

On Monogamy and Non-Monogamy As a Continuum

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Are monogamy and non-monogamy an either/or choice? Or is it more of a continuum?

I've been thinking a lot lately about monogamy and non-monogamy: mostly because of a recent post I wrote about it, and the subsequent comment conversation about that post. And I had an idea I wanted to toss out there. It's probably not original to me, I may well be re-inventing the wheel here: but I haven't seen it talked about a ton, and I think it could be useful.

The idea is this: Monogamy and non-monogamy are not an either/or choice. They're more of a continuum.

I think many of us tend to think of it more as either/or. We tend to think of people, and relationships, as either (a) monogamous or (b) non-monogamous. And we tend to see these as fundamentally different approaches to relationships, with fundamentally different philosophies behind them, and with a fairly sharp divide between them.

But people who call themselves monogamous, who are on the more monogamous end of the spectrum, will often have very different agreements about what does and doesn't fit into their definition of "monogamy." Does having cybersex fall within their monogamy agreement? What about going to a strip club? Enjoying the entertainment of a stripper at a bachelor or bachelorette party? If watching a stripper is okay... what about getting a lap dance? Is it okay to do these things alone, or just together as a couple? Is it okay to have threesomes? Some couples who see themselves as basically monogamous are fine with enjoying any or all of these activities. (I've even heard of couples who call themselves basically monogamous, who agree that if one of them is traveling, sex on the road "doesn't count.") Other couples consider some or all of these activities to be off-limits. Still others are so far on the monogamous end of this spectrum that they consider flirting with other people, watching porn, even masturbating, to be cheating.

And people who call themselves non-monogamous (or polyamorous, or poly, or open, or some other term — I'm using "non-monogamous" here to contrast it with "monogamous"), people who are on the more non-monogamous end of the spectrum, also often have very different ideas about what does and doesn't fit into their non-monogamy agreements. That's especially true for poly people in a primary or core relationship, with secondary or peripheral relationships outside it. Are certain kinds of sex off-limits outside the core relationship — such as penetration, or kink? Are there limits on how often you have sex with outside partners? Is it okay to have pretty much any kind of sex outside the core relationship, but not okay to spend the night? Is it okay to have outside sexual relationships, but not romantic ones? Outside romantic relationships, but not Capital-R Relationships? I've known lots and lots of non-monogamous folks in my day, and the ones who are in couples or other committed relationships have almost universally had some sort of agreements about what is and isn't okay outside the partnership. There may be poly couples and committed partnerships where everything goes and all bets are off... but if there are, I haven't met them.

In other words... well, I guess I'm just going to re-state the thesis here. Monogamy and non-monogamy are not an either/or choice. They're more of a continuum.

I think looking at it this way would help in a lot of ways. I think it would help monogamous couples — or rather, couples on the more monogamous end of the spectrum — to negotiate limits in their relationships. Most people still see monogamy as the default choice... and as is often the case with default choices, that choice tends to go unquestioned. I think if we saw monogamy/ non-monogamy as a continuum rather than an either/or choice, more couples

would be more likely to consider non-monogamy as an option. And if they do decide to be on the monogamous end of the spectrum, they'd be more likely to openly discuss and negotiate where exactly on that spectrum they'd like to be. When people reflexively assume that of course they're going to be monogamous, and therefore don't discuss that choice, they often assume that "monogamy" means the same thing to both of them — and this can have bad, sad consequences.

I also think this "spectrum" view would help monogamous people be more understanding and accepting of poly people. I think they'd be less inclined to see poly folks and poly relationships as radically different: as slutty, selfish, greedy, unable to commit, etc. I think they'd be more inclined to see us as people who just draw the lines about their relationships in a different place.

And I think this "spectrum" view would help many poly people — or rather, people on the more poly end of the spectrum — be more understanding and accepting of monogamous people as well. I've heard more than one poly person argue that polyamory is superior, that monogamy is unnatural and unhealthy, that jealousy is irrational, and so on. And I've heard more than one poly person give lip service to the idea that monogamy is a valid choice, while being obviously judgmental of people who make that choice. This isn't universal, but it's all too common. And I think seeing monogamy and non-monogamy as a continuum rather than a sharp divide could alleviate this. Again, I think it might make poly people less likely to see monogamy as radically different, and more inclined to see monogamists as people who just draw the line in a different place. After all, if you and your partner have a "no kink outside the relationship" agreement, or a "no sleeping over outside the relationship" agreement... is that really so much more obviously rational and healthy than a "no sex outside the relationship" agreement?

I don't think we need to completely replace our language about this with "more on the monogamous end of the spectrum" or "more on poly end of the spectrum." (Which, admittedly, is pretty cumbersome.) I don't think we need to entirely get rid of identifying ourselves and our relationships as "monogamous" or "non-monogamous/ polyamorous/ open/ etc." After all, sexual identity is a continuum too, and we still (mostly) accept people calling themselves gay or straight, even if they're not on the absolute far ends of the Kinsey scale. And I think a case could be made that the far ends of this spectrum actually are pretty different: that having an open relationship with almost nothing that's off-limits is pretty damn different than a relationship where even flirting with other people is verboten. The way that, for many people, being overwhelmingly gay or overwhelmingly straight feel pretty significantly different.

I just think that... okay, restating the thesis again. Monogamy and non-monogamy are not an either/or choice. They're more of a continuum. And I think looking at it this way could be helpful. I think it could help people discuss their agreements about their own relationships more openly, and make decisions that are more uniquely tailored to work better for them. And I think it could help monogamous and poly people be less judgmental of each other.