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Polyamory Is Deviant – But Not for the Reasons You May Think

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies types of consensual non-monogamies (CNM) and contrasts them with cheating. When people realize that some people negotiate multiple partner relationships and monogamy is not the only option, they have encountered the polyamorous possibility and might have one of three common reactions. These reactions are embedded in a culture shaped by compulsory monogamy, within which CNM does not fit. Under the relational panopticism of compulsory monogamy, conventional society attributes significant stigma to polyamorous relationships. Two of the ostensible reasons for this attribution of deviance include the fact that polyamorous people have sex for pleasure and maintain multiple partners. Because these are common in other relationships as well, these apparent reasons are not the actual reasons for the stigma and deviance. Rather, there are at least three real reasons for this deviance assigned to polyamory, including honesty, women negotiating access to multiple partners, and the challenge it poses to heterosexual nuclear families.

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Polyamory is a form of consensual non-monogamy (CNM), a category of relationships in which the participants negotiate multiple sexual and/or romantic partners. The broadest category of CNM is the *open relationship*, which gives little information about the specifics of the structure beyond the fact that the participants have agreed on non-monogamy. Some people consider their relationships open and identify with other categories of CNM as well. *Polyamory* is a form of CNM that emphasizes emotional intimacy among multiple partners. It differs from *polygamy* in several ways, most notably that polygamy is a form of marriage with multiple spouses frequently embedded within a religious community (Zeitzen 2008). The most common form of polygamy (both cross-culturally and historically) is *polygyny* in which one husband is allowed multiple wives, but wives are not allowed to have multiple husbands (Zeitzen 2008).¹ In contrast, many polyamorists are neither married nor rooted in a religious structure that advocates polyamory. People of all genders are allowed multiple partners in polyamory, not only men. Polyamory also differs from *swinging*, another form of CNM that emphasizes heterosexual couples swapping partners for sexual novelty or having group sex, usually in a semi-structured setting like a house party, sex club, cruise, or resort (Gould 2000). Both less structured and less heterosexual than swinging, polyamory is also not as well known among the general public.

All of these forms of CNM share the crucial characteristic of negotiating access to multiple lovers, distinguishing CNM from infidelity (also known as cheating or adultery) which is not negotiated, but rather conducted in secret without the other partner's consent. McAnulty and Brineman (2007) define infidelity in dating as "... almost any form of emotional or sexual intimacy with a person other than one's primary dating partner (94)," a definition that could be extended to marital infidelity as well. It is most instructive that McAnulty and Brineman do not add *nonconsensual* to

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¹Polyandry, marriage between one wife and multiple husbands, is comparatively rare and most common when there is limited land, the population is geographically isolated, or there is a significant imbalance in the population; see Zeitzen, 2008.

their definition, implying that all extradyadic emotional and sexual intimacy is definitionally non-consensual. This assumption that monogamy is the default and only legitimate form of relationship is termed *compulsory monogamy* (Emens 2004; Heckert 2010; Ritchie and Barker 2006), an idea we explore in greater depth shortly.

This article focuses on polyamory and the ways in which it is deviant and some of the reasons explaining that deviance. First, it explains the polyamorous possibility, three common reactions, and the culture of compulsory monogamy in which these reactions are performed. Next, this article identifies the obvious reasons for polyamory's deviance and demonstrates why those reasons are false. Then, it identifies the real reasons that polyamory is deviant, and what that means for compulsory monogamy when confronted with the polyamorous possibility.

The polyamorous possibility

Coming to the realization that there is an option to have openly conducted non-monogamous relationships is what Sheff (2013) calls the *polyamorous possibility*. Once people become aware that there are alternatives to both monogamy and cheating, they have grasped the polyamorous possibility, and can never unthink it again. They may reject the idea or decide to explore it further, but the potential for themselves or their partner to initiate discussion of a consensually non-monogamous relationship exists in a way it had not before they became aware of CNM as a social option. Sheff (2013) has found that three common reactions follow realization of the polyamorous possibility: People are generally either blasé, delighted, or terrified.

The polyamorous possibility is banal for some people who are blasé about it – they become aware of it and it makes little impression on them. People in this category tend to dismiss the polyamorous possibility as an “oddity” they would not consider, like getting a facial tattoo or joining a cult. Others are already practicing polyamory and glad to have a name for it, but the realization is not earth shattering because they have already engaged in a CNM relationship. For others, however, the polyamorous possibility is mind-blowing, and their strong reactions usually express in one of two ways (Sheff 2013).

The first of the strong reactions is delight. Some people experience feelings of freedom and relief when they become aware of the polyamorous possibility. For members of this category, realizing the polyamorous possibility can be like taking a deep breath for the first time in their lives. Finally, free of compulsory monogamy, the possibility of having multiple lovers honestly and transparently can feel liberating for those in this category. Becoming openly polyamorous can alleviate the burdens of lying and cheating, and offers people who have caused pain and suffered themselves as failed monogamists/cheaters the opportunity to construct an alternative relational paradigm.

A second strong reaction some people have to the polyamorous possibility is abject terror. Realizing that CNM is an option can feel extremely threatening for people in this category, especially if their partner has ever given any indication that they might want to have an open relationship. Several issues can contribute to a fearful response, such as being monogamous by orientation or having personal or familial experience with cheating or adultery. In the same way that some people say polyamory is a sexual or relational orientation for them, others report that they are innately or inherently monogamous (Emens 2004; Sheff 2013; Tweedy 2011). Those who are monogamous by orientation say that they do not feel attraction for others when they are in love with someone. For monogamists, the possibility that their partner might love someone else can feel like their beloved no longer loves them.

For others, unresolved issues with cheating make the idea of consensual non-monogamies untenable. This fear can be especially potent for those whose partners have cheated on them in the past, worry that their partner may cheat on them now or in the future, or feel guilt for their own past or current cheating. Others have parents who cheated on each other and are wary of non-monogamy because of the mistrust and deception they observed in their families of origin. Becoming conscious of the potential for open relationships and knowing CNM might spread to their social

circle can make some people with unresolved issues around infidelity profoundly uncomfortable. For these and other reasons, realizing the polyamorous possibility can also mean attaching significant deviance and stigma to the relationship style – at least for the folks in the second strong reaction category. The next section explores the ostensible reasons for the deviance and stigma associated with polyamory.

Compulsory monogamy

These varied reactions to the polyamorous possibility occur within a society structured by compulsory monogamy, which is the coercive and (mostly) invisible idea that monogamy is the sole legitimate form of relationship in which everyone is required to engage. Patterned after Rich's (1980) idea of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory monogamy is the mandate for solely dyadic romantic relationships embedded in social norms, customs, and institutions (Emens 2004; Heckert 2010; Ritchie and Barker 2006).

In a foundational discussion of compulsory monogamy Emens (2004: 7) detailed “monogamy’s mandate,” explaining the persistent popularity of marriage founded in the fantasy of Western Romance tradition and laws such as criminal statutes related to adultery or bigamy that function as “a coercive enforcement of monogamy.” Important features of compulsory monogamy include the importance of jealousy as evidence of true love, the fantasy of supermonogamy in which there is only one person who is the perfect soulmate and complete complement of the other, sociobiological explanations of exclusive heterosexual mating as the superior evolutionary strategy, and that cheating – especially for men – is embedded as a requisite component of compulsory monogamy (Emens 2004). In other words, compulsory monogamy requires that the idea and resultant image of monogamy be maintained, not the actual conduct of sexual and emotional fidelity.

Scholars find evidence of compulsory monogamy in language that excludes the possibility of non-monogamy being consensual (Ritchie and Barker 2006), relationship structures that inhibit and restrict autonomy and self-awareness (Heckert 2010), and a sexist double standard that impacts women more than men (Willey 2015). Enforced via legal prosecutions (Emens 2004) and *relational panopticism* in the culture at large (Willis 2019), compulsory monogamy affects people in CNM relationships in interactions with their personal networks and social institutions. Compulsory monogamy frames the social world in which polyamory and other forms of CNM are deemed deviant. The next section explores the ostensible reasons for that deviance.

The obvious reasons

A Puritanical society at root (Weber 2013/1905), mainstream culture in the United States has never been comfortable with non-monogamy (Coontz 2006; Jacobson and Burton 2011). That discomfort has not, however, translated into an absence of non-monogamous relationships, both consensual and non-consensual. Marital infidelity is common worldwide, with an average of 21% of wives and 31% of husbands internationally reporting extramarital “sexual fulfillment” (Dillon, Nowak, and Weisfeld 2017). Rates of marital infidelity are rising in the United States (Fincham and May 2017), with wealthy people (mostly men) seeking partners online using sites such as Ashley Madison to find clandestine partners (Chohaney and Panozzo 2018), Facebook facilitating infidelity among new and former partners (Abbasi and Alghamdi 2017), and erectile dysfunction drugs enabling extramarital sex (Fincham and May 2017). Infidelity remains a leading cause of divorce in the United States (Yuan and Weiser 2019). Cheating in dating and cohabitational relationships is even more common than among married people (Fincham and May 2017).

In addition to widespread infidelity, consensual non-monogamies are both currently popular and have a long history in the United States. Swinging began in the United States among military spouses and has spread to many other subcultures (Gould 2000). Polygamists have resided in the US since its inception, and contemporary polygamous sub-cultures include Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints

and Muslims (Bennion and Joffe 2016). Non-monogamous communities and group marriages have had three waves of popularity in the United States, beginning with the nineteenth-century transcendentalists, through the free love movement of the 1960s and 70s, to the current Internet-fueled expansion of CNM (Sheff 2012).

Polyamory as a specific form of CNM began in the 1970s (Sheff 2012) and has grown in popularity dramatically in the last 10 years (Moors 2017). Because most people learn about polyamory online or through a reality television series like *Married and Dating* on HBO, the general public has a salacious and negative view of polyamory (Conley et al. 2013a; Ferrer 2018). Reality television is notorious for its hypersexualized focus, and when it comes to portraying sex and gender minorities that existing tendency is magnified dramatically (Gamson 1998). Furthermore, many polyamorous people are at least somewhat closeted, because stigma and discrimination have had demonstrably devastating effects on other polyamorous people, and community wisdom suggests caution when considering coming out (Sheff 2013).

As a result, many members of the general public might know someone in a consensually non-monogamous relationship but are probably unaware that they know a polyamorous person because that person is closeted. Without personal connection and conversations about the reality of consensual non-monogamies, mainstream society is free to sustain prejudicial misconceptions about polyamory and other forms of CNM (Conley et al. 2013a; Ferrer 2018; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2016; Moors et al. 2013). These misconceptions tend to be in two primary areas: having sex for pleasure and having multiple partners.

Sex for pleasure

Part of traditional monogamy – especially for women – was completely refraining from sexual intercourse prior to marriage, and then refraining from sex with anyone besides the spouse post-nuptially (Coontz 2006). This tradition arises from Christian religious attitudes that sex is for procreation, not pleasure (Seidman 1990). Having sex for pleasure or recreation is immoral – according to many Christian religious traditions (Fuchs 1983). Evidence indicates that polyamorists and people in other types of CNM relationships clearly have sex for pleasure: they often use condoms and other barriers for protection against sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, some seek sexual novelty among multiple partners, and others engage in an expansive range of sexual interactions including kinky sex/BDSM, group sex, and sacred sexualities (Sheff 2013).

The reality is, people in ostensibly monogamous relationships have sex for pleasure and recreation as well. Many people use birth control to have sex without becoming pregnant (Watkins 2012) – the essence of sex for pleasure and recreation. Hookup culture is both well documented (Aubrey and Smith 2016; Beste 2017) and not confined to college (Garcia et al. 2012). Consumption of pornography has driven Internet technologies and communications, fostering not only hundreds of thousands of websites but also the equipment to provide video and sound (Müller, Opwis, and Mekler 2018; Smith 2017). Smartphone apps from Grindr and Tinder to BlackPeopleMeet and SilverSingles assist users in finding new people to date and/or engage in sex. Sex-toy and erotica stores sell merchandise designed to stimulate and enliven sex for couples far beyond what is required for procreation, and lingerie sales from stores like Victoria's Secret indicate that people are dressing up for recreational sex. Advertising relies so heavily on allusions to sexual pleasure that it can be difficult to discern precisely what commodity the commercial is actually advertising (Lull and Bushman 2015). Because this phenomenon is not confined to polyamorous people but is, in fact, widespread, sex for pleasure cannot be the real reason for the deviance and stigma.

Multiple partners

Traditional monogamy was a practice in which very young women and men married as virgins and were each-others' sole partner for life, becoming celibate when the other died (Fisher 1989).

Traditional monogamy was most popular when life-spans were shorter and transportation much slower (Coontz 2006). It was much easier to be truly monogamous when most of the people were dead by 40 years old and only met 300 others in their entire lives – a significant portion of whom were already relatives of some sort (Ryan and Jethá 2010). Because traditional monogamy does not currently function for large portions of the population, compulsory monogamy has fostered the practice of *serial monogamy* in which each person has one partner at a time, breaks up, and re-partners with one other person, repeatedly until permanent partnership is established or death. In practice, the prevalence of serial monogamy means that almost everyone in the US today has multiple partners, just not concurrently (Mulder 2009).

Or at least not concurrently *in theory*. In practice, cheating, infidelity, and adultery are incredibly common, with conservative estimates indicating 2% to 4% of married people cheat on their spouses each year and at least 25% of married people engaging in infidelity across their duration (Fincham and May 2017). Rates of cheating are probably even greater among unmarried committed partners. Even people who have trumpeted family values like heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage have been caught very publicly failing to live up to what they espouse. As a lobbyist for the conservative Christian Family Research Council, Josh Duggar (eldest child on the reality television show *19 Kids and Counting*) espoused heterosexual monogamous marriage as the only legitimate basis of family. During his high-profile political maneuvering against same-sex families, media reports documented Duggar's repeated molestation of his younger sisters and a family friend when he was an adolescent (InTouch 2015). In 2015 a data breach at Ashley Madison – a website dedicated to pairing married people who want to have clandestine affairs with other married people looking for affairs – exposed customers' names, and Josh Duggar was among them (InTouch 2015). While Duggar is among the most recent, he is certainly not the only man who has spent years publicly agitating for heterosexual monogamy and then been exposed as unable or unwilling to live up to the standards he proposed to judge everyone else. Political figures like Newt Gingrich (Brattebo 2013) and Donald Trump (Darweesh and Abdullah 2016) have faced public disapproval for their hypocrisy around demanding monogamous heterosexual marriage from others but cheating on their own spouses.

Not only is cheating incredibly common, but monogamy is not the only option for relationship structure, nor even the most enduring. Historically and currently, polygamy is quite common (Fenske 2015; Gordon 2003). In virtually every society of which anthropologists and sociologists are aware, men (and especially wealthy or elite men) have been able to access multiple female partners, either as wives, concubines, courtesans, mistresses, or prostitutes (Zeitzen 2008). While monogamy began with men intending to pass their accumulated goods to their biological sons and gained popularity with the spread of Christianity (Coontz 2006; Ryan and Jethá 2010), it has never fully eclipsed polygamy.

Finally, consensual non-monogamy itself is far more common than is widely acknowledged. Interest in polyamory and open relationships (two types of CNM) has increased dramatically, especially over the past 10–15 years (Moors 2017). Research indicates that more than one in five (22%) Americans have engaged in a consensually non-monogamous relationship at some point in their life (Hauptert et al. 2017). Approximately 5% of people in the United States are currently engaged in a CNM relationship, which is roughly the size of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community combined (Rubin et al. 2014). Given the popularity of serial monogamy, cheating, polygamy, and consensual non-monogamies, it is simply normative to have multiple partners – so that cannot be the actual reason that polyamory is deviant.

The real reasons

If sex for pleasure and multiple partners are both commonplace, why does the mainstream find polyamory and other forms of CNM so deeply disturbing (Conley et al. 2013a)? What are the real reasons behind the deviance and social stigma? Now that we have identified and debunked the ostensible reasons for the stigma associated with polyamory, we explore the true reasons underlying

the significant social discomfort associated with this relationship style (Conley et al. 2013b). These reasons include honesty, women gaining access to multiple partners, and the challenge CNM poses to conventional heterosexual nuclear families.

Honesty restructures power imbalance

Facebook, OK Cupid, eHarmony, Match.com, Grindr, Tinder, and a host of other dating websites and apps have made finding a mate – or multiple mates – far more convenient than ever before. These sites facilitate truly monogamous relationships, as well as cheating (Abbasi and Alghamdi 2017; Chohaney and Panozzo 2018). Non-consensual non-monogamy like cheating and adultery are predicated on a power imbalance in which one person thinks they are in a monogamous relationship with another who has agreed to monogamy but does not actually practice it (Allen & Atkins 2005; Williams 2011). In some cheating relationships, the person who is cheating knows more of the reality of the relationship than the person who is being monogamous and thinks they are in a truly monogamous relationship (Allen & Atkins 2005). Knowledge, as Foucault (1982) so elegantly demonstrated, is deeply intertwined with power, and having more knowledge about the relationship confers power on the cheater. Even in relationships in which both people are cheating, the clandestine nature of the adultery makes it not only more socially palatable to the larger mainstream community but confers power on whomever is the most secretive (Allen & Atkins 2005; Williams 2011).

Alternately, when there is a significant power imbalance in a relationship, the more powerful partner might cheat without regard to secrecy (Lammers et al. 2011). The partner with less power might pretend to be oblivious to the affair or may acknowledge it and be unable to affect it. Remaining in relationship with a cheating partner might be preferable to potential loss of status, poverty, and/or homelessness (Utley 2011). Regardless of the impetus or expression, cheating is part of compulsory monogamy, providing an outlet for either maintenance of the original relationship by allowing clandestine sexual novelty with new lovers, or a way to audition possible future partners to replace the current partner (Willey 2015). In this manner, cheating and hiding multiple partners actually serves to reinforce and stabilize a monogamous system (Heckert 2010; Willey 2013).

By honestly negotiating consensual non-monogamy, polyamory brings multiple partnerships into the open. In a society structured by compulsory monogamy and the attendant practice of non-consensual non-monogamy (cheating), it is an act of resistance to negotiate non-monogamy (Willis 2019). When some people begin to negotiate non-monogamies, it indicates to others that there are more choices than simply monogamy (Sheff 2013). This honest discussion of multiple partners thus destabilizes the carefully balanced world of cheating that endows the partner with multiple relationships with greater power than the truly monogamous partner. By allowing negotiation and open discussion, CNM overturns the expectations that either everyone is monogamous or that cheating is inevitable and the only method to attain sexual variety (Heckert 2010; Sheff 2013; Willey 2015).

This is not to say that there is never power inequity in CNM relationships – like every other relationship, gender, race, class, ability, and other factors shape access to social power (Sheff 2013; Sheff and Hammers 2011). Perhaps even most important for CNM relationships, personal charisma, and emotional tenor can profoundly affect the power balance of a relationship. The person with the ability to attract multiple partners and the social acumen to continue relating to these partners for years has more options and more social cache among polyamorists (Sheff 2005, 2013). CNM and polyamory may have other forms of power imbalance, but secrecy is generally not one of them (Sheff 2013; Sheff and Hammers 2011).

The ability to openly discuss relationships means that people can negotiate things like money, time, and safer sex agreements. In fact, CNM relationships have significantly greater sexual health precisely because they can be honest about the need for condoms and other barriers (Conley et al. 2013a). Polyamorous relationships also have higher levels of satisfaction than those who have been cheated on, and those in monogamous, swinging, or open relationships (Conley et al. 2013b). Power

imbalances remain, but rejecting such a hallowed social convention as monogamy means that polyamorists and others in CNM relationships are freer to question other things as well (Ritchie and Barker 2006; Sheff 2005, 2013).

Women get multiple partners too

Monogamy has always had sufficient flexibility to accommodate multiple partners – for men. In every society we can identify, wealthy men have had access to multiple women. From prostitutes and courtesans to mistresses and multiple wives, men with high status have never truly been confined to the practice of monogamy. Non-monogamous or “promiscuous” women have been occasionally able to carve out small arenas of influence, generally under the patronage of powerful men. Courtesans (Faraone and McClure 2008) and Geisha (Downer 2002) both were highly educated in not only lovemaking but also art, politics, music, and social graces. These women have not, however, generally been able to marry multiple younger men or rise to positions of political leadership (Downer 2002; Faraone and McClure 2008). They were necessary to maintain a polite society, but never truly accepted within it.

Far more frequently, however, non-monogamous women have been branded (sometimes literally) as whores, slandered as sluts, ostracized, deemed mentally ill, and/or imprisoned (Edwards et al. 2011; Foucault 1982). Sexual double standards are popular and virulent in the United States (Emmerink et al. 2017), even among young people shaped by successive waves of sexual revolutions (Bell and Bell 2013). Birth control is commonplace now, we realize that gay people really are everywhere, oral sex has become so mundane we are not even sure it is truly sex (at least if it is women doing it to men), and many other attitudes toward sexuality have changed significantly in the past 50 years (Bullough and Bullough 2019; Twenge, Sherman, and Wells 2015). Sexual double-standards, however, remain deeply embedded in contemporary attitudes toward women (Emmerink et al. 2017; Farvid, Braun, and Roney 2017; Fjær, Pedersen, and Sandberg 2015).

One of the most deviant aspects of polyamory is that it sanctions multiple sexual partners for all genders, including women. In fact, women tend to have great social power within mainstream polyamorous communities in the United States (Sheff 2005, 2013). Most of the community leaders and many of the academics studying polyamory are women. Researchers have noted the complex nature of gendered interactions among polyamorists and how women’s access to honest negotiation grants them greater control over their sexual health (Conley et al. 2013b) and even increased personal power (Ritchie and Barker 2006; Sheff 2005, 2013). Furthermore, the kinds of men who are willing to choose polyamory – as opposed to cheating or polygyny—are more likely to endorse (and even attempt to practice) gender equality than are men who are unable or unwilling to share “their” woman (Sheff 2006; Toft and Yip 2018).

Challenge to heterosexual nuclear families

Compulsory monogamy serves to support a narrow definition of family and relationship legitimacy (Emens 2004; Rothschild 2018), and CNM encourages those who realize the polyamorous possibility to become aware of and perhaps even consider alternatives (Sheff 2013). A real reason polyamory and other forms of CNM are so deeply disturbing for conventional society is the challenge they pose to a monolithic conception of family, love, and relationships (Sheff 2011). For people who find the polyamorous possibility terrifying, the challenges accompanying the expansion of family and relationship options seem threatening (Conley et al. 2013b; Ferrer 2018; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2016; Moors et al. 2013). Beyond the personal issues around infidelity that tend to contribute to fear of the polyamorous possibility (Sheff 2013), two larger social factors also shape negative reactions: sex negativity and the potential for universal appeal.

Sex negativity is the general attitude of fear and suspicion that surrounds anything to do with sexuality and those who relish it (McFarland and Williams 2016; Rubin 1984). It is the disdain that

gives words like *slut* or *whore* their punch (Tanenbaum 2015), and ensures that sexuality is always seen as dirty, marginal, or offensive (Foucault 1982; Manning 2015; Rubin 1984). In mainstream society, the impacts of sex negativity are evident in many ways, from the lack of realistic sex education (Santelli et al. 2017) to the sluggish governmental response to HIV/AIDS during the 1980s (Herek and Capitano 1999). In a polyamorous context, sex negativity often expresses as disdain for people with high enough sex drives to have multiple partners (Sheff 2005, 2013).

Possibly most disturbing for people who react negatively to the polyamorous possibility is its potentially universal appeal. Among forms of sexual or relational nonconformity, polyamory is unusual in that it could possibly be appealing to everyone who desires intimate relationships with other people. Most people are heterosexual, and it is readily apparent that not everyone experiences same-sex sexual attraction or desire (Dean 2014). In other words, not everyone has the capacity or desire to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Unless they are monogamous by orientation (Tweedy 2010), however, most people in long-term relationships – regardless of sexual orientation – have had the experience of being attracted to someone else besides their partner (Clement 2002). Almost everyone has the potential to be polyamorous in a way that many people do not have that same potential to be gay. This near-universality of possible appeal can make polyamory seem especially menacing.

Conclusion

This article began by identifying types of consensual non-monogamies and contrasting CNM with cheating. Then, it described the polyamorous possibility and the three common reactions people can have when they realize that monogamy is not the only option within a society structured by compulsory monogamy. Next, it identified the ostensible reasons for the deviance attributed to polyamory, including sex for pleasure and having multiple partners, and explained why those were not the real reasons for the deviance. This article then identified three real reasons for this deviance: 1) honesty, 2) women negotiating access to multiple partners, and 3) the challenge CNM poses to heterosexual nuclear families.

Ultimately, perhaps the critical social reason polyamory is so deviant is that it exposes the weaknesses of compulsory monogamy and the heterosexual nuclear family. Compulsory monogamy demands that the precarious and fragile nature of monogamy remain invisible, and seeks to limit both the ability to imagine an alternative (Heckert 2010; Ritchie and Barker 2006; Willey 2013), and the material lives of those who do (Emens 2004). Deeply entwined with compulsory heterosexuality and the binary gender system (Connell 2005; Klesse 2010; Rich 1980) that underlies contemporary conceptions of heterosexual nuclear families (Coontz 2006), compulsory monogamy is in the process of being dethroned as the cultural standard by a wide range of relationship possibilities. After almost a century of dominance (Coontz 2006), the heterosexual nuclear family is in danger of losing its cultural preeminence. As the polyamorous possibility becomes even more widely known, it will inevitably exert an even greater influence on society. Emens (2004) foresaw this over a decade ago when she argued that “a key reason for the opposition to polyamory is, somewhat paradoxically, the pervasive or potential failure of monogamy (5).” Sheff (2011) concluded that “In the highly unlikely event that same-sex and poly marriage actually do obliterate monogamous, heterosexual marriage ... it will result from the inadequacies of that “traditional” family form, not the ‘wickedness’ of lesbians and polyamorists (513).”

Casting polyamory and other forms of CNM as deviant is part of the demise of the heteropatriarchy, compulsory monogamy, and the decline of the heterosexual nuclear family. It is precisely the ubiquitous nature of the polyamorous possibility that makes those who select it so deviant: Anyone could choose it, but some of those who prefer monogamy do not want their own partners or anyone else to be able to choose polyamory. The polyamorous possibility is deviant precisely because it could be tempting for such a wide range of people, and some of those who refuse to allow themselves to give in to the temptation also wish to prevent others from seeing it as an option. The

polyamorous possibility is cast as deviant because it highlights the weaknesses of the heterosexual nuclear family and compulsory monogamy.

Notes on contributor

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