

A multiplicity of desire: Polyamory and relationship counselling

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Reflecting on a personal and professional journey, this paper invites readers to consider prevailing ideas of monogamy and its effects on relationship counselling. The term and practice of polyamory are introduced, highlighting how society's training in monogamy obscures this choice. An interview with experience consultants challenges some of the myths of polyamorous relationships and makes suggestions for counsellors.

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INTRODUCTION

What would relationship counselling look like if it took seriously the challenges posed by what is now referred to as polyamory? For those who have not heard of the phrase 'polyamory', it refers to the practice of deliberating and openly choosing to love more than one person. It is a departure from monogamous thinking. We will be speaking particularly about forms of polyamory that are being practiced and written about within queer communities, although heterosexual polyamory is also practiced.

The editors of the book *The lesbian polyamory reader*, Marcia Munson and Judith P Stelboun, give a brief history of the term 'polyamory'.

They describe how, up to the 1950s in the USA, sex outside a couple relationship was commonly called 'cheating'. Women who 'cheated' were described as 'loose', whereas men who 'cheated' were 'studs'. The 1960s, however, saw a sexual revolution take place. Birth control pills, counter-cultural social movements, and the concept of 'free love', changed the ways in which sexuality was understood, at least for some members of one generation. In the 1970s, after the release of the book by Nena O'Neil and George O'Neil called *Open marriage*, those who were interested in loving more than one person referred to living in 'open relationships' (O'Neil & O'Neil, 1984). In the 1980s, the term 'non-monogamy' began to be used to describe multiple concurrent sexual involvements. More recently, in the 1990s, the concept of polyamory has gained in influence, particularly within the queer community, as it emphasises love, not only sexual connotation (Munson & Stelboun, 1999). In 2006, the term 'polyamory' was added to the Oxford Dictionary.

Personally, I learned that monogamy was a choice when I started meeting people who practiced non-monogamous (or 'poly') relationships. Previously, I knew that open relationships existed, but generally I had dismissed these as a 'fringe' or 'hippy' thing, not something I needed to consider seriously. I think I had also confused polyamory with the 'swinging parties' I had seen depicted in movies.

When I started meeting people who were in loving and respectful open relationships or had multiple lovers, I was curious about this. I remember talking with a friend who was so comfortable and matter-of-fact about her sexuality and her various lovers. There was nothing salacious about her descriptions and it was also clearly no big deal to her. In her life, and her community, it was just normal to care about, to love, and to be sexual, with more than one person.

This friend of mine provided me with an initial platform to think about poly relationships in a new way. It altered my idea of what was normal. What if poly relationships were not bizarre or unusual as they are so often depicted? What if they were just as 'normal' as the idea of finding one partner and sticking with that partner?

It was significant for me to be thinking in this way. At the time, I was in a monogamous relationship with a man. Later, when I began to explore my sexuality and be more open with my attraction to women, these issues became more personal. How could I explore or honour my same-sex attraction if I was in a monogamous relationship? Would it be necessary to end my relationship with my partner in order to explore my same-sex attraction? Even if I still loved my partner? It was around this time it began to dawn on me that monogamy was a choice, and that polyamory could also be a choice for me. This realisation of choice was both exciting and scary.

Looking back, I realise that I had been raised with the idea that everyone is supposed to find a partner and stick with that partner exclusively.

This idea has real implications for counselling work. Recently, I consulted with a client who shared with me her feelings for a man other than her male partner and I, without hesitation, asked her questions that were based upon the premise that these feelings were a sign of a deficit in her current relationship. Afterwards, I thought about the thinking behind my questions – it was clearly a result of my training in monogamy: a training that has been so successful that, despite my own stand against it, it easily creeps back into my work. Why is it so difficult to shake this idea that you can only romantically and sexually love one person at a time?

I have come to realise that, whatever our personal choices in relationships, the discourse of monogamy affects our work in relationship counselling. How can we become aware of this?

Well, one way is to consult and listen to those who are living polyamorous lives.

In preparation for this presentation, I interviewed a number of my friends about their experiences of polyamory. This is what they said:

People make the choice to live polyamorous relationships for many different reasons. What are some of the reasons you embarked on polyamory?

- Part of forming my ideas around poly relationships had to do with me looking at jealousy which used to have a very strong hold on me – I didn't want it to and thought a lot about why I felt it so strongly. Part of what I came up with was that it was about ownership of others and I wanted to try to challenge and learn about this by trying to not own my lovers by being polyamorous. I have since tried this in many different shapes and forms, and it feels like everything else in life – it is something that needs frequent reassessment and review. I think that my journey around polyamory has been a difficult one and that sometimes I have jumped in and tried things that I wasn't ready for, or my lover(s) was/weren't ready for, but the thing that really works for me in it – and always has – is that it has all been about honesty and facing reality. The best road is not necessarily the easiest one ...
- I had well and truly tried to live within monogamous relationships and these had not worked for me – or my partners for that matter. Rather than keep trying to fit our lives into a monogamous ideal, it seemed a good idea to try something different.

What has been most helpful?

- One of the most important resources that helped me and my partner to have a common language around our non-monogamous relationship was a book called *The ethical slut* (Easton & Liszt, 1997). Having a

common language makes it a lot easier when expressing fears and desires and in negotiating a life together.

What have you learned about yourself through engagement with poly practices that you may have not known if you had chosen monogamy? Are there specific 'skills' that you have developed?

- I've realised that, in instances where my lover has other partners/lovers outside of 'us', I'm actually really okay with sharing, as long as my lover/partner is 100% present and with me when we have our turn to spend time together.
- I think it has helped to hone my skills of communication. Specifically, I think I have got better at speaking a difficult truth, of saying something I think someone else may not want to hear. I have also learned more about the ability to look inside myself to seek out an uncomfortable thought or hidden feeling so that I can communicate what is true for me. I have also learned about what my limits are in terms of how much I can share with other people in a practical real time sense. I am still learning lots about how to gauge what is the right thing for me at any one time and how to provide a safe space for my partner/lovers to let me know what is the right thing for them.

How do dominant ideas about monogamy affect you individually and as a couple?

- I find that it can be difficult to find advice and support about my relationship because it falls outside of the 'normal' parameters.
- They affect me a lot! Part of me still has a fantasy of simple monogamous bliss that comes from being told this so often by the dominant paradigm. I think jealousy is learnt from that too (this is a society that happily makes films about people who seem to be excused all types of behaviour, including killing, for jealousy!), and a feeling of lack of self-worth if you aren't part of a 'couple'. I find it difficult at times to find other people to chat to about little or larger issues that

may come up in my love life because either people are too busy freaking out or making a judgement, or they are interested in polyamory and start asking you all about it rather than listening to your problems! So, yes, 'coz it's little understood it can be difficult to find support.

What would you look for in choosing a counsellor?

- Someone who understood queer, non-monogamous relationships had good sex-positive feminist politics and an understanding of alternative sexual practices. Whoa, perhaps that's a tall order!
- Someone with a range of skills. Someone mature with a real understanding of emotional issues. Someone who doesn't judge me on my sexual preferences, sex positiveness, or polyamory.

What reservations might you have about attending 'couples counselling'?

- My main reservation is that I would be judged and not understood for my lifestyle and the way in which I choose to have relationships.
- The other thing that occurred to me is that some people might feel excluded by the term 'couples counselling' because they may be, for example, in a three-way relationship. So perhaps the term 'relationship counselling' may be more inclusive.

What are some of the challenges people in non-monogamous relationships might face that monogamous couples might not face?

- Monogamous relationships would have more options in terms of counselling and resources. Their relationships are always reinforced by media, literature, society, etc. ... so, for people who are polyamorous, there is a lot more searching to find good role models/ advice/resources for their relationships.

Do you have suggestions for counsellors working with people (or preparing to work with people) in poly relationships?

- Please don't think that, because we have an 'open' relationship, we have no 'boundaries' or rules. This is a common misconception – it is often the opposite. Plenty of thought has been given to rules and boundaries to make things as clear and safe as possible.
- Please don't assume that our relationships have any more or less meaning/emotional significance than monogamous relationships.
- Please don't assume we haven't thought about/made informed decisions about our choice of relationship styles – as with anything outside the dominant paradigm, usually you have to make an informed decision to go that way.
- It may not be the non-monogamy that is a cause of the problems in the relationship.
- When asking questions, do it with consideration. And, if you feel out of your depth – or unable to fully comprehend the situation – admit it! No-one knows everything! But suggest some alternatives if you feel this is the case.
- Like with any other situation, do some reading, watch some films, have a good think about the issue with as little prejudice as possible.

Are there 'basic understandings' about polyamory that counsellors should have?

- Non-monogamy as a lifestyle choice is very different from having illicit affairs, in that it is a conscious, open choice rather than a situation of denial and lies.
- We are not taught by society to be very good at consensual, loving, non-monogamy, so it is something we have to learn about. Often, like with everything else, we make mistakes on the way. Even if we are making these mistakes, it doesn't necessarily mean that we don't want to pursue polyamory.

Finally, it seems significant to consider how discourses of gender are relevant to this topic. I can trace my own thinking about poly practices to sex-positive feminism. Women frequently have to stand

against the shame that patriarchy applies to women's bodies and women's expressions of sexuality. Anyone who deviates from heteronormative practices is also called upon to defend, justify and explain their ways. Women who don't choose monogamy and instead practice polyamory may additionally encounter public or internal judgements of being too sexually permissive or being selfish.

Situating myself within a queer feminist framework helps me to slowly make my own way in developing and living forms of sexuality and identity that fit for me. There are many wonderful interpretations of what it means to be queer. For me, to be queer means to challenge the monopoly of monogamy, to refuse sex-related shame, and to decline to fit myself into a specific box or label regarding my sexuality.

As a narrative practitioner, these considerations seem relevant too. Becoming aware of the influence of monogamy's discourses, and deconstructing the effects that this discourse has on the lives of those who consult me, seems to me to be an important part of narrative practice.

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RESOURCES

- Loving More Magazine: <http://www.lovemore.com/>
- <http://www.polyamory.org>
- 'Poly in the UK': Polyamory resources for the United Kingdom: <http://bi.org/uk-poly/polyuk.html>
- Poly-friendly professionals directory: <http://www.polychromatic.com/pfp/>
- A list of professionals open-minded about, or supportive of, polyamory issues – therapists and other health professionals can add their name and contact details at no cost.
- Wikipedia – 'polyamory' entry: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polyamory> – a good overview of the issues, with links to resources