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Teaching About Consensual NonMonogamy in Relationship Science and Sexuality Courses

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In recent years, relationship science has produced innovative and provocative research focusing on *consensual non-monogamy* (CNM)—that is, an explicit agreement between two partners that one or both of them can have other sexual and/or romantic relationships (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013; Moors, Edelstein, & Conley, 2012). Examples of CNM include "open relationships," "swinging," "polyamory," "polygamy," and "friends with benefits."

Research about CNM is of great importance and interest to the field, given the prevalence of consensual non-monogamous relationships (estimated between 4.3-10.5% of relationships) and the negative stereotypes people hold about those who engage in these relationships. Researchers from the University of Michigan's Stigmatized Sexuality Lab explain that the bias in favor of monogamy is so pervasive that assumptions about monogamy as a superior relational style are axiomatic, even in empirical psychological literature (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2012). Thus, while research about CNM aims to describe a largely misunderstood and often stigmatized array of relationship styles, it also offers a novel arena in which to test hypotheses derived from theories that were developed with the assumption of monogamy as the ideal form of romantic relationships. Despite CNM's relevance to the field, college-level instructors may be slow to integrate information about CNM into their courses on relationships or human sexuality, especially in contemporary Western societies where monogamy is perceived as the normative, optimal relationship style (Conley et al., 2013) and has served as the basis for the overwhelming majority of scholarship. With this context in mind, the purpose of this article is to discuss approaches to teaching about consensual nonmonogamy in the classroom.

We recognize that some instructors may be reluctant to teach about consensual non-monogamy in their relationship courses for one or more of the following reasons: feeling they lack time to devote to the topic, feeling inadequately prepared to cover it effectively, personal biases (e.g., strong personal preference for monogamy), or not even being unaware that this line of research exists in the first place. Perusing three contemporary textbooks for interpersonal relationships courses (Bradbury & Karney, 2013; Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2013; Miller, 2011), there is scant discussion of consensual emotionally and/or sexually non-exclusive

relationships other than brief discussions of polygamy, which is not necessarily even the most common type of CNM in Western cultures. There is no discussion of other mutual non-monogamous arrangements, such as polyamory. Although the absence of textbook coverage of CNM is noteworthy, there are other, mostly colloquial readings that can offer instructors and students valuable perspectives about the diversity of human relationship experiences (see for example, Anderson, 2012; Easton & Hardy, 2009; Ryan & Jetha, 2010; Sheff, 2014).

Framing the Topic for Our Students

Before delving into a classroom discussion about consensual non-monogamous relationships it is useful to remind students that, while monogamy seems the most practiced relationship arrangement, it certainly isn't the only model out there. In addition, people practice different varieties of non-monogamy, and not everyone defines monogamy in the same way. As instructors, we need to remind ourselves and our students that respectful engagement of the topic is essential. Beyond being good scholarly practice, such tone-setting helps maintain a safe environment for all class participants—especially those who themselves identify as polyamorous, for example, or those who were raised in poly households. In our experience, many students (regardless of personal background) are eager to participate in discussions of monogamy and alternatives to monogamy.

It's also important for instructors to make clear that they realize this topic may be totally foreign to some students. We can encourage productive engagement with the topic by emphasizing course goals related to understanding the diversity of human relationship experiences. Tying the topic back to key course objectives can help side-step negative emotional reactions on the part of more reticent students. Many students, simply by virtue of being raised in cultures where monogamy is the norm, may not even realize that alternatives to monogamy exist. Furthermore, some students may, through discussion of the actual behaviors people engage in, start identifying their own behaviors as falling outside the traditional ideas of monogamy (for example, the "friends with benefits" model of relationships is common among our students).

A final piece of tone-setting that we have found useful for promoting discussion is to invite intellectual risk-taking. The many different words and labels alone can feel overwhelming to some students. For example, we regularly hear students confuse the term "polygamy" with "polyamory" (see Conley et al., 2013 for definitions of different types of CNM relationships). In our classrooms, we simply ask students to do their best and provide resources (like a simple glossary) to arm students with the correct language. We also remind the students to be patient with each other as they try out ideas, ask questions, etc.

Theoretical Perspectives

Once instructors opt to include consensual nonmonogamy in a course, they will need to decide whether the topic will be integrated into existing topics or whether it will be treated as a stand-alone topic. For example, during a unit about sexual norms, an instructor might wish to talk about the rise in sex outside of marriage, as well as people's desires for sexual variety, and then use that topic as a segue into talking about consensual non-monogamy. If treated as a stand-alone topic, it can be useful to explain to students that all the other topics of the course are absolutely

relevant to CNM relationships to ensure that they do not come to perceive CNM relationships as entirely different from dyadic, monogamous relationships.

Consider that while this area of research--though certainly not the practice of CNM--is new, there are existing theories that may facilitate teaching students why and how people engage in consensual nonmonogamy. For example, though no study has examined this idea directly (at least not yet), multiple romantic/sexual relationships could offer additional opportunities for self-expansion, self-concept growth and exploration (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013), as well as additional avenues for emotional/romantic fulfillment and/or sexual satisfaction, that would not be possible with only one partner. The deficit model of romantic infidelity (Thompson, 1983) suggests that people seek extradyadic partners in large part because of dissatisfaction or low fulfillment with their primary partner/s, however, this may be limited to nonconsensual extra-dyadic sex. New research on polyamorous relationships suggests that need fulfillment is largely independent across consensually non-monogamous partners (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, 2014). Having needs fulfilled with multiple partners was associated with increased satisfaction with primary partners.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) contributes nicely to this area. Attachment theory is often presented as a core unit in relationship science courses, thus making it easy to incorporate information on non-monogamy into this theoretical framework. Some new evidence indicates that people high in avoidant attachment are more likely to have positive attitudes toward consensual non-monogamy and stronger desire to engage in such relationships, but this was only true among individuals who had never been in a consensually non-monogamous relationship. People who were lower in avoidance were more likely to report actually being in a consensually non-monogamous relationship, relative to those high in avoidance (Moors, Conley, Edelstein, & Chopik, 2014). Similar results have been found in other subpopulations; for example, one study of same-sex couples found that monogamy status (whether people identified as monogamous or not) was unrelated to relationship satisfaction and commitment for people low in anxious attachment. For people who scored high in anxious attachment, monogamy status was associated with lower relationship satisfaction and commitment (Mohr, Selterman, & Fassinger, 2013).

Evolutionary psychology may provide thoughtful, though perhaps mixed and equivocal, perspectives on monogamy. It may be best to frame this information to students in terms of the debate rather than a consensus from one research camp. Monogamy, though prevalent in human populations, is quite rare in the animal kingdom (Barash & Lipton, 2002), and there is disagreement and debate among biological scientists regarding how and under what set of conditions monogamy develops in nature (Lukas & Clutton-Brock, 2013; Opie, Atkinson, Dunbar, & Shultz, 2013). Some intriguing perspectives on human monogamy exist in popular books such as Sex at Dawn (Ryan & Jetha, 2010; see also Christopher Ryan's TED talk here) and its counterpoint Sex at Dusk, various commentaries (Ellsworth, 2011), as well as anthropological work (Hrdy, 1980).

Consensual non-monogamies are certainly more prevalent in a variety of cultures across the world, and the mere existence of cross-cultural variability in monogamous tendencies suggests that monogamy is not a biological human universal. Even the way we frame this issue

(monogamy as the norm) is culturally biased through our lens of Western/North American reality.

Consensual non-monogamy may offer evolutionary advantages including genetic diversity and egalitarian sharing of resources in small groups. Part of this evolutionary debate also centers around how to properly define "monogamy," which could mean sexual/emotional exclusivity or something more general. Consider that biologists refer to "social monogamy" as when a pair of individuals builds a committed, long-term relationship that is mostly (but not completely) exclusive (Reichard, 2003). All of these queries and ongoing debates (see two recent articles here and here) about the nature of monogamy and how it manifests in human sexuality make it a topic that is especially fruitful for the purpose of teaching students how to critically examine divergent theoretical evidence in psychology, biology, anthropology, and related fields.

There are many scientific approaches to understanding jealousy, with some evolutionary psychologists identifying it as a painful yet perhaps necessary emotion that triggers vigilance about one's reproductive success (Buss, 2011). However, developmental psychologists have also identified jealousy as a non-romantic phenomenon in children (Hart & Legerstee, 2010). Thus, when teaching jealousy, it cannot be conceptualized as solely a mechanism for enhancing reproductive success; it is a complex cognitive and emotional state that is also driven by socio-cultural norms and idiosyncratic personal experiences. A myriad of variables, including attachment style (Selterman & Maier, 2013), neuroticism and agreeableness (Buunk & Jijkstra, 2006), and traditional gender roles (Hansen, 1985) contribute to the experience of jealousy. The link between jealousy and romantic rivalry makes this an excellent topic to merge with the study of consensual non-monogamy, especially because those who engage in consensual non-monogamies are actively pursuing the type of relationship that ordinarily elicits jealousy in other adults. Research shows that people who practice consensual nonmonogamy experience lower levels of jealousy than the rest of the population (e.g., de Visser & McDonald, 2007). When discussing jealousy in relationships, instructors may also bring up the idea of compersion (coined by laypeople in polyamorous relationships), which concerns feeling positive emotions when one's partner experiences pleasure from having an emotional or sexual experience or relationship with another person. Compersion is said to be analogous to when people in monogamous relationships experience positive emotions over their partner's positive non-relational experiences (e.g., a job promotion or winning an award). Holmes (2013) presented preliminary findings showing that some people in polyamorous relationships may experience high amounts of positive emotions (e.g., joy, happy, love for partner, loved by partner) and low amounts of negative emotions (e.g., sad, angry, jealous, scared) when their romantic partner has a sexual or emotional encounter or relationship with another person.

Research on prejudice and stigma also applies to this discussion, especially within a social-psychological framework where students are also exposed to research regarding conformity to cultural norms and research on stigmatization of non-mainstream sexual practices (e.g., fetishes) and promiscuity. It is worth mentioning that people may be swayed toward monogamy as a practice not because they believe it is intrinsically better but because of external stress/pressure stemming from stigmas associated with non-monogamous arrangements (see Conley, Relationship Research News November 2014, VOL 13, NO. 2 8 Moors, Matsick, & Siegler, 2013; Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, Rubin, & Conley, 2013). In addition, some forms of consensual

non-monogamy (such as polyamory) may be viewed more favorably than other forms (such as swinging; see Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2013). Course instructors may juxtapose research on prejudice against individuals who practice consensual non-monogamy with research on prejudice against LGBTQ individuals, or other forms of prejudice based on sexual identities (e.g., BDSM, kink) or relationship statuses (e.g., singlism).

In conclusion, it is clear that the science of consensual non-monogamy dovetails nicely with several overarching theoretical perspectives in relationship science.

Activities/Exercises:
The activities and exercises below provide instructors with concrete ideas for engaging these topics, though certainly the effectiveness of any given strategy will depend on the size, level, and nature of the class.

- **Discuss definitions and descriptions of monogamy**. As Conley et al. (2013) note, "Despite widespread endorsement of monogamy as the ideal type of romantic relationship, the construct of monogamy lacks a consistent definition" (p. 125). Ask students to free-write for a couple minutes in response to the prompt, "What is monogamy?" or invite small pods of students to write and then post to a Google Doc a definition of monogamy. Ensuing discussion will likely reveal that, while most students may agree that monogamy constitutes sexual exclusivity, they may not agree about what type of contact is permitted under such an arrangement (e.g., hugging/kissing, flirting, intimate conversation, cybersex, provocative dancing, exchanging gifts). Instructors might follow up on this with information from recent papers demonstrating the ambiguity associated with these behaviors (see Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Wiedler, & Bequette, 2011), and to explain that there is substantial variability in what couples consider "cheating." It is also worth noting that some people may define themselves individually or dyadically as monogamous (as part of their identity) but have preferential attitudes or desires that are more in line with a consensually non-monogamous arrangement. And, couples can define their relationship as "open," yet behaviorally look identical to a couple that identifies as monogamous (in other words, just because a relationship is open doesn't mean those individuals have sex with other people).

- **Discuss what students find appealing vs. not about different models.** In addition to teaching information on what these relationship styles are and how they operate, instructors can also ask students to consider why they would choose one or another of these varieties for their own relationships. Here, a staged debate (in which students are assigned positions) can be a useful tactic for surfacing reactions and revealing assumptions about relationship functioning.

- **Survey students about the meaning of other relationship statuses**. Instructors can solicit feedback from students about what constitutes an "official" relationship. What expectations, emotions, behaviors, and identities correspond with different relationship statuses (e.g., "Facebook official," dating, friends with benefits)? Encourage students to think about when and how the issue of monogamy/nonmonogamy comes up in discussions of relationship status. Also consider asking students whether there is a

different expectation for monogamy in committed relationships depending on the environment/culture, or immediate situation. For example, some may admit that, while they have made monogamous agreements with partners, there was an implicit or explicit expectation that extra-dyadic sex would be allowed if partners were physically separated (e.g., long-distance relationships), which may be especially prevalent during the transition from high school to college. Furthermore, norms in the college atmosphere may promote a greater acceptance of extra-dyadic behavior compared to post-college life and marriage. It may be the case that, while many students disapprove of romantic infidelity, they would be more forgiving of such behavior in a context of "casual" dating compared to a decades-long marriage. The goal here is to encourage students to consider how environments and situations shape their attitudes and expectations about monogamy.

• **Survey students about their attitudes toward extra-dyadic sex**. In an informal survey one of the authors conducted in their spring 2014 relationships course, 80-85% of students agreed that it was "wrong" for them or their partners to have sex with another person, and approximately 50% agreed that this behavior was grounds to terminate the relationship. After asking students to explain their attitudes, there was a productive free-response discussion about the consequences of such behavior (e.g., harm caused, fear of abandonment). Some students voiced counter opinions that were more accepting of consensual non-monogamy and expressed the view that others may consider it wrong only because of contemporary social norms and personal insecurities. In sum, there may be great variability in students' attitudes/responses. It may be beneficial for students to hear and openly discuss these views with each other in the classroom setting.

• **Ask students to define other relationship constructs without implying monogamy.** Ask students to articulate definitions of other relationship constructs –like love, trust, loyalty, commitment. Challenge them to create definitions that do not include monogamy assumed phrases like "one and only," "one's partner," etc. Once students are satisfied with their definitions, ask how those constructs might look in monogamous vs. non-monogamous relationships. Suggest that perhaps trust, loyalty, commitment, etc. need not be centered around social or sexual monogamy.

• **Ask students to think about all the qualities they desire in a short term and/or long-term romantic partner**. Then, ask students to reflect on the people they know, as well as people they've dated, who possess *all* of these qualities. The point of this exercise is to show the low probability of finding a long-term partner who contains all the desirable traits that students would want in a partner. Following this, prompt students to discuss the prospect of finding multiple partners to fulfill all of their needs/desires/fantasies.

• **Survey students (anonymously) about whether they have ever actively fantasized about the idea of sexually engaging with an extra-dyadic partner, either with or without their partner, while in an exclusive relationship.** It is likely that most students will (anonymously) admit this, and it would lead nicely into a broader discussion about the motivations to pursue multiple partners (e.g., excitement, novelty). Along the same lines, ask students why they believe people engage in extra-dyadic sex (in monogamous

relationships). In other words, ask students to offer possible explanations for people's motivations for romantic infidelity. Students may identify perceived (stereotypical or actual) differences between men and women in their motivations for extra-dyadic sex. This conversation could segue nicely into a discussion of recent research findings. Live Science reports that "middle-age women who cheat on their husbands are looking for passion and sex, but don't want to divorce their husbands over it. About two-thirds of the women said they were seeking more romantic passion, which always involved sex. And none of the women wanted to leave their spouses, with many even talking up their husbands." Given these findings, ask students to consider whether monogamy is obviously the "optimal" arrangement for long-term romantic relationships. Ask students to consider whether divorce rates would potentially decrease if married partners were permitted to pursue extradyadic sex.

• **Ask the students to brainstorm the perceived risks—emotional, physical, social—of extradyadic relationships for all parties involved.** Then, ask about the ways people involved in monogamous and CNMs could mitigate those risks. At this point in her class, one of the authors shares an example of a relationship agreement and invites students to discuss their reactions to the agreement vis a vis perceived risks. She eventually opens into broader questions about the role of explicit vs. implicit assumptions about relationships. If, when, and how often do students anticipate they'd like to talk about these assumptions in their own relationships (including in dyadic exclusive relationships)? After reading a relationship agreement, students will have a much better understanding of what it means to set expectations and establish norms in relationships. Some students may have reactions along the lines of, "Oh wow! THAT'S what I need to do to make my expectations clear in a dyadic monogamous relationship."

• **Ask students to brainstorm about the pros and cons of the different varieties of monogamy status** (e.g., "What are the pros/cons of consensual non-monogamy," "What are the pros/cons of monogamy?"). It may also be useful to follow this brainstorming session with empirical research on popular misconceptions about monogamy/non-monogamy (see Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013). Similarly, survey students about their attitudes toward consensually non-monogamous relationships. While students may view these relationships as more liberating or exciting, they may also view such relationships as riskier (specifically with regard to contracting a sexually transmitted infection), to be less stable over time, and to be less healthy (or even overtly damaging) to children raised by people in such relationships. However, many of these beliefs are unfounded and can be addressed by empirical research examining the behaviors of people in these relationships compared to the rest of the population. For example, people in consensually non-monogamous relationships are more likely to practice safe sex with their extra-dyadic partners compared to "monogamous" cheaters (Conley, Moors, Ziegler, & Karathanasis, 2012). Strict monogamy is an effective way to curb the spread of STIs but it is only effective if people adhere to it, which does not always happen given the high rate of infidelity in the population.

• **Invite guest speakers who are in CNMs to share their perspectives on the lived experience.**

Additional Resources There are some excellent teaching resources available, thanks to some excellent popular science writers who are also active relationship/sexuality researchers. Moors, Chopik, Edelstein, and Conley (2014) offer a comprehensive overview of consensual non-monogamy in *In-Mind Magazine,* including some basic definitions, examples, and up-to-date research examples. Justin Lehmiller's blog contains some articles on this topic, including a Q&A about polyamory stereotypes, finding potential partners for non-monogamous relationships, survey data on American's attitudes toward morality and relationships, and a study summary focusing on attachment styles and satisfaction/commitment in non-monogamous relationships. Finally, the award winning website *Science of Relationships* contains several articles on this topic as well, including a summary of consensual non-monogamy research, addressing and clarifying myths about consensual non-monogamy, non-monogamous relationships in Tanzania, showing variety in global perspectives, and an article that questions what infidelity really constitutes in light of consensual non-monogamy. Finally, the JSPR podcast series has a discussion with researchers in this field; you can listen here or read the transcript here.

Conclusion

As the field of relationship science evolves, the teaching of relationships follows suit. We strongly encourage college-level course instructors who teach relationship science and/or human sexuality courses to incorporate scientific information and discussion about consensual non-monogamy. We believe that this stands to benefit all students who enroll in such courses, irrespective of how they approach their own relationships.

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