

The Maintenance of Compulsory Monogamy

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Over the last decade, I have spent a good deal of time reading about the steps that people go through in order to become polyamorous. Indeed, handling the issues of nonmonogamy seems to be the primary point of polyamorous community, whether that means learning to overcome jealousy, finding suitably nonmonogamous partners, or navigating the social stigma that surrounds nonmonogamy. We have support groups, conferences, and a multitude of online resources that are devoted to these questions.

While some of the issues dealt with in the pursuit of nonmonogamy are in fact specific to nonmonogamy (most obviously time management), as it turns out most of the problems we face as polyamorous people are a direct result of living in a world that enforces a system of compulsory monogamy. Within our culture, monogamy is a ubiquitous structuring element of relationships and social interactions. As such, monogamous assumptions are built into our lives at every level from the basic conceptualization of love up through the standards of public discourse. In addition to infecting our moral valuations, relationship assumptions, and cultural scripts for behavior, compulsory monogamy is also enforced via standard dating dynamics, social stigma, and the structure of social interaction. In other words, we end up facing pressures towards monogamy in our own heads, in interactions with our partners, and in the social world.

I think that people entering polyamory are often surprised at the depth and persistence of compulsory monogamy in their own lives. Our culture promotes a general idea of monogamy as something you choose to do, but in fact this choice remains a choice only so long as one chooses monogamy. When a person chooses something other than monogamy, they quickly run headlong into a number of power dynamics that push them back towards monogamy. The process of becoming nonmonogamous therefore often involves stripping away many of the elements of the monogamous world and rebuilding one's life around nonmonogamy: finding new social groups, purging or managing guilt and jealousy, restructuring one's relationships, and so on.

In this essay I seek to answer the question: why is nonmonogamy so hard? To do this, I will not address nonmonogamy directly, but rather describe the system of compulsory monogamous conformity that exists in our culture. What is the conceptual structure of compulsory monogamy? What are the power mechanisms that attach to this structure? How is this structural system of power maintained over time?

In other words, this is the task of deconstructing compulsory monogamy specifically from a nonmonogamous viewpoint. It is well-known in activist circles that the best place to analyze a power system is from the losing position in that particular system, for the simple reason that analyzing the power system is mandatory if one is to survive and prosper (e.g. Harding 2003 in regard to sexism). As a result, the people best equipped to deconstruct the power systems of monogamy are those who are not monogamous, and

this paper is written specifically from a polyamorous point of view. Success at being polyamorous requires that one perform certain minimal deconstructions of monogamy, and it is those “poly truths” that illuminate the nature of monogamy itself.

Method

This is a work of conceptual strategizing, so when I use words in this paper (i.e. “monogamy”, “polyamory”, “commitment”) I am referring not just to the dictionary definition or the practice, but also to the conceptual apparatus that surrounds the word, and most importantly to the power connotations it carries. So “monogamy” here is not just “having sex with one person”, but rather a complex structure of interacting concepts, a set of valuations and injunctions, and a series of social practices extending out to seemingly unrelated tangibles such as weddings and insurance coverage.

I will be deconstructing monogamy in this paper according to the techniques of Foucault and Butler, which means that actions and concepts always follow power rather than precede it (Foucault 1978, Butler 1990). The primary questions are therefore questions of who benefits and who loses due to a particular concept, and what personal interest people have in maintaining the current regime of that concept.

While it will probably be difficult for monogamous people to read this essay, nothing I say should be taken as a criticism of the practice of monogamy itself. When monogamy is a conscious effort which allows for the real possibility of nonmonogamy in others, I have no problem with it. I know plenty of people who practice monogamy in this way, and who should be monogamous due to inclination. Similarly, I am not trying to privilege nonmonogamy here: any particular form of nonmonogamy (including polyamory) has its own attendant power dynamics, which I will not cover here.

I am writing this as a white and relatively privileged man in the United States. When I refer to “our culture” or “mainstream culture”, I am referring to mainstream USA culture, with all its attendant power dynamics and oppressions. Much of what I say will also apply to other white-majority nations or cultures, but starts to break down across language, ethnicity, and other cultural barriers. Nothing I say here should be taken as a global or universalized truth.

The Biology of Monogamy

There is no well-understood biology of monogamy, or at least no series of biological mechanisms that produce (or fail to produce) monogamy in humans and that are understood by science. While many scientists claim to have proven or disproven our tendencies towards monogamy, these claims are typically made by referring to human history or via comparisons to other species (e.g. Barash and Lipton 2001), both of which are inconclusive. Only recently have we started actually looking at the actual brain mechanisms of attraction (e.g. Fisher et al 2006), and it will be decades if not centuries

before we fully map the pathways of human desire, and understanding any hormonal drives towards or away from monogamy will probably only come with that mapping.

So, we cannot say anything conclusive about the human biology of monogamy (or nonmonogamy), and in fact there is a real chance that said biology does not exist, given the fact that evolution tends towards the simplest solution, and that simplest solution may well be “people get horny”. Further, it is clear that some people definitely succeed at monogamy, and others definitely succeed at nonmonogamy, so any claim to the naturalness or unnaturalness of either is suspect. We may simply be biologically flexible creatures when it comes to sexual exclusivity, and therefore our tendencies towards monogamy or nonmonogamy are largely determined by culture. This view is supported by survey data which reports that rates of monogamy vary widely by culture (Wellings et al 2006).

However, a funny thing happens whenever people start talking about monogamy, or nonmonogamy, or jealousy, or cheating. Very quickly people start referring to what is natural, or unnatural, or this or the other biological drive (e.g. Bennett 2009; Angier 2009; Doheny 2007). Even when nature is not invoked explicitly, the conversation often starts with the base assumption that it is in people’s nature to be monogamous or jealous, or perhaps that nonmonogamy is unnatural in some way. In more advanced conversations, books or studies are referenced, experts are quoted, and so on. Mainstream media provides us with an endless series of badly interpreted and often contradictory popular science edicts, which are written to score political points but are not all that useful for actually negotiating human behavior (e.g. Perlman 2009; Jones 2007; Fetini 2009).

And of course, polyamorous people fight back using the same sort of language, usually by decrying monogamy as unnatural or setting up nonmonogamy as the biological standard. These days we have our own expert source, *The Myth Of Monogamy*, which summed up the research on the animal kingdom to conclude that sexual monogamy is very rare in animals (Barash and Lipton 2001). But of course humans are different from other animals in a number of basic ways, so this again does not necessarily prove anything about people.

And so these back-and-forth arguments go, with no conclusions in sight. Conveniently, there can be no conclusion, since the science has simply not been done. As a result, we end up endlessly arguing circles around a questionable biological point.

However, the endless argument is in fact the point. Focusing on the biological is a convenient argument derailing tactic for both sides, because it allows us to ignore the uncomfortable questions, like why one would want to be monogamous or nonmonogamous. Or even better, what are the specific things that one gains from monogamy? Or cheating? Or nonmonogamy? What are the power influences that push people into monogamous behavior? What investments have people made in monogamy, and at what price?

And in fact, we can see this derailing technique in the reaction of monogamy advocates to *The Myth of Monogamy*. Before the book was published, polyamory (or any kind of nonmonogamy) would be assailed as unnatural. After the book was published, some of these advocates simply ignored the scientific evidence it contained, or switched their biological argument to jealousy (as described below). Others started arguing that monogamy might be unnatural, but that we should seek to rise above our lowly biological urges and be enlightened monogamous humans. This notably included Barash and Lipton themselves (Rakoff 2001), along with other media analysis (e.g. Wade 2005). It is clear from this example that the conclusion (monogamy) precedes any argument, and the evidence is marshaled to fit the conclusion. In other words, the cultural edict of maintaining compulsory monogamy is the real motivation for these advocates, and any actual nature or biology is beside the point, at most a convenient or inconvenient point of argument.

For the rest of this essay, I will shelve the question of biology as irrelevant. As we will see, there are plenty of social reasons for monogamy to exist, and these social forces are readily available for analysis, and have an immediacy that would likely overwhelm any underlying biology.

Monogamy and Sex

In order to understand the power structures surrounding monogamy, first we are going to have to investigate what it means to be monogamous.

Dictionary definitions of monogamy freely mix two different types of monogamy: marriage to one person and sex with only one person. This begs the question of which definition is the primary test of monogamy. While there have been various points in western history where the marriage requirement of monogamy was paramount (usually for determining inheritance), in the modern world it is the sexual requirement of monogamy that the strict rule, namely that a person only have sex with the right person.

This is easy to see if we look at violations of monogamy, namely cheating. What does one need to do to be something other than monogamous? First and foremost, one must have sex with someone other than the person one is in a relationship with.

In fact, if we imagine the archetypical violation of monogamy, it is a person finding their partner in bed with someone else, so movies, songs, and television shows tend to use this situation as shorthand to depict cheating (e.g. Brooks 1991; *Damage* 1992; *Sideways* 1992; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* 2002). For much of U.S. history, if a man found his wife in bed with another man, he had a legal right to kill the other man (Miller 2002: 57-60), and even today someone might be acquitted or have their sentence reduced despite getting violent in that situation (Verkaik 2008).

We can also see this in various movies that depict sort-of infidelity, where a person considers committing infidelity but then steps back from the brink, for example *Eyes*

Wide Shut (1999) and *American Beauty* (1999). As it turns out, the “brink” is sexual contact with someone other than their partner. This helps us draw the line around infidelity at sexual contact. Generally any sort of genital contact qualifies as infidelity, though there are people out there who would omit manual sex or other border cases for their own infidelitous convenience.

Indeed, people generally rank sexual intercourse or oral sex as definitely cheating when surveyed (Frank and DeLamater, 2009). In general, research confirms that most people view infidelity as primarily sexual (e.g. Harris 2002; DeSteno and Salovey 1996) and there is an overwhelming prevalence of sexual monogamy in literature (e.g. Radway 1984: 73-75).

Because sex with the wrong person is the primary violation of monogamy, we can take the contrapositive and say that the prime rule of monogamy is that one not have sex with someone other than one’s partner.

That said, sex is not the only way to violate monogamy. There are plenty of other less-serious ways to break monogamous rules, which I will discuss in the next section.

Monogamy and Relationship Meaning

Of course, if we start asking people what monogamy means to them, they will probably not start talking about sex. Instead they would probably bring up concepts like trust, commitment, love, or possession. So it is a bit odd that I am claiming that monogamy is a primarily sexual act, or rather an act of not having sex.

However, if we unpack the connection between these concepts and monogamy, it quickly becomes clear that sex is involved. For starters, how exactly are trust and monogamy connected? After all, a person can trust their friends without any sort of exclusivity, so why does trusting a relationship partner require monogamy? Well, perhaps someone trusts that their partner will not cheat with anyone else, which means they will not have sex with anyone else. Or perhaps they trust that their partner is not leaving them, as evidenced by the fact that they are not interested in straying sexually. This is not the same as simply trusting someone, which is typically not dependent on sexual fidelity. When monogamous people conflate monogamy with trust, they are talking about a very specific kind of trust.

Similarly, monogamous commitment is often the commitment to give up sex with other people. (For a further discussion of the connection between monogamy and commitment, along with polyamorous adaptations, see Finn 2009.) The love implied by monogamy is the love that can have only one sexual object, because if you are having sex with other people, then you are clearly not in love. Possessiveness in relationships typically means possession of the genital acts and sexual persona of one’s partner.

We can see this conceptual connection between monogamy, trust, and commitment at work in condom usage patterns. People stop using condoms in (love-centered) relationships in order to show their commitment to their partner or trust of their partner, implying that monogamy is viewed as a primary indicator of trust, commitment, and love. Researchers have noted that this sometimes misplaced trust results in disease transmission between committed couples, due to infidelity and serial monogamy patterns. (Misovich et al 1997; Critelli and Suire 1998; Winfield and Whaley 2005; Worth et al 2002)

Polyamorous people have trust, commitment, and love in spades, along with certain kinds of possessiveness. The mere existence of successful polyamory therefore belies the supposed connection between monogamy and love, commitment, and trust. If monogamy is not actually required for these things, why is it that monogamous people associate them with monogamy?

These relationship concepts provide a kind of conceptual cover for monogamy. Talking about trust or commitment is an effective way to talk about sexual monogamy, without actually talking about it. In this way, the sexual rule of monogamy is somewhat hidden from view, less available for criticism or revision. This strategy of making a rule of power unavailable in general conversation (while still an omnipresent fact on the ground) is common across cultural systems of power. As noted above, the concept of monogamy itself incorporates a similar tactic, using the marriage definition (marrying only one person) to cover up the actual sexual requirement of modern monogamy.

Mixing up sexual monogamy with things like love and commitment also serves a second purpose, which is to build out a web of conceptual dependencies based in sexual monogamy. Love, trust, and commitment are pretty crucial to relationships, and are generally considered a prerequisite for advanced relationship goals like getting married or raising children. If having children requires commitment and commitment requires sexual monogamy, then having children is seen as requiring sexual monogamy. In this way our culture sets up a social rule between two acts that otherwise are not directly dependent.

This is how we have ended up with the somewhat odd fact that wedding rings are a symbol for sexual monogamy (among other things). As the archetypical relationship symbol, there are various dependencies that lead from wedding rings back to sexual monogamy. A ring implies marriage, which implies love, which implies monogamy. Or perhaps a ring implies that one is possessed, which implies sexual monogamy. So, rings have become a strong symbol of sexual monogamy, to the point where someone who wants to cheat will take their ring off. The connection is also made clear in advertising which has frequently insinuated (incorrectly) that buying a woman a ring guarantees her sexual fidelity or promises yours, for example the recent over-the-top “monogamy¹⁰⁰” diamond advertising campaign (McLean 2007).

Of course, the dependency tree built on top of monogamy does not end at rings and children. Society almost always assumes a coupled relationship structure that leads back

to (sexual) monogamy. Taking the wrong person as one's date to a wedding, to the company party, or on a vacation is often taken as an admission of infidelity (Frank and DeLamater 2009). Similarly, monogamy is seen as evidence of one's good character, or conversely anything other than monogamy is evidence of bad character, with the result that one cannot be openly nonmonogamous and an elected official, or CEO, or the spokesperson who sells products in television ads. In the case of the latter, discovery of nonmonogamy (Wagner 2009) or infidelity (as in the recent Tiger Woods scandal, described in Pucin 2009) will result in a spokesperson being dropped from a campaign. For this reason, even when people are sexually nonmonogamous (either cheating or in consensual arrangements), they often adopt a social façade of monogamy, which notably opens them to the possibility that their sexual nonmonogamy may be outed. The insistence on monogamy also extends into the legal world, where the nonmonogamous are second-class citizens in various ways (Emens 2004).

To recap, our culture builds out a number of effects that depend on one's sexual monogamy. First, a number of crucial elements within relationships themselves are considered to be reliant upon sexual monogamy, to the point where it is generally thought that relationships themselves require sexual fidelity. Further dependencies are extended into the social sphere, to the point where one's job, social standing, and family goodwill are often dependent on one's adherence to at least the social presentation of sexual monogamy.

I should note that these wide-reaching dependencies creates a number of violations of monogamy other than sex with the wrong person, which are less severe but still grounds for reprisals within a relationship, depending on one's partner and their particular ideas about monogamy. These include things as varied as taking off one's wedding ring, looking at the wrong person the wrong way, getting too emotionally attached to someone else, or masturbating to pornography (e.g. Frank and DeLamater 2009, Neuman 2008). In fact, a number of these transgressions are thought crimes, like thinking of someone else as more attractive than your partner, or thinking of someone else during sex (as described in Neuman 2001, Glass 2002). These various other violations of monogamy are violations specifically because they imply that a person might be headed for sex with the wrong person, and are less severe specifically because they have not gotten there yet.

Monogamous Privilege

This attachment of a wider social contract to specific sexual acts is a common technique of power within our culture, found in relatively well-understood systems of power such as heterosexism and sexism. Making social consequences dependent on particular kinds of sex is an effective way to manage both the sex act itself and the social domain.

In the case of monogamy, this set of dependencies creates a system of privilege. Being (sexually) monogamous gets you things, which is to say it is a prerequisite for certain things such as having children, diamond rings, love, social respectability, and so on.

Conversely, being openly sexually nonmonogamous makes all these things much harder to get. In fact, being sexually nonmonogamous at all tends to throw all these things into doubt, though if one does not advertise it socially it is possible to retain a lot of the social effects as if one were monogamous. If we think of this web of meaning as a tree with sexual monogamy as the trunk, then consider what happens if you remove the trunk. You end up with a mess, a set of disconnected concepts that no longer have firm grounding or support.

And in fact, these dependent conceptual relationships are particularly visible to polyamorous people, because we break their reliance on sexual monogamy, and then experience the resulting disconnects as social and relationship problems. Coming out as poly is fraught with problems. A parent might try to intervene because they think we are being used instead of loved. A relative might get upset because they think that nonmonogamy means that we are not going to have children. Some of our friends disappear because they are worried we are ruining our relationship, or attempting to ruin theirs.

Inside a relationship, a poly person might feel guilty because they cannot shake the feeling they are betraying or failing to love a partner. Or they might see their partner's urge to be with someone else as evidence of a failing relationship. Or they may not know how to build trust within a poly relationship. All these things can happen even when people are enthusiastically polyamorous, because the way we think about relationships is largely structured via sexual monogamy, and doing something other than monogamy means that we lose that structure. People new to polyamory often experience this lack of conceptual structure as a sense of vertigo, an emptiness that we then fill with made-up words and books full of advice. In sum, we have to rewire our thinking in certain ways in order to simply be nonmonogamous (Ritchie and Barker 2006).

As this discussion illustrates, monogamous privilege is not just the ability to conform. Rather, it is a significant set of social and relationship advantages that come from matching the expectations of a culture that bases much of its structure in sexual monogamy.

Monogamous privilege acts as a significant deterrent to nonmonogamy, whether cheating or arranged, openly practiced or closeted. People understand that they have a lot to lose by either being or expressing nonmonogamy. Among monogamous people, this understanding acts to control cheating, in other words to control who people have sex with. Among people in nonmonogamous arrangements, this understanding tends to keep us closeted. And perhaps most importantly, this deterrent makes it so a lot of people are monogamous who would rather not be, because they see that they will lose a lot if they pursue nonmonogamy.

The conceptual and social dependency tree based on sexual monogamy is the source of our first form of power associated with compulsory monogamy, monogamous privilege. Monogamous privilege creates a system of winners (monogamous people) and losers (cheaters or nonmonogamous people), and additionally creates an often useful power

dynamic between the winners and losers. It controls the sex act in various ways, primarily by discouraging cheating, adultery, group sex, and nonmonogamous sex, but also through certain other side effects, like the eroticization of affairs or the privileging of sex in a monogamous context. And it makes monogamy largely compulsory through a system of conceptual dependency that rewards the monogamous and makes nonmonogamy conceptually and socially difficult.

Monogamy and Cheating

Strong systems of power invariably have Others, one or more groups of people who are marked as being somehow less than the norm, and who are marginalized based on that difference. Othering also performs the important function of creating a way to talk about the norm without referencing it directly, by talking about the Other (e.g. Beauvoir 1949, Said 1979, Foucault 1978). Monogamy has a series of Others, including swingers, free lovers, sex workers, gay and bisexual men, and women who have sex with too many people (“nymphomaniac”, “slut”, etc). However, the cheaters and adulterers seem to be the Others who are most immediately present in the imagination, and most consistently reviled. I have described the relationship between cheating, monogamy, and power at length previously, and will summarize here (Mint 2004).

Cheating is the common and expected failure of monogamy. And in fact, the existence of cheating depends on the monogamous contract, so we can properly consider cheating to be a part of the larger complex of monogamous ideology. If someone is nonmonogamous, often the fact that their partner slept with someone else is not actually a problem, and it becomes much more difficult to cheat.

While almost universally decrying cheating, our media and common cultural scripts provide so many examples of cheating that most people regard cheating as an option and know how to go about it. We in fact create a spectacle out of cheating, discussing it repetitively on talk shows, in tabloids, in songs, and in person. This process of spectacularization serves a number of purposes, beyond the obvious purpose of frequently reminding people that cheating is not something they should do (while simultaneously reminding them that it is possible to do).

First, all this talk of cheating creates a false dichotomy between cheating and monogamy via constantly setting up infidelity as the opposite of monogamy. This monogamy/cheating duality effectively erases the possibility of negotiating open relationships. Anything that is not monogamy gets relegated to the category of infidelity, and so monogamous people assume that nonmonogamy of any sort is just a type of cheating, even though the nonmonogamous people may protest that they are acting honestly and openly. Nonmonogamous people are forced to redefine cheating in a way that gets away from the “sex with the wrong person” definition (which would include them), and instead come up with definitions of infidelity that rely on dishonesty or rule-breaking.

Indeed, polyamorous people commonly face monogamous attitudes that conflate polyamory with cheating, devaluing it in the process. Sometimes this shows up as a refusal to believe that one's partners are okay with nonmonogamy, or other times more directly as "you're just trying to legitimize cheating". Ironically, monogamous people often fail to recognize that poly people have significantly less motivation to cheat, as we generally have license to have sex outside of any particular relationship.

Second, talking about cheating gives people a way to talk about monogamy without having to actually reference or describe it directly, using this duality. Primarily this is used to reaffirm the value of monogamy: if we are saying that cheating is bad, then monogamy must be good. If discussions about cheating (or fears of cheating) are ubiquitous, then monogamy must be a universally held value. But also this can be used to describe what monogamy is by delineating its boundaries. If cybersex is cheating, then monogamy means not having cybersex. Similarly, if watching pornography with one's partner is not cheating, then it must be a monogamous activity. This neat conceptual trick means that the borders of monogamy can be created and policed, without having to directly reference monogamy itself. This operates in a similar manner to Foucault's (1978) perverse implantation, the creation of a normative sexuality by describing non-normative perversions.

Furthermore, the idea of cheating gives people access to a number of power dynamics, forms of influence that are useful to people in relationships. A person might cheat in order to end a relationship, or in order to have someone waiting in the wings when a relationship ends. Or they might cheat to get revenge, either for their partner's cheating or for something else. Or they may simply cheat to gain access to more sexual or emotional pleasure, which itself is a kind of power operation. Some people make an art of cheating, carrying on affairs across years or decades and so creating a kind of infidelity-style nonmonogamy. Similarly, someone who is cheated on may use this fact to end the relationship, or use their partner's cheating history (if any exists) as leverage within the relationship, or expose the infidelity to the social group in order to discredit their partner.

Of course, actual cheating does not have to take place. Even the possibility of cheating is useful in various interpersonal dynamics. As I describe below, a person may imply that they will cheat in order to induce jealousy in their partner, or they might use their partner's possible cheating as an excuse for jealous behavior. Someone might demand more time with their partner, or demand that their partner spend less time with someone else under the rubric of helping their partner avoid temptation. Indeed, avoiding extra-monogamous temptation seems to be a structuring element of the social world, and so certain activities should generally only be done with one's partner, or at least with one's partner present, or failing that in a social group rather than one-on-one with a person one finds attractive: swimming, getting drunk, traveling, and so on. All of this is in addition to the primary purpose of the idea of cheating, which is to frequently remind people to not do it, while perhaps also reminding them that it is doable.

All of the above are ways in which the idea of cheating is useful to people, both inside of relationships and in the larger social world. Both the act and the notion of cheating are available and useful as tools of power between people, and so they are used frequently, though not by everyone or in every relationship. In order to use cheating in this way, people must ideologically invest in it: taking on the idea itself, spreading it to other people, bringing it up in discussion, presenting cheating as the opposite of monogamy as I describe above, and so on. In other words, the notion of infidelity is constantly buttressed because it is personally useful to people, and they become advocates of the notion of infidelity, though typically not of infidelity itself.

However, as we have seen, the concept of cheating is generally problematic to nonmonogamous people. While the ever-present threat of infidelity is useful to monogamous folks in various ways, its ubiquity causes problems for nonmonogamous people, both by erasing their experience via the monogamy/cheating duality, and by rendering the institution of monogamy invisible and therefore unavailable for discussion and analysis. In other words, the ideology of infidelity makes monogamy compulsory. This is why nonmonogamous people find that they need to revise their understanding of cheating in order to be nonmonogamous at all.

There is a circular relationship here between monogamy and cheating. Monogamy requires cheating as its negative counterpart and gives people access to the power dynamics of cheating, which encourages people to invest in a discourse of cheating, promoting it as something to be discussed, renounced, and feared culture-wide. This hegemonic investment in cheating discourse then renders monogamy as the only positive relationship possibility, buttressing the compulsory nature of monogamy. In other words, monogamy creates (requires, spectacularizes, invests in) cheating, which then creates (describes, hides, makes positive) monogamy.

This circular causation loop may seem odd, but in fact this is how systems of power self-propagate across a culture and between generations. If there were no such loops, then the system of compulsory monogamy could be easily overturned within a generation or two, which is clearly not the case. As part of establishing compulsory monogamy as a type of power, it is important that we find these catch-22 relations, and of course it is useful to do so since we must break these cycles in our personal lives in order to be nonmonogamous.

Monogamy and Jealousy

Jealousy is most commonly cited as the reason that nonmonogamy is impossible, for example in the media (e.g. Jackson 2006; Marech 2001; Coren 2005). This brings jealousy to our attention as a prime site for investigation. What exactly is this all-powerful jealousy emotion, which dictates our relationship parameters? How do we as a culture describe jealousy, and what is its actual purpose in terms of power? I have written before on jealousy, and will summarize and extend those conclusions here (Mint 2006; Mint 2009).

Jealousy is the emotion or feeling a person is supposed to have when they observe their partner attracted to someone else, or perhaps someone else interested in their partner. It is notably the only mainstream word we have to describe the emotions in a love triangle. We are remarkably vague on what this emotion or feeling is supposed to be, and do not assign physical symptoms to jealousy, such as the red face of anger or the tears of sadness. As a result, jealousy can be experienced as sadness, anger, fear, being upset, or as none of these things, and jealousy can have physical symptoms or none at all (White and Mullen 1989: 9-11; Sharpsteen 1993). This vagueness around jealousy throws its status as an actual emotion into doubt, and conveniently allows people to claim or not claim jealousy as their particular personal strategy dictates.

Indeed, people tend to claim that jealousy is a biological imperative, much like monogamy (e.g. Buss 2000). However, much like monogamy, there is no proven biology of jealousy, so these claims are unsupported by science (White and Mullen 1989: 58-75). In addition, these claims conflict with the stark fact that a minority of people simply do not get jealous (including your author). Really, we attempt to explain jealousy via biology or evolution in order to protect it from social analysis.

This assumption that jealousy is an intrinsic and inevitable emotion means that people who get jealous do not need to explain their jealousy in any way, aside from pointing out their partner's behavior or situation that justifies jealousy. And in fact, there are no jealousy-management classes in mainstream culture, even though we have anger management classes for anger, and therapy and pills for sadness.

This effectively places the onus of preventing jealousy on the jealous person's partner, to change their behavior or situation. This is a neat trick: by expressing a vague emotion, a person in a relationship creates the expectation that their partner will do (or not do) something. In other words, jealousy is effectively a kind of control mechanism, an exertion of intra-relationship power.

To make this clear, let us look at some of the more obvious examples. A person might display jealousy as a way of asking their partner for more affection, or to prove their love for their partner. Or a person might get jealous and demand that their partner stop spending time with a particular person, or a whole class of people. Or spend less time at work.

Of course, the way jealousy is usually framed is as a legitimate threat-response mechanism. In other words, jealousy is supposed to be the fear that arises when there is a threat to a relationship in the form of a potential outside paramour. Given that relationships are very important to people, it then would seem reasonable to take possibly extreme steps to stop the threat to the relationship. In this view, monogamy pretty much requires that jealousy exist. On the other hand, there are plenty of monogamous people who do not get jealous or refuse to act on their jealousy, so this is not necessarily true.

However, it is hard to differentiate between properly responding to threats and engaging in controlling behavior, and in fact often they are the very same thing. If a person gets

jealous and asks their partner to stop talking to someone, is that protecting their interests or cutting their partner off from outside support? It may or may not operate as the former, but it is inevitably the latter.

This gets at a problem with jealousy, namely that it can escalate all the way to violence (Sharpsteen 1993). Indeed, it is commonly understood among researchers that jealousy is a factor in domestic violence and homicide (White and Mullen 1989: 218-222; Barash and Lipton 2001: 55). This fits in with the “threat to monogamy” view of jealousy, but of course the violent aspect of jealousy is very convenient for people who wish to use jealousy as an excuse for controlling behavior. And in fact, these are one and the same thing – if a person feels the need to control, monitor, or threaten their partner, is that behavior justified even to continue the relationship? Tellingly, most jealous violence is targeted at the partner (as befits a control mechanism) rather than at the third party (White and Mullen 1989: 218-219).

To get at this problem, people typically separate jealousy into reasonable and unreasonable categories, though again we are quite vague about where the line between the two lands (Stenner and Rogers 1998). But doing this still leaves open the door to extreme forms of jealous reactions, because even if we think someone’s jealous behavior is unreasonable, it is still entirely *understandable*, and therefore conceptually available as a power mechanism.

To recap, jealousy is a vague emotion that is heavily legitimized and which justifies influence over one’s partner, influence that is often mild but can escalate all the way to clearly controlling behavior and violence. In other words, jealousy is an extremely potent and flexible mechanism of partner control. It is however limited by its conceptual scope, namely that jealousy has to be a response to a partner’s potential outside love interest. So jealousy is nonsensical in other situations, for example when one’s partner’s well-being is threatened by a non-romantic third party.

Muddying the waters is the fact that most people are reluctant to admit that they are jealous. This is partly because jealousy has gotten a bad reputation, perhaps due to the association with extreme behavior. But perhaps more importantly, jealousy is taken as a sign of romantic weakness. Because jealousy is seen as a response to an outside threat, admitting to jealousy is effectively admitting that the threat is real. We can see this in the relationship self-help section of the bookstore, where there are very few books that say “jealousy is good”, but a large number of books that license jealous behavior under the rubric of protecting one’s relationship from cheating (e.g. DeLorenzo et al 2009; Neuman 2008). In other words, at the same time as jealousy is heavily legitimized, people are encouraged to deny their own jealousy, behavior which (again, conveniently) makes jealousy a more effective tool of personal power.

There are other power mechanisms that accrue from the existence of this primary control mechanism of jealousy. For example, a person can accuse their partner of unreasonable jealousy (perhaps implying the romantic weakness described above) in order to get them to back off or change their behavior (e.g. Stenner 1993). Similarly, someone might

purposefully try to make their partner jealous, in order to get concessions (White 1980). Also, jealousy is sometimes eroticized, with the strong emotions used as fuel for sex or proof of love. In other words, the concept of jealousy provides a number of particularly useful tactics within relationships.

However, while the idea of jealousy is very useful in a monogamous setting, it becomes a liability in a nonmonogamous setting, where acting jealous is typically a prelude to a relationship or arrangement ending. Unfortunately, because jealousy is a conditioned emotional response, it does not disappear when a person decides to switch to negotiated nonmonogamy. This is different from the idea of cheating, which quickly becomes nonsensical in nonmonogamous arrangements. As a result, people often fail at nonmonogamy because of their (or others') jealousy, or decide not to try it in the first place. Much of the polyamory literature is focused on finding ways to defuse the power mechanisms of jealousy, whether that is done by owning, managing, appeasing, or deconstructing one's jealousy (e.g. Taormino 2008; Easton and Hardy 1997).

This makes it clear that very purpose of jealousy is to defend or create monogamy, and it does not distinguish between desired monogamy and undesired monogamy. In other words, we can properly view jealousy as monogamy conditioning, a response that we train into people so that they will in the future be monogamous. Of course, this training does not take in some people, but in general jealousy conditioning is a very effective way of making monogamy compulsory.

Much like cheating, the power mechanisms of jealousy have a circular causative relationship with compulsory monogamy. Jealousy is very useful for people who are practicing monogamy. In fact some would argue that it is required, though I would disagree. The monogamous mainstream culture conditions jealousy within us (for example via extremely consistent presentations of jealousy in the media), and we are encouraged to invest in jealousy due to its utility in mainstream relationships. But then this very same jealousy demands monogamy of us. Monogamy creates (legitimizes, produces, makes useful) jealousy which creates (demands, makes the only alternative) compulsory monogamy.

Other Mechanisms of Monogamous Power

As should be clear from the above, the concepts of both jealousy and cheating should properly be considered subsystems of an overall conceptual apparatus of monogamy, both useful and necessary to monogamy and simultaneously complicit in rendering monogamy compulsory. Similarly, the dependency tree of monogamous privilege is not easily separable from monogamy itself, and has the effect of producing conformity.

I have focused on the above three types of monogamous power because they seem to be the power dynamics most crucial to monogamy. However, there are a number of others that deserve mention and which I will describe briefly in this section. Even with these

additions, this is not an exhaustive list, and we can expect that there are further types of monogamous power which I have missed or which are not easily named or recognized.

First, an ethic of ownership is generally associated with relationships, and with sexual monogamy in particular. In other words, when a person is involved with another person, they are not just in partnership, but assume a certain level of possession of their partner, often with the attendant assumption of gaining a level of control over their partner. This is visible in language: valentines that say “be mine” are not speaking metaphorically. This sense of possession can extend into sexual monogamy, with people literally considering themselves the owners of their partner’s genitals and sexuality. Historically, this ethic of ownership was mostly a matter of men owning their women partners, who were financially and legally dependent (Coontz 2005). This sense of entitlement continues today in a somewhat gendered manner, with women having also signed on as owners. It is possible to find types of nonmonogamy which retain the full level of monogamous possessiveness (most obviously traditional polygyny), but not if the women involved are sexually nonmonogamous. Nonmonogamy for women seems to require either abandoning the ethic of ownership or modifying it heavily, which happens in the poly, swinger, and BDSM communities. This points to possessiveness (and its associated power) being a common aspect of monogamous relating, in particular when a person is in a sexually monogamous relationship with a woman.

Second, coupled relationships are generally assumed to be a basic structuring element of society, and this assumption shows up everywhere, from funding decisions to wedding gifts to social interactions. In general, people are considered to be more respectable and worthy when in coupled monogamous relationships. There is a growing body of literature that critiques this form of privilege (often called couplism) from the viewpoint of single people (e.g. DePaulo 2007). However, people who are in relationship situations involving more than two people also run up against a system which refuses to recognize any relation as important other than the monogamous couple. Poly people collide with social expectations that only allow one guest per person at corporate or family events. More importantly, it is common for monogamous people to consider a poly person’s secondary or co-primary relationships to be invalid or temporary, because to do otherwise would be to challenge couple-centric thinking. For the purposes of this paper, we can read couplism as a kind of monogamous privilege, though one that is powerful and pervasive enough to warrant its own analysis.

However, the effects of couplism are not just social. In the monogamous world, particularly the white mainstream, the overwhelming focus on the couple often acts as an isolating force, diminishing friend and family relationships that would otherwise act as a network of support. This also makes one’s partner a more important aspect of one’s life, providing more of a motive for controlling behavior, while removing checks on that behavior. In other words, couplism is implicated in controlling or abusive behavior in relationships. Again, this aspect of relationship power is both somewhat due to monogamy, and investment in couplism has the effect of making monogamy more compulsory.

Third, there is love/sex dichotomy active in our cultural understanding of relationships, where some types of sex are re-coded as love and legitimized, namely the sex within monogamous relationships. At the same time, sex outside of these contexts is understood to be carnal, dirty, diseased, and/or deviant. This is advantageous to people whose sexual lives are legitimized, and furthermore functions to produce their sexuality (per Foucault 1978). At the same time, the devaluing of nontraditional sex means that nonmonogamous people generally find all of their sex relegated to the negative category, so this set of valuations serves as enforcement for monogamy. The love/sex dichotomy was created in the 18th and 19th centuries as excuse to maintain a gendered sexual double standard (Coontz 2005: 145-160), but in the modern world seems to primarily function to elevate certain legitimized (monogamous, loving, coupled, heterosexual) sexual relationships above others. I have previously covered the effects of the love/sex split on polyamory in detail, including the manner in which this mechanism hides itself (Mint 2008).

The Power System of Compulsory Monogamy

From the above, we can see that compulsory monogamy is a system of power comparable to more fully analyzed oppressions, such as racism, sexism, homophobia (heterosexism, and so on). In other words, the manner in which compulsory monogamy operates is similar to the mechanisms of these other systems. Namely, it creates a system of power where some people are privileged and others are disempowered, and there is a resultant real and substantial difference in power between the two groups. It is pervasive and elastic, including a number of subtle techniques to maintain hegemony, from the conceptual to the social. It is a major structuring element of society and the lives of individuals, but at the same time is largely invisible and seeks to hide its own mechanisms. Its power mechanisms are inextricably bound up with a desirable good, in this case love, sex, and relationships. It encourages and is buttressed by the selective use of physical violence. It is entrenched and self-perpetuating via a number of associated power mechanisms, which are at the same time useful to individuals and reproductive of the entire system when used. I am not the only person theorizing compulsory monogamy as its own system of power (e.g. Haritaworn et al 2006, Wilkinson 2009, Heckert 2009), though my approach is more focused on monogamy itself rather than polyamorous resistance.

At the same time, compulsory monogamy differs somewhat from the major systems of oppression in various ways that make it less effective (namely visibility and mobility), so it is perhaps inappropriate to refer to compulsory monogamy as a kind of oppression. Instead we should consider it to be a strong system of cultural conformity, one which shares significant mechanisms with oppression and which can be analyzed in a similar manner. I will describe some of these differences in this section, as part of a general discussion of the parameters of compulsory monogamy.

First of all, let us take a look at who benefits and who suffers under the regime of compulsory monogamy. Clearly, the happily monogamous win out. They are supported

by a system that not only regards their choice as the only choice, but also provides a welter of role models and a sturdy conceptual framework for building relationships. Monogamous people benefit from the various monogamous privileges described above, ranging from social respectability to financial benefits to never having to justify their relationship model. Though it should be noted that monogamous people must live with the attendant restrictions and power dynamics of monogamy, which in most situations are not a problem to those inclined towards monogamy, but can become onerous (Frank and DeLamater, 2009).

At the same time, the openly nonmonogamous are the clear losers in this power scheme. They may lose friends or family, are not considered fit for public office or teaching kindergarten, and are subject to the wide array of reprisals available for punishing the sexually stigmatized. On a more personal level, openly nonmonogamous people lose the conceptual grounding and training available to the monogamous, and are often thwarted by the various anti-nonmonogamy booby traps built into the very way we think about love, sex, and relationships. Nonmonogamous people who closet (or who are effectively closeted by a world that assumes their monogamy) manage to avoid many of the social effects of compulsory monogamy, but at the same time are subject to the more personal effects.

Cheaters are a gray area. On the one hand, cheating is really a part of the system of monogamy as described above, and so the infidelitous tend to benefit. They are engaging in well-scripted behavior, and while people might get upset with them there is nothing that is alien or unintelligible about infidelity. Also, cheaters are typically not visible as such, and so benefit from the presentation of social monogamy. Further, cheaters gain access to a number of power dynamics, as described above. On the other hand, cheaters are targeted for heavy vitriol and stigmatization (though perhaps not as much as the openly nonmonogamous) and often face serious power struggles and/or losses within relationships.

In this talk of winners and losers, there is the all-important question of mobility. Systems of oppression are generally linked to largely immutable characteristics, such as skin color, genitalia, or sexual orientation. This ensures that they maintain a power differential over time. However, compulsory monogamy is not similarly marked. People move relatively freely between the categories of monogamous, infidelitous, and nonmonogamous. The possible exception is cheating: the idea that a cheater is doomed to cheat again has strong currency, as we can see in websites that seek to expose past cheaters (e.g. *dontdatehimgirl.com*, *womansavers.com*, *cheaternews.com*). However, most people who have cheated get past their history, either via people who just do not care that much about past cheating, or by recanting, or by burying it. As a result of this tendency towards mobility, compulsory monogamy does not necessarily burden or privilege any particular person for a lifetime, though there are plenty of us who are monogamous or nonmonogamous for our entire lives. Therefore, we can say that compulsory monogamy is somewhat less deleterious than the classic forms of oppression due to the relative ease of moving between classes.

Second, compulsory monogamy is an elastic system, dynamically changing with the times, from social group to social group, or even from person to person. Research confirms that the specific boundaries of monogamy vary depending on the person's outlook and strategies, though people agree on a core of sexual intercourse as infidelity (Frank and DeLamater 2009). As times and personal strategies shift, the overall shape of compulsory monogamy can change as well, as we are talking about a Foucauldian "bottom-up" system of power, one primarily driven by personal power dynamics (Foucault 1978). Note that the dynamism of compulsory monogamy does not distinguish it from the classic forms of oppression, all of which are elastic and historically contingent.

Some of these shifts have been in recent history. Most obviously, expectations of monogamy for heterosexual men have strengthened significantly over the past half-century. We can see this in the differential political responses to John F. Kennedy's and Bill Clinton's infidelities. Men have been paying lip service to monogamy for a couple centuries now (Coontz 2005: 140, 186), but it was not an easily enforceable dictate. We can expect that this recent advance in men's monogamy is due to women's increasing financial power and independence, which finally gave teeth to the idea that men should be monogamous.

Also, the incitement to monogamy has moved earlier and earlier in the relationship. In the mid-1900's, it was common for people to date around, often going on interweaving dates with multiple people simultaneously as a method of choosing an eventual partner. These days, monogamy can be presumed as soon as the first date, depending on context. Presumably this shift is due to changing sexual mores. In the earlier era it was standard practice to date for months or years without sexual intercourse, but more recently sex of some variety commonly happens in the first three dates. Because monogamy is attached to sex, it has moved forward in the courtship process with sexual activity.

Perhaps due to the advancement of monogamy (or perhaps due to other cultural changes, like birth control and better management of sexually transmitted diseases) there has been a simultaneous mainstream push to ease or remove the restraints of sexual monogamy. This is evident in the congealing of a series of primarily heterosexual (though sometimes also bisexual) nonmonogamous movements: swinging, free love, open marriage, and now polyamory. At the same time, some seek to expand the definition of monogamy to include sexual nonmonogamy, a tactic used by some swingers (McDonald 2009, Bergstrand and Sinski 2010: 82-83), along with people who coin terms like "new monogamy" or "managed monogamy" (e.g. Taylor and Sharkey 2005). None of these redefinition efforts has made even a dent in the wider culture's understanding of monogamy, a testament to the conceptual strength of the prime rule of monogamy.

Third, compulsory monogamy is somewhat more visible than other systems of power. Certainly, the mechanisms I have described in this paper are largely hidden from view and unavailable for immediate deconstruction. However, at the same time there is the general sense that monogamy can be overly restrictive, stifling, or monotonous. This makes monogamy itself available for criticism, creating cracks in the wall of compulsory

monogamy. We can expect that this visibility into monogamy is due to its gendered history as a restriction that has applied much more strongly to women than men, as in order to buck the system men need to be able to see it.

While this critique may exist primarily to enable infidelity or other monogamous competitive moves, it also provides ideological fuel for nonmonogamous movements. Polyamorous people frequently bring up the supposed shortcomings of monogamy when defending their relationship structure. The remarkably positive reception of polyamory in the media (Mint 2007) may be feeding on this frustration with monogamy. Also, this naming of monogamy provides the opportunity for non-theorists to effectively deconstruct certain elements of monogamous power. For example, poly people frequently break apart jealousy into component emotions. Along the same lines, a common poly aphorism is “polyamory is not an alternative to monogamy but rather an alternative to cheating”, which makes the monogamy/cheating interdependency visible. If we compare compulsory monogamy to systems of oppression, this extra visibility becomes clear: there is no corresponding culture-wide negative attitude towards whiteness, male power, corporate power, or heterosexuality.

Fourth, compulsory monogamy intersects with other kinds of power, which is to say it simultaneously reinforces and is reinforced by systems of oppression. One such reinforcing mechanism seems to operate by defining certain oppressed groups as inevitably promiscuous. These groups include but are not limited to: gay and bisexual men (Klesse 2007), bisexual women, transgender people, sex workers, African-Americans (Willey 2006, Willey 2009), and Native American women (Smith 2005: 7-33). Being assigned promiscuity in this manner both stigmatizes a group and makes first-class relationships unavailable (or at least not acknowledgeable) for members of the group. Devaluation of oppressed group relationships often is then used in turn to deny members of the group full citizenship (for example immigration rights), government funding, and so on. At the same time, devaluing the relationships of an oppressed people as promiscuous sets up a negative Other that buttresses the first-class value of white monogamous heterosexual relationships, one effect of which is to reinforce the compulsion to monogamy. For a further discussion of monogamous intersectionality and both the promise and failure of polyamory as a locus of resistance, see Haritaworn et al (2006), Noël (2006), Klesse (2007), Willey (2009), Wilkinson (2009), and Heckert (2009).

One standard aspect of intersectional analysis is that intersecting forms of power are not necessarily additive, which applies here as well. We can see this in the fact that the above mechanism only applies to certain groups, depending on their specific location in the matrix of oppressions. For example, lesbian women do not face the same accusations of promiscuity as queer men, despite having the additional burden of sexism (Rosa 1994). Similarly, Asian-Americans do not seem to face the associations of promiscuity or infidelity that beset other non-white race/gender groups, though Asian-American women do face the usual problems of being considered available for white men (Praso 2005: 132-164). This is not to say that these two groups are not subject to intersectional power effects of compulsory monogamy, but rather that they are not affected by this particular

promiscuity mechanism. I would argue that there are probably other intersectional mechanisms at play that do affect these groups, for example the threat of greater social sanctions for sexual promiscuity due to one's position as lesbian (Rosa 1994) or of Asian descent (Klesse 2007: 136-137).

Fifth, the current practice of monogamy relies in numerous ways on the fact that monogamy is ubiquitous and compulsory, as I have described above. This gives us the conclusion that for nonmonogamy of any sort to actually become a socially acceptable and viable alternative to monogamy, the current practice of monogamy will in fact be forced to change. In other words, the mere existence and acknowledgement of positive forms of nonmonogamy has a partially deconstructing effect on monogamy itself. This is the reason that monogamous people often get defensive upon even hearing about polyamory. In their heads, conceptual systems are eroding, power dynamics are defusing, valuations are shifting, and/or privilege is at risk.

However, the changes required to create a non-hegemonic monogamy are relatively minor compared to its overall conceptual apparatus, and the practice of monogamy is by no means threatened by positive nonmonogamy. We can find an analogous situation with queer-positive heterosexuality, a new type of heterosexuality that is more flexible and relaxed and which has been produced as an effect of the ongoing destigmatization of queerness. On the edges of polyamorous social circles, I already see the adoption of certain forms of conscious monogamy, monogamy that is freely chosen, that acknowledges nonmonogamy as legitimate and borrows nonmonogamous techniques, and that is rebuilt on personal agency rather than relying on cultural dictates. While there may be some losses, for example monogamous privilege, the resulting relationship form is overall stronger, conceptually well-grounded and less subject to the weaknesses created by cultural scripts or the danger of infidelity. In other words, the (in no way assured) eventual acceptance of nonmonogamy would in turn create a much improved monogamy.

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