Chapter 2

Historical, Biological, Social, Cultural, and Psychological Aspects of Non-Traditional Arrangements: Understanding Consensual Non-Monogamy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines consensual non-monogamy (CNM) from a variety of theoretical perspectives. The historical roots of marriage are traced to examine how society at large has shifted and come to view monogamy as the “typical” and acceptable approach to relationships, when this was not always the case. An examination of the biological evidence surrounding non-monogamy is presented in hopes of determining if we as a species are truly hard-wired to live a monogamous lifestyle. The psychological perspective is presented to examine the mental benefits and deficits faced by those in non-traditional relationships. Finally, the social and cultural components of non-monogamy are explored to highlight the various relationship structures commonly practiced, as well as the rules often abided by. This information will provide the reader with a clear picture of what non-monogamous relationships are and how these configurations impact the individual, as well as influence society as a whole.

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INTRODUCTION

The need to belong is a basic human drive, and as such, we have a pervasive desire to form and maintain lasting, positive relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Relationships are important for our overall well-being. Researchers have shown that marriage can boost self-esteem and lead to a positive sense of self, as married individuals report greater subjective well-being than individuals who were never married, divorced, separated or widowed (Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Beyond the emotional benefits, marital relationships also serve as buffers against stress (Maestripieri, Klimeczuk, Seneczko, Traficante, & Wilson, 2013), and stronger marital quality is associated with better health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles, Satcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014). In addition, married individuals are generally healthier, both physically and psychologically, overall suffering from lower rates of substance abuse and depression (Stutzer & Frey, 2006; Waite, Luo, & Lewin, 2009).

Most research highlighting the benefits resulting from social bonds focuses on marriage; however, recent literature has extended the benefits derived from those in marriages to people in stable relationships. Research has shown that individuals in romantic relationships report more happiness than those who are not (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Khaleque & Rohner, 2004). While the extension of research has sparked interest in this area, a major shortcoming is that most work focuses on the traditional and “typical” monogamous relationship. Other types of configurations are largely ignored, thus approaching relationships from a mono-normative perspective.

Non-monogamous relationships are often discussed in mainstream media, however research on these configurations is far behind. Zimmerman (2012) notes that research on open relationships is sparse, despite the fact that these structural partnerships have existed for centuries. Conley, Moors, Matsick, and Ziegler (2013) also note that little empirical research has focused on consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships, despite gaining attention in the popular press. Also, when non-monogamous relationships are discussed, they are described as being unstable and even psychologically damaging (Conley, Moors, et al., 2013). The sparse research that is out there also primarily centers on the male homosexual community (Hoff, Beougher, Chakravarty, Darbes, & Neilands, 2010; Hosking, 2013; Parsons, Starks, DuBois, Grov, & Golub, 2013).

Weitzman, Davidson, and Phillips (2009) note that there are many reasons why people are looking for new models of intimacy. One factor is longer human lifespans, which make it unrealistic to enforce decades of sexual and emotional exclusivity. The second factor is high divorce and infidelity rates, which demonstrate that traditional views of love and marriage may not work in practice. Many people are dissatisfied with serial monogamy, and as such would like to open up and expand their relationship horizons. The social equality of women is the third factor, as shifting gender roles have changed the game of courtship. Fourth and finally, the explosion of the internet has resulted in the spread of knowledge and sex-positive attitudes regarding alternative lifestyles. All of these factors are providing valuable information and enabling people greater choice in how they conduct their sexual and romantic lives.

Despite the growth of outlets offering sex-positive information, there is still a stigma surrounding non-monogamous relationships. As a result of this, the prevalence of these configurations is difficult to determine and the number of people engaging in non-monogamous relationships is unclear. Researchers have estimated that approximately 4% of participants identify as consensually non-monogamous (CNM), though this information was predominantly gathered through self-reported answers, and thus may underestimate the true percentage (Conley, Moors, Matsick & Ziegler, unpublished data; Moors, Conley, Edelstein & Chopik, in press, as cited in Conley, Moors, et al., 2013). The Polyamory Group Registry,