**When Sex is Cheap, Monogamy Becomes Expensive**

Not only is marriage delayed (by many) or avoided (by some), the values of relationship stability and monogamy itself are being called into question. This is in part because neither is a key component of the normative package of the pure relationship model. Stability continues to be offered lip service as an ideal, especially when the discussion of relationships involves children (and in particular their socio-emotional flourishing).[[1]](#footnote-1) But *assuming* either one is no longer central to the Western way of relationships, Giddens senses:

Unlike romantic love, confluent love is not necessarily monogamous, in the sense of sexual exclusiveness. What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, ‘until further notice’, that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile. Sexual exclusiveness here has a role in the relationship to the degree to which the partners mutually deem it desirable or essential.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Giddens is not the only one to discern the disappearance of stability and monogamy assumptions in the new relational system. Our interviewees brought up monogamy with a good deal of regularity in our interviews: 27 percent of them used the word, even though it was not a term or theme that we directly inquired about. But for many of them, “monogamous” was often clearly synonymous with “being in a relationship” rather than with ending a concurrent one in favor of another. Hence what was long known as a “defining the relationship” (DTR) conversation has, it seems, given way to “deciding to be monogamous” (in the words of one 24-year-old interviewee).

We did, however, ask respondents whether they had ever overlapped sexual relationships, meaning they were still in a sexual relationship with one person while having begun a sexual relationship with another person. To be sure, respondents might not think of these relationships as nonmonogamous or polyamorous. They may well have considered themselves as “cheating” on someone, or in the process of ending one relationship and beginning another. That is fine—what interests me is less their description of it than how many have experienced it. Analyses of the data reveal that two-thirds of American adults ages 18-60 said they had never been in a sexual relationship that overlapped with another one. An additional 20 percent said they had, but that the overlap was brief—less than a month. Just under 10 percent said they had been in a longer overlapping situation (over one month).[[3]](#footnote-3) If we were searching for genuine polyamory, I think it would be wise to use the more-than-a-month measure rather than likely misrepresent those 20 percent of respondents whose relationships overlapped for a brief period.

Sociologists Yoosik Youm and Anthony Paik demonstrate what nonmonogamy can do to the marriage rate even when the sex ratio remains stable.[[4]](#footnote-4) Figure 5.4, reproduced from their analysis of the implications of sex market patterns for family formation, details how expectations of monogamous sex are apt to issue in more marrying than when polyamorous sex is available. They are identical sex ratios—both favor men but only one hews to monogamy. Because of that we should expect men to partner differently. If monogamy is socially reinforced, as in the model on the left, all three men will marry and two women will go un-partnered. If nonmonogamy is permitted, as in the model on the right, only two of the men would marry and one of those will engage a second partner. More of the women in the second scenario will be partnered but fewer will be married. Youm and Paik conclude that nonmonogamy *directly* decreases the marriage rate. It fits the contemporary American mating market well.

Figure 5.4: The Effect of Nonmonogamous Sex on the Marriage Rate, with Sex Ratio Constant

Men

Nonmarital sex

Women

Marriage

Source: Youm and Paik 2004: 174

Although race/ethnicity is not a central theme in this book, the sex-ratio imbalance among African Americans noted in Chapter 2 should lead us to hypothesize that African-American men are more likely to report longer-term overlapping sexual partnerships, due to their optimal ability to navigate their local sexual economies as they please (due to the presence of more women than men). Is that the case? Yes. While the overall average of longer-term overlapping sexual partnerships is just under 10 percent, such is the case among 17 percent of African Americans. And since women may be unaware of such relationships, it pays to distinguish gender here as well: 22 percent of African American men report overlapping partnerships that exceed a month in duration (while 28 percent report overlaps of less than one month). Moreover, the most educated African American men were also the most likely to report long-term overlaps, at 31 percent among those with post-graduate education, compared with 18 percent of high-school dropouts, a phenomenon Youm and Paik noted as well in their study of Chicago neighborhoods.

We also asked *when* this experience occurred. Is it ongoing now or in the past year? Or was it between 1-5 years ago, 6-10 years ago, or before that? Many of these relationships are distant memories. Indeed, just under half of all overlapping relationships are well in the past—over 10 years ago. Nine percent were ongoing or very recent (within the past year), while 21 percent occurred between one and five years ago. The timing question varied little by gender, but considerably by race/ethnicity. Latino respondents reported elevated current (or recent) overlapping relationships, at 15 percent, followed by 12 percent among African Americans and six percent of whites. Most overlap among whites is a distant memory—57 percent of them said it was over 10 years ago, compared with 40 percent of African Americans and 33 percent of Latinos.

Granted, sex seems pretty accessible and significant numbers of men (and women) are, at least for a time, navigating and negotiating concurrent partnerships. But that appears to have been true in the past, too. How exactly do I come to the conclusion that monogamy has *become* more expensive? Without difficulty, actually. Monogamy is a classic hallmark of marriage. Yet everyother historical hallmark of marriage—such as expectations of children, permanence, and role complementarity—is now either in active recession or is already a memory. Children? Optional. Permanence? Look around you. Complementarity? Openly mocked. Each of these has become rarer, more difficult to achieve, and hence more expensive. Yes, monogamy is still preferred, but more preferred by older than younger, and by the religious more than the irreligious. But most of all it’s more preferred by women than men; that is, it’s more preferred by those in a weaker position in the mating market.[[5]](#footnote-5) Women are less apt to get what they want in that market, so of course it is reasonable to perceive that expectations of monogamy, too, have receded some as well.

There is talk of “open” marriages among men and women, and no shortage of media attention paid to it, but it remains a small minority in social reality. And yet the current social context seems ripe for change here: sex is cheap, the “pure” relationship model Giddens speaks of is filtering into committed relationships, the tables above (and in Chapter 3) suggest “extradyadic” partners are not uncommon, and the lingo is changing: people talk about “cheating” far more than they do about “adultery.” State adultery laws, once common, have collapsed. Although 21 states retain such laws, they are historical curiosities today. The US military, long trusted to help safeguard—with teeth—the sexual behavior of husbands away on deployment, is following suit. Given the military’s recognition of same-sex marriage and its definition of adultery as penile-vaginal penetration, enforcing its own adultery codes would first require considerable revision. (I cannot imagine it occurring.) Hence the exclusive sexual union risks ceasing to be perceived as having unique relevance—that is, not pivotal—for marriage in general.

If these developments do not signal the clear deinstitutionalization of marriage, what do they mean? That marriage is simply changing? Can marriage be something else? Sure, for a time, it can “try on other clothing,” so to speak. But it will not likely endure as something else. As mentioned earlier, sociologist Andrew Cherlin claimed that marriage was designed for a context of scarcity, meaning that its peak usage is when people need it, not when they want it. The difference between the two is quite significant. Needing to marry all but guarantees a social system in which marriage is expected by most, timed with peak fertility and virility, monogamous, and generally reproductively fruitful—if not always satisfying. Indeed, marriage will be more stable—though likely less happy and fulfilling—wherever it is normative and expected. Stable marriage pays benefits (increasingly dismissed by many critics), especially when it comes to household prosperity and child outcomes.

But if its hallmarks have eroded amid a context of comparative (historical) plenty, we should not expect marriage to endure as a majority behavior pattern. (It will never disappear as a minority behavior pattern.) Instead, cohabitation will catch up with it and lap it as a preferred relational style in the US, as it has in much of Europe.

So will “monogamish,” or the occasional, acceptable overlap of sexual partners, become the new normal? Maybe, but not likely in the next decade. OKCupid, the dating site, has added the capacity for a couple to search for a third partner, but online profiles do not simply signal what people want.[[6]](#footnote-6) Some signal what they hope for; others what they can tolerate. We are still embedded in an era of “serial monogamy” wherein men and women experience, on average, a variety of sexual partners but typically in single file, one at a time. The underwhelming data on overlapping partners suggests this pattern may continue. Finally, attitudes toward extramarital sex remain stably negative: fewer than eight percent of American adults agree with the statement “It is sometimes permissible for a married person to have sex with someone other than his/her spouse.” Hence nonmonogamy is—and will be for the foreseeable future—a behavior pattern normative (if at all) only prior to marriage, not during it.

Certainly, however, marriage is not a “haven in a heartless world,” as social critic Christopher Lasch described it, something men and women could count on even if their own personal happiness within it wasn’t rocketing through the roof. Instead, marriage has become another tenuous arena in competition with the economic marketplace (for time and energy) and the remarriage market (for second chances and sexual variety). Social conservatives tend to bemoan these and other developments, but what they really want is what they cannot have—a culture in which marriage is normative and expected, together with all the desired fruit of the shift toward the pure relationship and confluent love model: greater freedom, flexibility, time, and opportunity.

**What if Nonmonogamy Became the Norm?**

So monogamy is taking it on the chin lately. Its critics seem to be growing in number and visibility, lining up to take their turn punching the idea of committing to one person for life, or even for a while. Nonmonogamy—the practice of supplementing a primary sexual partner with one or more others— has became hip in some corners of the United States, and I’m not talking about rural Utah.[[7]](#footnote-7) Joking aside, this is not the first time nonmonogamy was popular in some locales, but it has been awhile since the idea of having multiple, concurrent partners could be considered more cool than repugnant. The difference is in terminology, geography, and commitment.

First, the terminology. Polyamory is *different* than polygamy. Polygamy is still off limits—countercultural—but it is so no longer because of the poly part but because marriage is out of vogue in places where polyamory has emerged as a minority practice. For polyamorists to think of marrying more than one person is laughable—it would esteem marriage far too much. The distinction between the two, however, may be splitting hairs: NYU sociologist Dalton Conley labels Americans’ sexual behavior patterns “dynamic polygamy.”[[8]](#footnote-8) It doesn’t look like “old school” polygamy, with multiple marriage partners at once. But multiple it is. Divorce, he reminds us, does not actually sever a relationship. It just concludes the marriage part of it. Financial and other obligations can long linger. And when children are involved, you remain in contact—even if on acerbic terms—with your ex for years. And remarriage compounds it. Conley thinks we tend to forget all this. He’s right.

Instead, contemporary polyamory or nonmonogamy is popularly presumed to refer to the negotiated practice of consensual sex outside of a primary relationship. That is, when both partners in a relationship have agreed to allow one or the other or both to experience sexual activity—and possibly form ongoing sexual relationships—apart from their primary union. This new version includes women, too. (The old school version did not.) The lack of commitment that characterizes modern cohabitation, together with the sexual malleability outlined in Chapter 2, has enabled the emergence of polyamory. Monogamy, it is increasingly held, is unnatural. But people “need” multiple partners like they need four houses or six automobiles. These are not needs; they are wants. And when seemingly reasonable people argue that in previous eras people didn’t live so long, such that the death of a spouse functioned as a way for humans to fulfill their “need for sexual variety...,” it pays to be skeptical.[[9]](#footnote-9) (Since when did golden anniversaries become something to pity rather than something to celebrate?)

No, the new turn away from monogamy was made possible not because we figured out that we were still animals but because we figured out how to effectively prevent pregnancy or end them prematurely, freeing us up to pursue the art of sexuality—the body as a tool of consumption rather than production. Giddens called it.

But few hold that what we are witnessing is much about *amor* (love) at all. Rather, it is about the consumption of more and more sexual experiences, dressed up in ironic language about being “ethical.” But what if nonmonogamy became more popular? What if it were normative, as in typical or even expected behavior? Perhaps Americans are on a trajectory to get over their hang-ups and instead display what some call “compersion,” or appreciating the sexual pleasure that a spouse (or primary partner) receives when with someone else. *Huffington Post* writer “Gracie X,” who advocates for the socialization of compersion, articulates well the tall challenge it represents:

Feeling all warm and gooey because your spouse had a great time banging someone else is not something we’re socialized to feel. We can be thrilled for our partner if they get a raise or promotion or receive some kind of unexpected windfall, but why can’t we be happy for our partners who find joy in bed with someone else?[[10]](#footnote-10)

Compersion, however, faces a tall order to become normative. Antagonism toward marital infidelity remains very high in the population—72 percent vs. 7.5 percent (who think it is permissible), but the share of respondents who are not sure is notable, at 17.5 percent.[[11]](#footnote-11) Social change concerning the permissibility of polyamorous (and extramarital) relationships will begin with them, no doubt.

The authors of *Sex at Dawn* welcome the idea, suggesting that trying to rise “above our nature” is problematic. It is an “exhausting endeavor,” they caution, “often resulting in spectacular collapse.” But to believe that loosening sexual standards, like monogamy, means that everyone will be free to do as they please is flat wrong. Groups and communities do not work like that. There will always be rules—with resulting winners and losers—in any sexual system.

A monogamous system, however, allows for *more winners*. That is, more men and women are in successful relationships. How so? A team featuring an economist, an anthropologist, and an environmental scientist set out to solve what they called the “puzzle” of monogamous marriage. Monogamous marriage, they detail, fosters savings and economic output, and reduces competition among men for women, which functions to reduce the pool of low-status, risk-oriented, unmarried men. (It reduces competition not through sex-ratio manipulation but through normative expectations of one partner.) And that, in turn, lowers multiple types of crime, abuse, household conflict, and fosters greater paternal investment in both their work and in their children, who enjoy their attention and exhibit notably lower stress levels than in households displaying all manner of strangers.[[12]](#footnote-12) Speaking of strangers, a review of data from 69 polygamous societies from around the world failed to reveal a single case where the relationships between a man’s partners or wives could be described as harmonious. Sexual-economics expert Marina Adshade jokes that “if I had to live in a household where my husband had more than one wife, there would have to be alcohol involved.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Monogamy also means confidence in the biological link between mother, father, and child, a combination long known to reduce the threat of abuse, violence and homicide in the household. And monogamy means greater equality—more men and women have the opportunity to meet, marry, save, and invest for the long term, instead of competing (and spending resources, etc.) for others’ available attention. Indeed, the authors hold that this is why monogamous marriage systems *preceded* the emergence of democratic institutions in Europe, and the rise of notions like human rights and equality between the sexes. This “package of norms and institutions that constitute modern monogamous marriage systems spread across Europe, and then the globe,” precisely because it competedwell.[[14]](#footnote-14) Monogamy, after all, is disciplined (by definition).

So men win. Women win. Children win. Entire societies benefit. Sounds good. Not so fast, modern polyamorist skeptics say. That is not the kind of relationship system we’re talking about, they claim. We are not pushing polygamy, but rather supporting “open” relationships, not closed ones between one man and several women. And women are free to be poly, too. It’s “ethical” polyamory, after all.

It is true—modern polyamory does not look or feel like old-school polygamy. Poly men and women typically do not share spouses and children and homes, but rather just sex and dinner dates. It sounds simple. But one former polyamorous man expressed his distaste for the constant drama that arises:

The thing I dislike most about poly is having to always renegotiate and check-in. It’s like we’re always talking about this and that and what we want to do and what she wants to do and how I’m going to meet those needs and how she can better meet mine. Sometimes I feel like we spend more time discussing our relationship than enjoying our relationship. EVERYTHING has to be processed before, during and after.[[15]](#footnote-15)

At bottom, polyamory means a great deal of trust is constantly required of people who openly resist the idea of fidelity. It is pretty ironic, and it’s also why such relationships almost never last. Unlike with marriage, most of which involve childbearing and rearing, there is little incentive to continue polyamorous relationships. Moreover, a polyamorous life is only conceivable when no one actually *conceives*. Paternity concerns and jealousy, especially among primary partners, would abound. Working hard at one relationship—not many—historically paves the way for a father’s investment in his children. Few popular accounts of polyamory ever discuss what happens when poly meets fertility. It is there that nonmonogamy contributes to no shortage of anxiety, misery, and agonizing decisions—especially for women.

A child is not the only thing polyamory can leave one with. Overlapping partners is the *single biggest factor* accelerating the spread of sexually transmitted infections in a network of partners. In sub-Saharan Africa, concern about “multiple partners” is the focus of a major public health effort.[[16]](#footnote-16) Among polyamorists in the United States, it’s part of the deal. As an aside, white Americans in the RIA who have had at least two STIs are 52 percent more likely than those who’ve never had an STI to agree with the statement “It is OK for three or more consenting adults to live together in a sexual/romantic relationship.”

*Is Nonmonogamy a Free Rider Problem?*

It is plausible that the West is living off the social capital accrued by generations of monogamy—albeit imperfectly lived out—only to watch those it has benefitted turn on it, oblivious to the social hazards that will accompany undermining a monogamous system. A poly society will require a more vigilant public health system, a more active security state to protect its citizens—especially women—and a more aggressive social welfare system, since invested fathers will continue to recede. Misogyny is embedded in polyamory, however “ethical” it claims to be, because sexual objectification—the treatment of persons as objects—is unavoidable in a nonmonogamous system, especially a modern one characterized less by plural marriage than by the serial circulation of multiple, overlapping sex partners. A nonmonogamous future, were it to occur—and I have my doubts that it will—would decidedly rest on a very undemocratic approach to relationships. Sociologist Catherine Hakim notes that monogamy remains popular, especially among women, precisely *because* it offers sexual democracy.[[17]](#footnote-17) A nonmonogamous sexual system would undoubtedly be Darwinian, hierarchical, and patriarchal. The New Polyamory masquerades as egalitarian at present. It cannot survive this way, though.

Historically, getting (monogamously) married meant “getting serious.” It meant higher expectations of one’s proper behavior.[[18]](#footnote-18) The social ties of marriage create interdependent systems of obligation, mutual support, and restraint. Marriage meant having someone to care for and having someone to take care of you—yes, being interdependent—and these responsibilities and obligations only grew stronger when children entered the family. Nonmonogamy flouts such norms, exhibits little constraint, a great deal of “checking in,” and invites partner jealousy and pernicious bugs, all in the pursuit of genital pleasures. Some things may just be more important than that. And some facets of marriage will endure, like the link between the wish to have children and the desire for monogamous commitment. No one wishes to have children by multiple men or women. Individuals may elect not to form marriages or families—indeed, they may openly resist the forms of both presented to them—but they are not capable of socially constructing monogamy out of existence. We are simply not free to write off fertility’s debt to love, its desire for exclusivity, and its idealization of marital union. It will resist and reemerge, if even only in wounded form.

1. If the social scientific world seemed to agree upon anything from the furor that erupted after my 2012 article on the adult children of parents who’ve been in same-sex relationships, it is that stability is a good thing for kids. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An additional four percent of respondents elected not to answer the question. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yoosik Youm and Anthony Paik, “The Sex Market and Its Implications for Family Formation,” in *The Sexual Organization of the City*, eds. Edward O. Laumann, Stephen Ellingson, Jenna Mahay, Anthony Paik, and Yoosik Youm (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 165-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The sexual exchange model assumes that women prefer monogamous relationships more than men do, and that men—as a cost of being in a relationship with a woman—agree to monogamy as part of the terms. Among married Americans (people conceivably invested in monogamy), twice as many men as women (8.8 vs. 4.4 percent) agree that “it is sometimes permissible for a married person to have sex with someone other than his/her spouse.” An additional 17 percent of married men (vs. 10 percent of married women) aren’t sure what they think about that statement—neither agreeing nor disagreeing. And more men than women refused to answer the question (5.1 vs. 3.2 percent, respectively). When monogamy does not happen (for whatever reason), it doesn’t mean that the exchange model is fatally flawed; it means that for some the terms of exchange have shifted, typically in a direction favoring men’s interests (that is, away from monogamy). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Olga Khazan, “OKCupid Adds a Feature for the Polyamorous,” *The Atlantic Monthly*. [Online] January 8, 2016. Available: http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/01/ok-cupid-is-opening-up-to-polyamorous-relationships/423162. [January 8, 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Laurie Segall, “I have a Fiancé, A Girlfriend, and Two Boyfriends,” *CNN*. [Online] January 28, 2015. Available: http://money.cnn.com/2015/01/25/technology/polyamory-silicon-valley. [August 14, 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dalton Conley, *Elsewhere, U.S.A: How We Got from the Company Man, Family Dinners, and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms, and Economic Anxiety* (New York: Vintage), 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Meghan Laslocky, “Face it: Monogamy is Unnatural,” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gracie X, “Compersion: A Polyamorous Principle that Can Strengthen Any Relationship,” paragraph 5, *Huffington Post*. [Online] March 6, 2015. Available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gracie-x/compersion-a-polyamorous-principle-that-can-strengthen-any-relationship\_b\_6803868.html. [April 8, 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The gender gap in marital infidelity is narrowing, and in the NFSS it does not appear at all: 19 percent of women report having ever had a sexual relationship with someone else while married or cohabiting, while the same is true of 18 percent of men. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, and Peter J. Richerson, “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society (B)*, 367 (2012): 657-669. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Adshade, *Dollars and Sex*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Henrich, Boyd, and Richerson, “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage,” 666. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kassia Wosick-Correa, “Agreements, Rules, and Agentic Fidelity in Polyamorous Relationships,” *Psychology & Sexuality* 1 (2010): 44-61. The quote is from page \_\_. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Helen Epstein, *The Invisible Cure: Why We Are Losing the Fight Against AIDS in Africa* (New York: Picador, 2008); Vinod Mishra and Simona Bignami-Van Assche, “Concurrent Sexual Partnerships and HIV Infection: Evidence from National Population-Based Surveys” (Calverton, Maryland, USA: Macro International, 2009); Martina Morris and Mirjam Kretzschmar, “Concurrent Partnerships and the Spread of HIV,” *AIDS* 11 (1997): 641-648. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hakim, “Supply and Desire.” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Henrich, Boyd, and Richerson, “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)