

It's Only a Matter of Time: Insights for Helping Professionals Working with Non-Monogamous Clients

D J Williams and Jeremy N. Thomas

Idaho State University and Center for Positive Sexuality (Los Angeles)

Introduction

Despite American cultural norms that continue to privilege monogamy, researchers have reported that there are high numbers of people who openly or secretly practice polyamory and various other forms of non-monogamy (Sheff, 2013; Weitzman, 2006). Furthermore, Frank and DeLamater (2009) observed that often “monogamy” is erroneously homogenized, even in academic and professional contexts. In contrast to common monolithic interpretations, Frank and DeLamater found that there are diverse ways that monogamy is negotiated and practiced among couples in committed, long-term relationships, thus simple dichotomizations (monogamous or non-monogamous) fail to reflect the rich diversity of relationship practices, beliefs, and experiences.

Polyamory, of course, is also complex and diverse. In a recent thorough review of the literature on polyamory, Klesse (2014) found that polyamory has been interpreted as an intimate practice, a relationship orientation or style, an identity, and a sexual orientation. Regarding the latter, Klesse warned that while framing polyamory within the trappings of essentialism may have initial appeal for some, such a rigid framing could serve to undermine the rights of polyamorous individuals rather than protecting them. Once again, academics and professionals must learn to grapple with navigating the nuances and complexities of individuals’ diverse needs, practices, and preferences regarding intimacy and relationships.

Research on non-monogamy and polyamory is rapidly growing across the social sciences (e.g., Barker, 2005; Barker & Langdrige, 2010, 2011; Frank, 2013; Jenks, 2014; Klesse, 2014; Sheff, 2013; Sheff & Hammers, 2011), including a special issue on the topic in the journal *Sexualities* (Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006). However, despite increased attention by scholars to the diversity and complexities of various forms of relationships, along with pointing out fallacies associated with oversimplifying and making assumptions based on traditional norms, the helping professions have been very slow to incorporate such scholarship.

When Helping Professionals Harm Clients

Several scholars have observed that people in non-monogamous relationships function just as well, psychologically, as those in more traditional relationship styles; and, while there are challenges to non-monogamy, there are also significant potential benefits (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Sheff, 2013; Weitzman et al., 2009). However, many professionals continue to project, unknowingly, their social and cultural biases onto clients who prefer nontraditional relationship styles. Indeed, a study conducted by Knapp (1975) found that a third of marriage counselors in the sample believed that people in open

relationships had some form of psychopathology that was associated with their nontraditional relationship preferences.

More recently, Graham (2014) discussed a case where a bisexual, polyamorous woman sought psychiatric treatment for depressive disorder, yet her psychiatrist mistakenly attributed her mental health condition to her relationship preference. The client felt misunderstood and judged by her mental health provider, but began withdrawing from her poly community. Subsequently, she felt like her social support had deteriorated, and her depression worsened. After switching to different mental health treatment providers who were well-educated regarding sexual and relationship diversity, this client was able to establish a good working alliance with clinicians, was reconnected with her poly community, and her mental health condition was effectively treated. Unfortunately, training on alternative relationships remains virtually nonexistent in educational curricula for helping professionals, though this glaring need is becoming more widely recognized (Barker, 2011; Brandon, 2011; Graham, 2014; Weitzman et al, 2009; Williams & Prior, 2015).

Becoming More Open: Linear and Therapeutic Constructions of Time

Despite the need for clinicians to become more open and accepting of clients' diverse relationship styles and preferences, some helping professionals may have difficulty doing so (see Ribner, 2011; Williams, 2015). Of course, more training and becoming familiar with scholarship on alternative relationships can help substantially. It should also be remembered that effective communication and acting ethically (such as honesty, openness, negotiating boundaries, etc.) are key ingredients for all healthy relationships, regardless of their particular structures (Easton & Hardy, 2009; Weitzman et al., 2009).

In addition, an interesting insight that is often overlooked, yet one that may be very helpful to those who are struggling to become more open and accepting of non-monogamous relationships, is to remember that concepts and meanings of time are culturally constructed. This is important because many of the critiques and perceived challenges of non-monogamy can be addressed by thinking through the distinctions between commitments of time and commitments to multiple partners. When many people think about polyamory, the focus is on number of partners. However, the concept of time, which is just as relevant, is frequently overlooked. Common traditional relationships tend to be serially monogamous; that is, many Americans have had multiple committed relationships (including marriages), just not necessarily at the same time. A serially monogamous individual may have three partners, consecutively, over a span of several years; whereas, a polyamorous relationship may include the same number of partners simultaneously over that same length of time. Obviously, a major difference between the two is associated with time and not the number of partners.

Godbey (2016) recently reported that "Every living thing on earth has its own sense of time as part of its genetic endowment" (p. 253). In summarizing scholarship on time, Godbey emphasized that in ancient and primitive societies, time "was a circle within which humans lived" (p. 253), and it was associated with natural environmental events, such as the passing of seasons, orbits of the sun and moon, and the ebb and flow of tides. Furthermore, diverse cultures understand time differently, and thus have different relationships with it.

Godbey (2016) refers to the work of philosopher J. T. Fraser, an expert on the study of time, in noting that as societies modernized, time became linear, and also a finite commodity. As science and technology rapidly increased, then “time became the ultimate organizing mechanism of the modern world—the ultimate scarce commodity (Godbey, 2016, p. 254).

Many therapists commonly assume, consistent within cultures of industrialized societies, that time is linear (proceeding from past, to present, to future), yet simultaneously realize that, in therapeutic contexts, linear segments of past and present are both quite messily intermingled as present. When the latter therapeutic interpretation of time predominates, any real difference between serial monogamy and polyamory disappears. The point of this discussion, of course, is to show that although non-monogamy may seem unusual or strange to some, its perceived strangeness lies in specific cultural constructions of time.

In contemporary practice, more fully recognizing the implications of time is important. While one of the common critiques of polyamory is that individuals in such relationships must necessarily share their limited time and energy across multiple partners, it is essential to recognize that polyamory may actually be more able to provide the flexibility that can allow and promote long-term relationships. Indeed, as monogamy focuses one’s time on just one partner, such a relationship is typically assessed in terms of the immediate quality and benefit of that relationship—and if the relationship is judged as inadequate in some manner, there is a strong incentive to end the relationship and move on. In contrast, polyamory trades the singular focus on one partner for a more diffuse experience of relational time that can better allow for the ways that relationships with specific partners may change and develop, as well as ebb and flow. In doing so, polyamory provides a distinct but just as meaningful experience of relational time—an experience where time and energy spent with a given partner can accumulate over the long haul and thus be less subject to the immediate constraints of one’s time and energy and the judgments which may proceed from the realization of those constraints. Of course, the style of relationship that a client chooses to participate in, whether monogamous or non-monogamous, should be a product of that client’s ethical right to self-determination, which helping professionals should ultimately respect.

Conclusion

While there has been increased attention by scholars to non-monogamous relationships in contemporary western societies, such research has not been integrated into educational and training programs across the helping professions. Subsequently, clients who prefer alternative relationships and lifestyles are at risk for incurring harm by well-meaning helping professionals. Professionals should recognize that there are diverse ways that healthy functioning relationships may be structured, and that both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships can be designed and negotiated differently by those within them.

While there are excellent resources available to help professionals understand and work effectively with non-monogamous clients, including work cited herein¹, it may be helpful for clinicians to recognize that common interpretations of both “healthy

relationships” and “time” have strong roots in cultural constructions. Thus, professionals who may struggle to become more open to nontraditional relationships are encouraged to assess critically both of the above concepts. Regarding time, helping professionals may explore different ways that “past” and “present” may be constituted and interrelated. Indeed, there exists considerable complexity and diversity in all forms of relationships, the natural and social environments that we inhabit, and the temporal dimension of human life.

Note:¹ Two particularly valuable resources cited here are: Weitzman and colleagues (2009) and Easton and Hardy (2009).

References

- Barker, M. (2005). This is my partner, and this is my...partner's partner: Constructing a polyamorous identity in a monogamous world. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 18*, 75-88.
- Barker, M., & Langdridge, D. (2010, Eds.). *Understanding non-monogamies*. London, England: Routledge.
- Barker, M., & Langdridge, D. (2011). Whatever happened to non-monogamies? Critical reflections on recent research and theory. *Sexualities, 13*, 748-772.
- Brandon, M. (2011). The challenge of monogamy: Bringing it out of the closet and into the treatment room. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 26*, 271-277.
- Easton, D., & Hardy, J. W. (2009). *The ethical slut: A practical guide to polyamory, open relationships and other adventures*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts.
- Frank, K. (2013). *Plays well in groups: A journey through the world of group sex*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Frank, K., & DeLameter, J. (2009). Deconstructing monogamy: Boundaries, identities, and fluidities across relationships. In M. Barker & D. Langdridge (Eds.), *Understanding non-monogamies* (pp. 9-20). London, England: Routledge.
- Godbey, G. (2016). Trends in time for leisure. In G. J. Walker, D. Scott, & M. Stodolska (Eds.), *Leisure matters: The state and future of leisure studies* (pp. 253-258). State College, PA: Venture.
- Graham, N. (2014). Polyamory: A call for increased mental health professional awareness. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 43*, 1031-1034.
- Haritaworn, J., Lin, C., & Klesse, C. (2006, Eds.). *Sexualities, 9*(5).
- Jenks, R. J. (2014). An online survey comparing swingers and polyamorists. In *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality, 17*.
- Klesse, C. (2014). Polyamory: Intimate practice, identity, or sexual orientation? *Sexualities, 17*, 81-99.
- Knapp, J. J. (1975). Some non-monogamous marriage styles and related attitudes and practices of marriage counselors. *Family Coordinator, 24*, 505-514.
- Ribner, D. S. (2011). A response to “The challenge of monogamy: Bringing it out of the closet and into the treatment room” by Marianne Brandon. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 26*, 278-280.
- Sheff, E. (2013). *The polyamorists next door*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sheff, E., & Hammers, C. (2011). The privilege of perversities: Race, class and education among polyamorists and kinksters. *Psychology & Sexuality, 2*, 198-223.
- Weitzman, G. (2006). Therapy with clients who are bisexual and polyamorous. *Journal of Bisexuality, 6*, 137-164.
- Weitzman, G., Davidson, J., & Phillips, R. A. (2009). *What psychology professionals should know about polyamory*. Baltimore, MD: National Coalition for Sexual Freedom.
- Williams, D J (2015). Does social work need a good spanking? The refusal to embrace BDSM scholarship and implications for sexually diverse clients. *Journal of Positive Sexuality, 1*, 37-41.
- Williams, D J, & Prior, E. E. (2015). Contemporary polyamory: A call for awareness and sensitivity in social work. *Social Work* (Advance Access).