dominant monogamist culture, there is a sexual double standard that describes the ways in which women are judged much more harshly than men for engaging in the same sexual behaviors (Reiss, 1964). Although no research has documented that polyamorous women reject the power dynamic embedded in the sexual double standard, it seems likely that these women are attuned to the ways in which monogamy limits women's sexuality. Simply put, polyamory is a relationship type that typically emphasizes equality among partners; thus, gender identity may not be a prescription for the organization, roles, or partner dynamics within these relationships.

In sum, women's high rates of sexual desire disorders as well as decreases in sexual desire in monogamous relationships suggests that women could benefit

from an increase in sexual variety—a benefit that can be provided by polyamorous relationships. In the next section, we will re-examine the notion that monogamous relationships are void of jealousy for women.

Monogamy:

Jealousy and Its Repercussions for Women

Although a commonly assumed benefit of monogamy is the absence of jealousy (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012), ample research documents that this is not the case (see Conley, Ziegler, et al., 2012; for a review). Both women and men experience jealousy; however, it is more common for women to experience repercussions, including domestic violence and sexual assault, by male partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b). In an effort to abate cheating by their partners, men may exhibit possessive, controlling, and threatening behavior—all of which are manifested forms of jealousy (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2004). For example, in a survey of agencies that treat men who batter their wives, results indicated that jealousy was the second most common trait (after alcoholism) of these men (Feazell, Mayers, & Deschner, 1984).

Despite the seemingly logical rationale for jealousy, there are a number of negative repercussions that are associated with jealousy. Alarming, an average of 1.3 million women in the United States are physically assaulted by an intimate partner each year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), with research indicating that between 21% and 55% of women experience intimate partner violence in their lifetimes (Coker, Derrick, Lumpkin, Aldrich, & Oldendick, 2000; Jones et al., 1999; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a; Zolotor, Denham, & Weil, 2009). These are perhaps among the more extreme examples of the negative implications of jealousy in romantic relationships; however, it is important to note that despite these obvious risks, monogamous relationships are cited as a way of *avoiding* jealousy in relationships today (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012).

Perhaps people perceive jealousy to be void in monogamous relationships, because it is not viewed as a negative attribute (or emotion) to have in romantic relationships. Jealousy is seen as an indicator of feelings of commitment and love within a relationship (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983). For instance, Puente and Cohen (2003) asked college students to evaluate different scenarios in which jealousy might arise between a

husband and wife. Results indicated that participants often recognized a husband's jealousy as a sign of love, even when the cause of jealousy was undetermined. Additionally, during instances of infidelity, participants *strongly* supported a husband's jealousy. For more severe cases, such as physical violence, it would be expected that outside perceptions of love in the relationship would diminish. However, participants rated men who were jealous *and* violent towards their wives as being *more loving* than men who were simply violent without the presence of jealousy. Surprisingly, this finding includes instances of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of women by their husbands. Thus, experimental evidence shows that jealousy is being used as an excuse for violent and abusive behavior against women within monogamous relationships.

While polyamorous relationships are not necessarily void of jealousy, polyamory allows partners to openly engage in multiple concurrent relationships. Thus, polyamory is founded on renegotiating the meaning and consequences of jealousy. It has even been suggested that feelings of jealousy are actually just manifestations of insecurity or fear of losing one's partner. Because polyamory allows for more than one concurrent partner, there is perhaps a lesser fear of being replaced by a new love interest, thus contributing to the lower incidence of jealousy (Jackson & Scott, 2004). As further evidence, research shows that individuals in polyamorous relationships experience «compersion,» which is described as the *opposite* of jealousy. That is, compersion is used to describe feelings of happiness that result from seeing one's partner happy with one of his/her other partners (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Scholars have argued that jealousy maintains social and economic order within the institution of monogamy; specifically, this emotion reinforces women's dependence on men for emotional and financial support (Mint, 2010; Robinson, 1997). The consequences of maintaining social order via jealousy are twofold: it promotes justifying inequity (i.e., the phenomena known as system justification, discussed later), and, subsequently, individuals perceive jealousy as a positive emotion in monogamous relationships (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Puente & Cohen, 2003). In contrast, jealousy is perceived as a highly negative emotion among individuals in polyamorous relationships. It is common for individuals in these types of relationships to leave a partner if controlling behaviors or consistent patterns of jealousy are exhibited (Taormino, 2008). This is reiterated within

popular polyamory «self-help» texts which provide guidelines for how to overcome and manage jealousy-triggering situations (Anapol, 1997; Easton & Liszt, 2002; Munson & Stelboun, 1999). Additionally, those engaged in polyamory often establish clear boundaries and practice open communication concerning «extra-dyadic» sexual and/or romantic partnerships (Ritchie & Barker, 2006).

Thus, the reconstruction and avoidance of jealousy appears to be more prominent in polyamorous relationships—not monogamous relationships as previously believed (Conley, Moors, et al., 2012). And, because jealousy is perceived as more manageable and less essential to polyamorous relationships, the negative consequences of jealousy are likely less severe and therefore have less of a negative effect (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault) on women.

Future Avenues of Research:

Benefits Potentially Unique to Polyamory for Women

In the next section, we consider benefits that polyamory may uniquely afford women. Specifically, we consider other benefits that were not previously examined in the Conley, Ziegler, et al. (2012) critical review. These benefits include: a) agency, b) financial resources, and c) social support networks.

Women’s agency within monogamy. Historically, the institution of monogamy was not intended to protect or support women (Evans, 2005). Given that marriage has allowed for the ownership of wife by husband (Weadock, 2004), certain aspects of conventional monogamy exist to restrict women’s agency and autonomy. Although marriage is no longer commonly perceived as an exchange of property, it is not without its patriarchal traditions and restrictions (Weadock, 2004). Certainly, not all heterosexual monogamous relationships oppress women; however, the institution of monogamy may make it more difficult to question normative scripts, whereas the lack of hegemonic scripts within polyamory may allow for greater challenging of norms (Barker & Langdridge, 2010).

Given these oppressive foundations, why do women participate in monogamy? From a sociocultural perspective, women are lead to believe that their successes are a result of their romances, and thus can only be accessed through their relations with men (Rudman & Heppen, 2003). Indeed, women’s common romantic fantasies have been linked to their disinterest in personal power, indicating that women who prioritize love and romance may be simultaneously limiting

their own personal successes, including educational, career, and economic achievements (Rudman & Heppen, 2003).

In terms of gender roles within the institution of monogamy, structural practices continue to promote women's investment in monogamy. For example, men are more likely to value earnings, power, and leadership; in contrast, women are taught to value interpersonal relationships and helping others (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigan, 2000). Women are socialized to be caring and communal (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989) and, subsequently, learn to rely on personal relationships as a source of self-esteem more so than men (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992). Even though women are overwhelmingly viewed more positively than men (Eagly & Mladinic, 1993), the traits that are prescribed foster their subordination (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 2001). Women's dependence on men only serves to further increase women's investment in monogamy (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). Not only are women socialized to believe that marriage is an important lifetime achievement, but we argue that women are also taught that their identity as a woman is dependent on their ability to fulfill these relational roles. Thus, by not engaging in traditional monogamous relationships, women fail to fulfill essential components of their womanly roles.

Women's endorsement of a social institution that limits their opportunities may seem counterintuitive, yet, this is unsurprising given literature on false consciousness and system justification (see Jost & Banaji, 1994 for a review). This psychological phenomenon helps explain women's investment in a system that disadvantages them. According to this framework, outgroups are motivated to maintain the status quo as a result of a desire for stability as well as a need to hold positive views of the overarching social structure (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Despite the obvious drawbacks that result from women's greater investment in romantic relationships, women believe that their romantic relationships with men are of ultimate importance and value (Kilianski & Rudman, 1998). However, women are not to be blamed for their investment in this self-limiting structure, as their identity as women is repeatedly reinforced through a society that rewards them for gender role conformity (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Gender roles within monogamy and polyamory. In monogamous relationships, sexual scripts have strict and specific rules for how women and men

enact their gender roles (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). However, these sexual scripts are limited in their application to heteronormative and monogamous relationship contexts. Since these norms are created in the context of a monogamist culture, it seems challenging to apply them to polyamorous relationships. As a result, polyamory (often) reconstructs the norms and scripts that guide traditional monogamous behavior; thus, this rewriting of rules provides women with the opportunity to explore non-normative gender roles. Accordingly, research suggests that gender roles are not as strongly enforced in polyamorous relationships and communities as they are within their monogamous counterparts (Sheff, 2005). Polyamory is not necessarily void of traditional gendered roles and behaviors; however, the nontraditional nature of polyamorous relationships may allow for greater fluidity in the performance of gender.

Polyamory may have fewer social restrictions than monogamy, because it exists outside hegemonic relationship scripts. Subsequently, participants are afforded greater freedom in negotiating individual roles within these contexts. Greater flexibility for challenging traditional gender roles in polyamorous relationships parallels roles often found within same-sex relationships. For example, research shows that individuals in same-sex relationships are more likely to engage in an egalitarian division of labor than individuals in opposite sex relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 2005). Similarly, Sheff (2005) suggests that engagement in polyamory questions norms of dominant culture (e.g., monogamy), perhaps making it easier for polyamorous women to exert agency and autonomy. In other words, polyamory provides a supportive environment that encourages women to explore their sexuality without the usual restrictions and stigmatization found within dominant cultural scripts.

Women's access to resources in monogamy and polyamory. Relationships should offer equal benefits to its members, particularly with respect to finite resources. When two people combine resources, there should be more for both people, such as with the handling and sharing of domestic responsibilities. However, this is typically not the case in marriage, since women experience an increase in time spent maintaining a household, whereas men experience a decrease (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Although we know of no research that explores the division of resources within departures from monogamy, women

may have more to gain from a polyamorous relationship due to the greater sharing of the burden of household chores.

Relationships can be costly in other ways, and often function to limit women's agency and autonomy. Potentially, women within polyamorous are less dependent on men due to their engagement in multiple romantic partnerships, thus providing them greater social support. The lack of reliance on a single individual to satisfy one's emotional and sexual needs allows women to enjoy greater overall fulfillment due to having multiple partners to provide multiple different advantages. Further, in polyamorous relationships, there is likely a reduction in the amount of pressure a woman may feel in a romantic relationship, knowing that she is no longer responsible for fulfilling *all* of her partner's emotional and sexual needs (Jackson & Scott, 2004). Also, because polyamory removes some of the focus from the romantic pairing as the most important relationship in one's life, there is an increased investment in non-romantic relationships and networks (Jackson & Scott, 2004), therefore even non-romantic relationships are likely stronger for people engaged in polyamory.

Theoretically, monogamous relationships should provide both women and men with an increase in available resources; however, we know that men are often advantaged over women in these relationships. Due to this, and because of the increase in number of individuals engaged in a relationship, polyamory may provide an alternative arrangement where there is more equal sharing of responsibilities.

Men's Position in Polyamory

We, of course, acknowledge that men can also benefit from polyamorous relationships. Radical social change is best achieved with coalition building and forming allies with those who have social power (in this case, mainly men). Polyamory provides opportunities for the sharing of resources, including time, money, domestic responsibilities, which would benefit all partners— regardless of gender. Also, while polyamorous communities may allow for greater sexual freedom, mainstream monogamous culture is more likely to look favorably on a man with many partners, as opposed to his female equivalent (cf. Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, under review). In these ways, men may also experience rewards that they might not otherwise gain from monogamous relationships. However,

this does not detract from our argument that given women's social context, the net benefits to women are greater than they are to men.

Of note, the opportunities for greater gender parity in polyamorous relationships are not automatic and, in fact, non-monogamous relationships can definitely mirror more conventional relationship styles, thus perpetuating polynormativity and the constraints that accompany any monogamous relationship. Rather than suggesting that non-monogamous relationships inevitably lead to the host of benefits, we merely elucidate the potential advantages that consensually non-monogamous relationships offer to relationship partners due to their ability to disrupt dominant scripts of heteronormativity and mononormativity.

Conclusion

Given that women are supposed to be relational, why has this prescription been interpreted as needing to exist within the confines of a monogamous relationship? If this prescription is indeed about the need for women to be communal, it seems logical that women could fulfill this just as easily (if not more so) in polyamorous relationships as they can in monogamous partnerships. Not only does women's engagement in polyamory allow them to fulfill their communal and relational roles; but also, polyamory may provide a host of benefits that cater to women's sexual satisfaction, agency, and gender role flexibility. Monogamy's tendency to uphold certain restrictions on women's autonomy, as well as its pivotal role in situating women in relationships that perpetuate their roles as the inferior gender (Jost & Banaji, 1994), help to maintain gendered power differentials that serve to oppress women. Therefore, by applying a sociocultural and feminist lens to analyze benefits of romantic relationships, we have highlighted monogamy as an institution that upholds a system of gender oppression. We encourage researchers to evaluate the ways in which polyamorous communities may cultivate greater gender equality, and how they are thus more advantageous for women than monogamous relationships.

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Endnotes

- 1 Although we recognize that not all monogamous relationships are composed of a woman and a man, the culture of traditional monogamous relationships is typically one defined by heteronormativity, and thus our focus will be on dyads composed of one man and one woman. Undoubtedly, same sex relationships would add an important element to this discussion; however, because we are interested in investigating traditional gender roles within romantic relationships, the current discussion remains focused on heterosexual behavior.

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