

# **The Power Dynamics of Cheating: Effects on Polyamory and Bisexuality**

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## **Abstract**

*Rampant scorn of cheating is used to reinforce monogamy in our culture. The author argues that cheating and monogamy are interdependent, and should be addressed together, since each position in a cheating situation provides scripted opportunities for personal power. He also observes that the tools of cultural conformity that are used against cheaters will also be deployed against both polyamory and bisexuality. Simply denying the conceptual link between cheating and polyamory or between cheating and bisexuality will not prevent this. Polyamorous people need to emphasize the relationship between monogamy and cheating. Finally, he suggests that bisexuals need to use new forms of visible nonmonogamy to create visible bisexuality. Polyamory and bisexuality are conceptually connected through a common oppression, so activism that aids one community will inadvertently aid the other.*

## **Keywords**

Monogamy, cheating, polyamory, bisexuality, monosexuality, duality, adultery

## **1. Introduction**

My purpose in this article is to unearth the relationship between cheating and power. In the first section, I describe the cultural treatment of cheating in the United States. The following section argues that the construction of cheating forms part of a monogamous system of enforcement. Following that, I lay out the power dynamics of cheating on a personal level, establishing the cheating dynamic as a tool of interpersonal power. The “Cheating and Polyamory” section delineates the ways that the cheating construction and the cheating dynamic are used to hamper polyamory. The “Cheating and Bisexuality” section does the same for bisexuality, drawing connections from the cheating construction to the invisibility of bisexuality. The final section notes that bisexuality and polyamory share a common opposition in the cheating dynamic, and concludes that joining conceptual forces is critical for the political success of both communities.

## **2. The Cultural Response to Cheating**

Cheating and cheaters are almost universally disdained in our culture. Self-help books, talk shows, tabloids, and big Hollywood productions all agree: cheating is bad. Cheaters and adulterers are dishonest, sick individuals who need to be dumped, divorced, or at the minimum castigated. Cheaters need to change the error of their ways.

I generally agree that cheating is dishonest. However, I think that there is a lot more to cheating than bad behavior and its consequences. Specifically, the cultural response to cheating is more self-serving than it is righteous.

### **I. Cheating is Commonplace and Expected**

Cheating in the US is like smoking weed in California: it's definitely against the rules, and it could land you in serious trouble, but nobody is surprised when they find out you've been doing it. This is because a significant portion of the population cheats. Everyone knows someone who has cheated or has been cheated on, or both. At various points, surveys have confirmed that cheating is a culture-wide occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

The act of cheating is what I call an "expected failure." It is well-scripted by the media and the culture at large: people know how to cheat, what happens when you cheat, and how other folks are supposed to react. A person who cheats is not doing anything particularly revolutionary (in an ideological sense), but rather following an over-determined plan fed to them by movies, television, and their acquaintances.

In other words, our culture condemns cheating while providing people with enough information and role models to make the act of cheating conceptually and emotionally easy. Seen this way, cheating is at its base a normal act and the people who do it are normal people, even though they are not behaving as the cultural norms say they should.

### **II. Cheating as a Spectacle**

Our culture and media create a circus spectacle of cheating. For example, think of Clinton's Oval Office and the stains on the dress. Tabloids do the same thing on a weekly basis. Movies unceasingly address cheating and adultery as a major plot device. However, none of these

compare with the assault of infidelity brought to us by talk shows and reality shows like *Temptation Island*.

The same spectacularization is carried out on an interpersonal level. When people discuss relationships, their assessment of the likelihood of cheating is often included. Knowledge of actual cheating spreads through a social group like wildfire. People in relationships consult with outside experts such as counselors and private detectives when they are suspicious of cheating or after a cheating drama has unfolded. The constant discussion around cheating keeps it fresh in everyone's mind, creating a sustained level of fear and vigilance.

The reason we raise a common sin to high theatre is to provide an example of what not to do. The visible re-enactment of the cheating drama names a common temptation, draws a supposedly typical person into that temptation, and then lays out the terrible results of their fall from grace. The spectacle of the discovered cheater or adulterer is a modern morality play, with a fairly fixed script that is endlessly reused. In this spectacle, the cheater plays the common cultural part of the demonized other, a yardstick that normal people can measure their morals against. Like other systems of demonization, this one operates by naming the outsider ("cheater") and leaving the normative behavior un-named and unexamined. In order to describe people who are not cheaters, we have to make up nouns like "cheatee" or "monogamist."

It is the ubiquity of this spectacle that makes it into an effective morality tool. People watch repetitive cheating plots on television not because they are entertained, but because they are moralizing. The cheating script is so well established that when the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal broke, everyone knew what to do. Bill Clinton knew that he should apologize tearfully, Hillary knew that she should forgive him equally tearfully, and the Congressmen knew that they should descend like zealous missionaries on a moral quest. With everyone behaving as they should, the public was satisfied, even though we have no idea what really happened in the Clintons' relationship.

Talk shows and other forms of public spectacle can therefore praise and reinforce monogamy without even mentioning it. They do this by endlessly condemning its opposite. This is the common cultural trick of validating a cultural norm by interrogating and demeaning violations of the norm, and it has been used throughout the last century to implicitly praise heterosexuality (by condemning homosexuality), sex for procreation only (by pathologizing all other sexual acts), and white people (by maintaining focus on the problems of non-white people), to name a few examples.

### **III. Cheaters Are Marked and Punished**

A discovered adulterer faces very real social and economic consequences. Divorce law in many states punishes adultery, through financial settlements and the removal of children. Unmarried cheaters do not have as many legal repercussions, but often face social disapproval and the economic problems associated with breaking up.

Worse, cheating is often understood to signify an essential moral weakness. Once a person has cheated, we expect them to do it again, or we expect them to have to fight the temptation from that point onward. In this manner a cheater is marked for life. This marking is not as strong as others used in our culture (like "homosexual" or "drug addict"), but the act

of cheating is attached to the person and their body (through imagined uncontrollable lust) in a very similar manner.

### **3. The Monogamy/Cheating System**

#### **I. The Conceptual Apparatus of Cheating Enforces Monogamous Standards**

Monogamy needs cheating in a fundamental way. In addition to serving as the demonized opposite of monogamy, the mark of the cheater is used as a threat to push individuals to conform to monogamous behavior and monogamous appearances.

Actual sexual behavior is just the beginning of this enforcement. The appearance of monogamy is very important in our culture, and we generally feel the need to maintain a certain monogamous decorum in view of friends and acquaintances (in addition to the actual partner). The purpose of this decorum is to avoid gossip, scorn, scandal, and possibly exposure to the partner. (In my experience, the social group is often more critical than the monogamous partner.) The actual level and manner of imposed self-restriction varies greatly depending on the social circle and situation, but our culture attaches sexual or romantic meaning to a whole host of actions that are not explicitly sexual or romantic. Some of these actions are: traveling with a person, spending a lot of time with one person at a party, helping someone financially, talking about someone when they are not present, spending time alone with someone, meeting their parents, holding hands, and of course flirting, touching, or smiling too much. All of these actions are signifiers of a possible sexual relationship in our culture, and this is what makes them socially dangerous. In order to avoid a sexual subtext, a person in a monogamous relationship must act carefully if they are with someone of an attractive gender who is not their partner. Through this mechanism, the social control of monogamy escapes the bedroom and inserts itself into everyday situations, by policing not just sexual activity but any activity that symbolizes the possibility of sex.

Monogamy is thus a locus through which social power is exercised, one of a number of such loci which are ostensibly based in the body but really act almost entirely through social discourse. The cultural ideas of cheating and adultery do one portion the work of enforcing monogamy; the other portion is accomplished through jealousy.

#### **II. Cheating and Monogamy: A False Duality**

Our culture sets us up with a false choice: we are faithful or we are cheating. Both options are highly scripted and allow the operation of power through restrictions. However, this false choice hides the fact that monogamy and cheating form a single ideological system, and it is possible to step outside of the system. In fact, ideological resistance to monogamy often takes the form of a repudiation of the entire system, by denying both the monogamist and cheater roles. Lesbian communes in the seventies, gay male subcultures, sex radicals, bisexual communities, and polyamorous people have all accomplished a certain distancing from both monogamy and cheating.

Western (specifically U.S.) culture is laden with false identity dualities of this nature: man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, black/white, virgin/whore, etc. The monogamist/cheater duality is not as strongly based in identity as some of these, but the false duality forms a single power-infused system in a manner similar to other systems (the system

of race, the sex/gender system, the system of sexuality, the madonna/whore complex). Each one of these systems has a false unexamined assumption at its core. The monogamy/infidelity system is based on the assumption that sexual fidelity is natural and always desirable.

Because monogamy and cheating are oppositional choices, they are conceptually interdependent and cannot be successfully addressed independently. They represent two sides of the same coin, one shiny and one tarnished.

Resistance to dualistic systems of power can take the form of addressing the power inequality (feminism, the civil rights movement, slut pride) or it can try to expose and jettison the entire system (the transgender movement, bisexuality, lesbian separatism). We have seen both forms make up the resistance to the monogamist/cheater system. Polyamory seeks to rewrite the rules inherent to the system. The emergent “down low” identity seeks to put a positive and sexy spin on unsanctioned sex.<sup>2</sup> Websites such as the Ashley Madison Agency<sup>3</sup> do the same for women. Certain sexual identities, such as bisexuality, carry inherent resistance to monogamy as part of their very definition. By acknowledging more than one desire, bisexuality makes a lie of the monogamous myth of a single object of sexual desire.

## **4. Interpersonal Power Dynamics in the Monogamy/Cheating System**

### **I. It takes two to cheat.**

The second person is the "cheatee", the person who is cheated on.

At a personal level, the drama of cheating requires that the cheatee is hurt or offended in some way. If the original partner does not care what their lover does, then it is hard to create blame in a situation where no one is hurt, though the social circle surrounding the couple may consider the arrangement weird, scandalous, or just a bad idea. (Note that the culture at large still considers such arrangements to be cheating, even when everyone is knowledgeable and happy with the situation.) While social scorn is definitely powerful stuff, it can be ignored. The full pain of the cheating experience requires that the cheatee feel dismayed, betrayed, jealous, and so on. In this manner the monogamy/cheating system relies on the role of monogamist (or cheatee) to ensure that the actual cheating experience matches its depiction in the media as painful and damaging.

The role of monogamist or cheatee is largely unexamined in our society, in order to protect it from criticism. Once we make monogamous people visible, it becomes possible to address monogamy directly. Any assault on the monogamist/cheater power system requires a critique of this invisible yet empowered role.

### **II. Cheating as a Way to Take Power and Create Personal Happiness**

So far I have discussed cultural and personal responses to cheating, but I have left the cheater unexamined. I believe that every action a person takes is for a good reason involving personal gain, and cheating is no exception.

Cheaters get their cake and get to eat it too. In addition to the physical and emotional fun of an outside affair, cheaters retain the privileges and trappings of monogamy. (I believe

that this win/win situation is the "cheating" that cheating actually refers to. The cheater is actually cheating the rules of monogamy itself.) The retained benefits include the monogamous intensity of the primary relationship, the social privileges of the relationship, and the social privileges and validation accorded to the appearance of monogamy. Though most people would like to think that cheating always takes the form of a short-term affair, cheating situations can actually last years, decades, or a lifetime, so the cheater may actually reap their benefits for quite some time. The actual experience of cheating can be very different from its media portrayal as a dead-end disaster.

The idea that cheating is always temporary and unstable helps cheaters maintain a monogamous identity even in the face of their own nonmonogamy. Presenting cheating as part of a choosing process allows the cheater to be read as essentially monogamous even when they are not acting monogamous. Using cheating as a mechanism for reading monogamy into nonmonogamous situations conveniently returns cheaters to monogamy. So if a cheater simply refutes one of their relationships or claims to be in the process of choosing, they can avoid being marked as morally suspect, even when exposed.

In addition, the act of being exposed as a cheater (or more often, self-exposing) actually carries its own power benefits. It can be used as an emotional bludgeon or a reminder that leaving the relationship is possible. Possible future cheating is often used as a threat to coerce behavior.

If a cheater is unmarried and childless, they can usually avoid the worst legal consequences of cheating. Often cheatees are just as scared to expose the affair as cheaters, due to the social pity and scandal that will be heaped upon them, and because the other benefits they receive from the relationship outweigh the power gain from exposure. While the outside affair typically ends at exposure, the cheater can pick up a new one or revive the old one and start the cycle over again.

So we should not be surprised at the culture-wide prevalence of cheating: while it is officially condemned, it constitutes an available and well-scripted grab for personal power and pleasure. Media depictions of cheaters assume that most or all cheaters are men, but women and men actually have outside affairs at a similar rate.<sup>4</sup>

A political move against the monogamist/cheater system should address the failings of cheating as well as the inherent weaknesses of monogamy. However, criticizing cheaters as dishonest or bad people is not an effective way to do this, because it serves to reinforce the system itself. Rather, cheaters should be located within the system that makes cheating advantageous, in order to expose the underlying problems of monogamy.

### **III. It Takes Three to Cheat**

The third person is the "other woman" or "other man." (I will just refer to the "other lover".) The very name of this position implies both an outsider quality and a competitive aspect. The other lover is generally frowned upon by our culture, in a manner somewhat similar to cheaters. (For example, the term "adulterer" can be applied to either a cheater or the other lover.) The suspense and horror sections of the video store are full of movies whose plots revolve around an encroachment by a lover, usually a woman. The other lover typically ends up dead or confined in these movies. In short, the other lover is generally stigmatized on a culture-wide level.

In a system of monogamy, any three-person situation is assumed to be unstable and short-term. Therefore, our culture considers a cheating situation to embody a competition between the faithful partner and the other lover. To the extent that the affair is successful or continues, the outside lover is seen as "winning", and the primary relationship is losing. If the affair is halted, the primary relationship wins, and the other lover loses. The end goal of the affair (and of the other lover) is supposedly to end the primary relationship and establish the affair as the new primary relationship. In other words, affairs are seen as an attempt to steal the cheating person.

In this manner, the outside lover has a certain prestige linked to their ability to attract the cheater and maintain the affair. The outside lover gains personal power as the cheater turns towards them, and loses it as they turn away. It is this power to steal or compete that makes the other lover a somewhat attractive position in the cultural imagination.

In conjunction with this accorded power, the stigma of the other lover is much more forgiving than that of cheater. In our culture, the other lover is not necessarily marked as morally weak or corrupt, as the cheater is. They are seen as taking actions that are reasonable or understandable, though still bad. The affair is not so much their fault as it is the fault of the cheater. The culture recognizes the other lover role as a legitimate power grab. Aside from the occasional "loss of companionship" lawsuit, there are no legal repercussions to being the other lover.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the other lover is well-scripted by our culture (and not entirely negatively) and therefore forms a real alternative relationship position, albeit one that is simultaneously demonized by the culture that acknowledges it.

#### **IV. The Monogamy/Cheating System and the False Duality Between Couples and Three-Person Cheating Situations**

The other lover role, along with the cheater and monogamist roles, forms a lopsided V-structure relationship format. The monogamy/cheating ideological system simultaneously acknowledges the possibility of this three-person situation and (often falsely) characterizes it as unstable, short-term, competitive, and painful for everyone involved. The stigmatized V-structure is cast as the only alternative to the normative couple, and it is used as an example of what couples should not do.

The monogamy/cheating system is therefore setting these two relationship models in opposition (as a second false duality). Monogamy gives us only one model for a three-person situation, and it is not a pretty one.

It should be noted that four-person relationships (often called quads in poly terminology) and larger group arrangements fall prey to the same stereotyping. Any larger arrangement (or a fully connected triad) can be broken down into multiple V-structures, each of which can be separately cast as a problematic (cheating) V-structure. In other words, mainstream culture does not really address large and complex relationship structures directly, but instead breaks them into smaller components for consideration. These smaller pieces are then compared directly to the cheating dynamic.

Any three-person or larger situation is viewed as having unbearable and destabilizing internal tensions, even if no such tensions actually exist. In this manner the monogamy/cheating duality is used to stigmatize any nonmonogamous arrangement, even structures that do not resemble the cheating V-structure.



## **V. Polyamory and Bisexuality Provide Three-Person Structures Not Modeled on Cheating**

Polyamory gives us other positive models for three-person relationships, and these models break this false duality. The V-structure, the simple fact of one person loving two (or more) other people, can be seen as the basis from which all polyamorous arrangements spring. Much of the difficulty and the reward of polyamory is that it seeks to reclaim the stigmatized V-structure as cooperative, long-term, and positive for everyone involved.

Bisexuality provides another alternative V-structure, but this one is based in desire. By definition, a bisexual has the ability to desire more than one gender. Because desire is heavily based in gender object choice, this implies that bisexuals have the ability to desire more than one sort of person. These multiple desire possibilities can be conceptualized as a V of desire, with the two points of the V representing desire for men and women. In his book *The Bisexual Option*, Fritz Klein refers to this as “dual sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, the desires of actual bisexuals are much more complex and interesting than this simple representation, and this simple V does not address the possibility of transgendered object choices. However, mainstream culture almost always imagines bisexual desire as forked because it the easiest way to compare bisexuality to heterosexual monogamy. Because monogamous heterosexuality is one gender/one desire/one partner, monogamous heterosexual people will conceptualize bisexuality as two genders/two desires/two partners.

The ability to desire more than one gender therefore implies that it is done simultaneously. Mainstream culture always imagines bisexuality as involving simultaneous relationships with at least one man and one woman, forming a relationship V. While this is very different from the way bisexuals actually live their lives, this mainstream assumption means that bisexuality always carries connotations of nonmonogamy.

When bisexuality and nonmonogamy are actually combined, another alternative structure emerges: the erotic triangle. The erotic triangle is not just a collection of other V-structures, but is also a basic relationship structure in its own right, somewhat divorced from the mainstream culture’s couple-based models. Bisexual and homosexual polyamorists have been taking advantage of this, forming triads and larger interconnected relationships. These triangles always stand in opposition to cheating dynamics, as they can be seen as healing the rivalry between the cheatee and the other lover.<sup>7</sup>

## **5. Cheating and Polyamory**

### **I. Polyamory and the Monogamy/Cheating System**

The maintenance of false dualities depends on their ability to relegate any ambiguous behavior (or appearance) to the negative category. The monogamy/cheating duality is no exception; any behavior that is not clearly monogamy can be considered cheating, even if it does not fit the formal definition of cheating.

This is the conceptual trap that polyamory falls into. While it is fairly rare for someone to outright claim that polyamory is always cheating, mainstream culture will deal with polyamory as if it were cheating at any particular level: in the media, in the legal system, in social interactions, and even within personal relationships. For example, surveys on adultery

or cheating rarely differentiate between approved extra-relationship sex and illicit extra-relationship sex, considering any such sex to constitute cheating.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, divorce laws generally do not distinguish between sanctioned and unsanctioned extramarital sex in their definitions of adultery.

At the social (or media) level, people who know polyamorists will typically assume that there exists some level of tension between the various relationships. This assumption is an implicit comparison to the cheater's V-structure relationship. If there is no pre-existing tension between relationships in a polyamorous situation, then this assumption by outsiders constitutes a social pressure to create tension. The social pressure shows itself when a monogamous person discovers that their friend's relationship includes a third partner, and immediately asks, "Well how does [the partner they know about] feel about this?" Other assumptions, like the assumption of a hierarchy of relationships, occur when observers equate polyamory with cheating. Each one of these assumptions creates pressure for its own ratification. In this way, the implicit social comparison of polyamory to cheating attempts to re-create the power dynamics of cheating (and therefore monogamy) within polyamorous relationships.

The pressure to imitate cheating power dynamics can come from inside a polyamorous relationship as well as from outside. Polyamorists, as members of the culture, have access to all of the conceptual power mechanisms available in the cheating V-structure, and often use them. While polyamorists usually do not identify with the monogamy/cheating system, they can easily internalize the dynamics of the cheating situation. The practice of polyamory requires that poly people constantly resist this internalization.

Polyamorous culture and publications are not necessarily immune to this internalization, either. I consider the heavy focus on primary/secondary arrangements in poly discussions to reflect an inherent comparison with the cheating V-structure.<sup>9</sup> Also, the common assumption that polyamory is somehow essentially more difficult than monogamy seems to be based in the assumption of power dynamics similar to those found in cheating situations.<sup>10</sup>

## **II. Legal and Financial Penalties of Cheating and Polyamory**

Child custody laws and fault-based divorce are two legal avenues through which nonmonogamy of any sort can be punished. In the case of divorce, it is possible to lose child custody or monetary awards through sleeping around. Even outside of divorce, unfit parent laws can be used to remove a child from the home of a polyamorist. This has already happened, to someone who agreed to be interviewed for a television documentary.<sup>11</sup> Any form of poly visibility will generally be followed by similar legal attacks.

A lack of discrimination laws is another concern. Right now it is legal to discriminate based on sexual or relationship behavior in most states. Coming out as poly can result in the loss of a job or housing, with no recourse.

Changing this legal situation should be a priority of the polyamorous movement. However, the current laws are based on the assumptions of the monogamy/cheating system, and those assumptions must be altered before the laws can be changed.

## **III. The Success of the Polyamory Movement and its Escape of the Cheating Label**

So long as polyamorists are placed within the monogamous/cheating duality, they will be forced to re-enact the cultural scripts of cheating. Polyamory itself is an attempt to create a valid third option, in the ideological space between the two existing options. To leave the negative side of the duality, poly people either need to expand the definition of monogamy or restrict the definition of cheating. Both routes have been attempted, but because monogamy is overly restricted and cheating is so vague, they have had more luck redefining cheating.

The poly movement is taking advantage of a conceptual disparity between one particular definition of cheating (rule breaking or dishonesty) and its general usage (any nonmonogamous act). In other words, polyamorists are saying, "if no one lies, it isn't cheating." Even though most people will agree, this is still a radical step, because it forces the culture to consider the feelings of the relationship members in addition to the actual physical acts.

Polyamorists often push the redefinition project on a personal level by disparaging cheating or cheaters. A polyamorist who puts down cheating is implicitly saying "I am not a cheater" and therefore "polyamory is not cheating". A monogamist who says "cheating is bad" is usually implicitly including polyamorists, and is therefore using a different definition than a polyamorist who says the same thing. The focus on extreme forms of honesty in polyamorous literature and culture can be seen as an attempt to distance polyamory from cheating and (by extension) to roll back the usage of cheating so that it does not include polyamory.<sup>12</sup>

## **6. Cheating and Bisexuality**

In her book *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber states that visibility is a central problem of modern bisexuality.<sup>13</sup> This begs the question, what is it that keeps bisexuality invisible? It is not just assumptions of heterosexuality. There is a certain conceptual difficulty to performing bisexuality, which we can trace to monogamy/cheating.

The monogamy/cheating system makes bisexuality invisible in a two-stage process. First, the assumptions of monogamy hide the fact that there are monogamous bisexuals. Second, bisexuals are assumed to be cheaters in the same way that poly people are assumed to be cheaters.

### **I. The Myth of the One True Love and Bisexual Invisibility**

Monogamy is not just the idea that you only have sex with one person at a time. It also includes the myth of the one true love, the idea that a particular person is really only attracted to one other person during the course of their entire lives. Most people recognize this as an entirely unrealistic proposition, but it shapes our understanding of relationships nonetheless. Modern relationships go to great lengths to create and maintain the illusion of the one true love. Because of the need to maintain this façade, it is common for people to repudiate their earlier attractions as somehow hollow or false. Even if there is no such repudiation, the social circle will act as if there had been, conveniently forgetting old attractions. In other words, the only desire given social validity is a person's current relationship.

This social myopia prevents the culture from recognizing the possibility of monogamous bisexuals. If a person is only seeing one other person, then they are unable to claim attraction to more than one gender in a manner that is believable. Specifically, the culture at large will

refuse to recognize their earlier attractions as legitimate. The Ann Heche/Ellen Degeneres Hollywood romance is a great example of this in action. When Ann and Ellen started dating, the tabloids all assumed that Ann was a lesbian, and that she had been a lesbian all along. (Apparently the string of men she had relationships with earlier did not count.) When they broke up and Ann went on to date some new man, she was suddenly straight and her affair with Ellen was recast as a passing fancy. Using this sexual identity sleight-of-hand, the media managed to avoid any serious consideration of bisexuality, even though most people would consider Ann's overall behavior to be bisexual.

Because of the myth of the one true love (or desire), the mainstream imagines bisexuality to be inherently nonmonogamous. Mainstream depictions of bisexuality (such as the movies *Basic Instinct* and *Y Tu Mama Tambien*, as well as the spate of "bisexual chic" magazine articles in the mid-90's) universally depict the bisexual as having simultaneous relationships with both men and women, preferably in the same bed at the same time.<sup>14</sup> Garber calls this concurrent bisexuality, and differentiates it from sequential bisexuality, where a bisexual person dates only one gender at a time.<sup>15</sup> Our culture's persistent refusal to acknowledge a person's erotic history makes it difficult or impossible to present as a sequential or monogamous bisexual.

Of course, most real bisexuals do not spend all their social time with a gender on each arm. Bisexuals move in and out of relationships, and life often catches them dating only one gender. There are plenty of self-identified monogamous bisexuals, though they seem to be a minority within bisexuality (possibly due to this failure of the cultural imagination). Monogamous bisexuals often have difficulty claiming both monogamy and bisexuality, above and beyond the normal bisexual identity issues. People assume that monogamous bisexuals are actually monosexual (based on the gender of their current attraction) even when they actively claim a bisexual identity. Bisexuality becomes invisible in monogamous situations.

## **II. Concurrent Bisexuality Compared to Cheating**

This begs the question, why are concurrent bisexuals also invisible, even though they fulfill the mainstream image of the bisexual? Concurrent bisexuals fall into the same conceptual trap as polyamory: because they are not monogamous, they are treated as cheaters. Note that this happens as a direct comparison instead of a logical two-stage process. Because our culture conceptualizes bisexuality as inherently nonmonogamous, a single set of associations are drawn directly from bisexuality to cheating, instead of being drawn from bisexuality to nonmonogamy to cheating. In this view, bisexuality is just another form of nonmonogamy, and is therefore cheating. Because bisexuality is read as cheating, all of the social, legal, emotional, and interpersonal repercussions of cheating can be used to repress bisexuality.

Media representations of bisexuality mirror this association, frequently presenting bisexuality in the context of cheating. A recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* on the emerging down low identity follows this pattern.<sup>16</sup> The "down low" is both an identity and a descriptive term for black and latino men who sleep with other men but keep their liaisons hidden from relatives, friends, and partners. The men on the down low interviewed in the article did not consider themselves bisexual, and actually denied it during the interviews. However, the article relentlessly brings up comparisons to closeted gay and bisexual men, creating a connection even in the face of this denial. The article focuses on black and latino men who cheat on their wives and girlfriends by sleeping with other men, supposedly

providing a route of AIDS infection. (Other articles in the down low moral panic follow the same pattern.) In this article, bisexuality is presented as leading directly to cheating, even requiring it, even though some of the men in the article are not actually cheating.

The down low moral panic is a mirror image of the (white) bisexual male AIDS panic of the 80's, with the added bonus of racist stigma. In both cases, the men involved did not actually identify as bisexual, but the media imposed the bisexual label on them. In both cases, male bisexuality was presented as being synonymous with cheating and infection.

It is not just bisexual men that suffer from the association of bisexuality with cheating. The central bisexual character in *Basic Instinct* sets up a rivalry between her long-term woman lover and her recent male lover. The rivalry ends when the man drives the woman off the road, killing her. This is the classic cheating scenario of a stolen lover, even though there is little or no secrecy involved. Other suspense movies (*Poison Ivy* for example) ritually present bisexual women in cheating situations.

The persistent cultural association of bisexuality and cheating imbues bisexuality with some of the qualities of cheating. In particular, cheating is incorrectly seen as a temporary arrangement, a process of choosing between two stable (monogamous) possibilities. Seeing bisexuality through the lens of cheating allows the mainstream to view it as a temporary arrangement, even in the face of long-term concurrent bisexual behavior. Bisexuality is therefore rationalized as a short-lived situation, the process of moving between two stable (monosexual) desires.

The casting of bisexuality as temporary state of choosing (“just a phase”) is actually an attempt to erase bisexuality itself, by reducing it to a summation of two monosexual possibilities. We can pretend that a cheater is a monogamous person in transition, and we can use the same logic to pretend that a bisexual is a monosexual in transition. Attempts to recast bisexuality as cheating are therefore attempts to invalidate bisexuality altogether, making it into an invisible stepping stone between two visible sexuality choices.

This explains why the media brought bisexuality into articles describing the down low lifestyle, even though everyone interviewed refused the bisexual label. It was simultaneously an attempt to discredit the men involved (as being closeted) and an attempt to discredit bisexuality (as being hidden, ephemeral, and transitory). The down low articles managed the neat trick of contributing to the invisibility of bisexuality by bringing up the possibility of bisexuality.<sup>17</sup>

## **7. The Bi/Poly Alliance**

### **I. Polyamory and Bisexuality Aid Each Other**

In a chapter on literary erotic triangles, Garber suggests an innovative strategy based on the connection between cheating and bisexuality. Instead of reading bisexuality as cheating, she reverses the relationship, and reads heterosexual cheating as bisexuality. Heterosexual cheating becomes bisexuality because the rivalry between the two men (in her examples) is itself a homosocial relationship.<sup>18</sup> Garber's bisexual reading suggests a political strategy: cheating and other forms of nonmonogamy are potential sites for bisexual visibility.

This is already happening in the poly movement. There is a strange connection between bisexual and poly identities. Informal online surveys show that about half of online

poly people identify as bisexual.<sup>19</sup> In my personal experience, bisexuals tend to be nonmonogamous, and most of the bi folk I know are poly.

On the surface, the connection between bisexuality and polyamory appears as a number of happy coincidences. Bi people and poly people appear in the same subcultures and social groups. Both polyamory and bisexuality borrow concepts and ideology from the gay and lesbian movements, and align themselves with those movements. Both bi and poly ideologies speak of freedom, openness, and possibility. Bi people tend to develop polyamorous identities and poly people tend to develop bisexual identities.

These surface correlations are really a reflection of deeper conceptual connections. Both bisexuality and polyamory seem to reflect a certain “greedy” attitude towards sex and relationships, one that refuses to accept limitations on intimacy. Note that cheaters are “greedy” in a similar way, because they gain the advantages of both monogamy and nonmonogamy. In fact, both bisexuals and poly people qualify as “cheaters” in that they are cheating the system: they purposefully break the rules of attraction and try to get away with it. Bisexuals cheat the rules of a single gender attraction. Poly people cheat the rules of sexual and emotional exclusivity. Both sets of rules are instrumental for the maintenance of the monogamy/cheating system.

In other words, polyamory and bisexuality are facing off against the same conceptual opposition, specifically the monogamy/cheating duality and the myth of the one true love. It is this shared opposition that makes them convenient bedfellows. If a person can take the steps necessary to claim one of the two identities, they will have done most of the work to claim the other identity. This conceptual linkage is evidenced in the way the two identities enable each other. Poly people are typically given the relationship space to experiment with their own desire, making the move towards bisexuality much easier. Bisexuals are used to dealing with a multiplicity of desire, which eases the transition to polyamory.

## **II. Polyamory and the Production of Bisexual Visibility**

Visibility is currently a central problem in bisexual liberation. While the possibility of bisexuality seems to be everywhere, it is rare to see the actual ratification of that possibility in the form of visible bisexuals. Bisexuality is difficult to perform. Part of this is invisibility of sequential bisexuality, caused by the myth of the one true love. The other part is the invisibility of concurrent bisexuality produced by the monogamy/cheating duality. The former invisibility can be addressed by creating new forms of sexuality that incorporate understanding of a person’s erotic history, but this unfortunately requires reconstructing love and sexuality. However, the latter invisibility can be addressed through bisexual-friendly forms of nonmonogamy.

Unfortunately most nonmonogamous movements have been distinctly unfriendly to bisexuality. Historically, this includes movements as diverse as swinging, gay bathhouse culture, and lesbian-feminist communes. There is a certain desperate quality to this opposition: any form of nonmonogamy carries connotations of bisexuality, because it also opposes the monogamy/cheating system. In other words, these groups are unfriendly to bisexuality partly because their nonmonogamy exposes them to allegations of bisexual deviance.

Polyamory seems to be an exception. This is largely for historical and cultural reasons: both movements have grown from the same ideology, and they have shared a significant overlap of members and subcultures. In fact, the large number of bi people in the poly

movement provides evidence that bisexuality is one of the major driving forces behind polyamory. In other words, polyamory was created and spread partly to satisfy the need for bisexual relationship structures. Bisexuality has been heavily represented within polyamory at least through the 1990's, and it shows up in every major poly publication. Furthermore, poly people have pursued a strategy of coming out based on LGBT tactics.

This production of visible polyamory enables visible bisexuality. To the extent that polyamory is believable, bisexual polyamory will be believable, because it is simply polyamory with partners of different genders. The monogamy/cheating duality is a trap for bisexuality, but the conceptual victories of polyamory can provide bisexuality with a way out. To the extent that polyamory can escape the monogamy/cheating duality, it will create a hole that bisexuality can also escape through.

It therefore comes as no surprise that poly activism is one of the most dynamic areas of contemporary bisexual activism. Poly forums routinely address and validate bisexuality. Poly outreach will bring up bisexuality, because the majority of poly activists are also bisexual. In our current cultural moment, there is a certain inevitability about this connection: anywhere polyamory goes, bisexuality will travel with it. Poly activism is bi activism.

The corollary is that polyphobia will often also qualify as biphobia. For example, some LGBT speaking organizations discourage poly people from joining or speaking about their poly experiences, in order to make the group more palatable to the mainstream. Unfortunately, this practice makes it hard to perform bisexuality, reducing the visibility or believability of the bisexuals in the group.

Bisexual and poly activists should keep this connection in mind, because it makes activism that much easier. This is not to say that bi activists necessarily need to push polyamory or vice versa, but rather that the two communities allied will grow much faster than they would grow individually.

There are a number of ways that this cross-enabling can inform bi and poly activism. Bi activists should address polyphobia and poly activists should address biphobia: either prejudice hurts both causes. They should recognize that "bi and poly" is becoming its own identity category, with numbers comparable to monogamous bisexuals and poly monosexuals. This overlap group can form a conceptual and social cement between the two communities. More importantly, the two forms of activism should be sharing ideology. Bi activists can use poly arguments to address problems of feasibility and comparisons to cheating. Poly activists can use bisexual discourse to describe a multiplicity of desire and to enable certain relationship structures, like triads and intimate groups. The two communities can learn a lot from each other.

## **8. Conclusions**

Mainstream culture does not address monogamy in everyday discourse, either in personal discussions or in the media. This is convenient: monogamy does not have to be named, claimed, debated, or defended. Instead, monogamy functions as a hidden assumption, ever-present and unexamined. When the culture actually needs to discuss monogamy, in order to delineate its borders, uphold its ideals, or enforce its conformity, the discussion is carried on indirectly, through a discourse on cheating.

Whereas discussions of monogamy are rare, references to cheating are everywhere, from personal fears to so-called women's magazines to daytime television to the plots of

movies. These constant reminders push the possibility of cheating into everyday life, and the invisible assumptions of monogamy are pulled in with it. The endless discourse on cheating is a culture-wide project, a constant reaffirmation and reconstruction of monogamy itself.

The omnipresence of cheating is not only talk, of course. Plenty of people actually cheat. Cheating provides a convenient escape from the restrictions of monogamy, while not actually challenging monogamous assumptions. Through a discourse on cheating, actual nonmonogamy is rationalized as transient, immoral, or pathological.

Nonmonogamous movements of any sort fall into this rationalization trap. Bisexuality is also caught here because the close relationship between monogamy and monosexuality renders bisexuality as a form of nonmonogamy. Through explicit or implicit comparisons to cheating, these movements are demonized or rendered invisible. In order to be successful, these movements must find ways to escape or defuse the discourse on cheating. They therefore share a common conceptual and political opponent. This common opposition creates a certain unity of purpose and ideology among otherwise disparate communities. When this unification is not actively opposed, communities can share victories, strategies, and members.

Bisexuality and polyamory are currently undergoing this conceptual collaboration. Lessons on sexuality and desire flow in one direction. Anti-monogamous strategies travel in the other direction. The collaboration seems to be increasing the numbers in both communities. It is the duty of activists to acknowledge and strengthen this bond, and to move this collaboration into the cultural and political realms. The bi/poly dynamic has the potential to move both communities towards a point of culture-wide visibility, which is a necessary step on the road to acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Numerous surveys have confirmed that cheating rates run at a third to a quarter of the population. Specifically, in *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior*, 35% of married men and 26% of married women surveyed admitted to having had extramarital sex. The numbers were much higher for divorced men and women, 56% and 59% respectively. (Samuel Janus and Cynthia Janus, 1993. pp. 195-198) Even though these numbers have been widely reported as representing cheating, we have no way of knowing how much of this extramarital sex was covert and how much was by agreement or arrangement with the spouse. However, other sources have confirmed that the significant majority of extra-relationship sex is illicit. For example, *The Day America Told the Truth* specifically asked about affairs, and got back an overall rate of 31% among married men and women. In the context of this paper, it is interesting to note that among those in affairs, only 17% of men and 10% of women planned to leave their spouse. (James Patterson and Peter Kim, 1991. pp. 92-99)

<sup>2</sup> "Double Lives on the Down Low" by Benoit Denizet-Lewis, *New York Times Magazine*, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003. This article did a fairly good job of letting the men involved speak for themselves, compared with a number of alarmist and moralizing articles that came out around the same time. One such was "Down Low" by Jabari Asim, *Washington Post*, August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> [www.ashleymadison.com](http://www.ashleymadison.com) is a dating service website that ostensibly caers to married women. Its presentation is a mix of messages explicitly relating to cheating, open marriages, and polyamory. There are actually more registered (for money) men than women on the site, but not by much.

<sup>4</sup> In Janus and Janus (note i) more married men than married women (35% versus 26%) admitted to extramarital sex. However, slightly more divorced women than men reported extramarital sex (59% versus 56%).

<sup>5</sup> However, it should be noted that these lawsuits take a very real toll. A Mississippi jury recently awarded a divorced husband \$50,000 in damages from the man his wife had slept with while they were married (*Richard J. Gorman v. Charles Harry McMahon*, Mississippi Court of Appeals No. 1999-CA-01761-COA, decided 4/10/2001. <http://www.msllawyer.com/mssc/ctapp/20010410/9901761.html>). Also in Mississippi, a man was awarded \$175,000 this year in a similar situation ("Man Ordered to Pay for Marriage Breakup", *Associated Press*, printed in the *The Clarion-Ledger*. Jackson Mississippi, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003. <http://www.clarionledger.com/news/0308/08/m10.html>).

<sup>6</sup> Fritz Klein, *The Bisexual Option* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1993). p. 11.



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<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000). pp. 423-428. Garber points out that bisexuality can form triangles out of cheating models.

<sup>8</sup> Janus and Janus (note i) only survey extramarital sex, with no regard to whether or not it was illicit. Another major survey that did not make an illicit/sanctioned distinction is *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Edward Laumann, John Gagnon, Robert Michael, and Stuart Michaels, University of Chicago Press, 1994). pp. 208-216.

<sup>9</sup> Both older and newer poly publications maintain a focus on primary/secondary arrangements, including *The Ethical Slut* (Dossie Easton and Catherine Liszt, Greenery Press, 1997) and *Redefining Our Relationships* (Wendy-O Matik, Defiant Times Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Poly people in online forums usually take a “difficult but rewarding” attitude towards polyamory. One good place to see this happening is livejournal: [www.livejournal.com/community/polyamory](http://www.livejournal.com/community/polyamory).

<sup>11</sup> In November 1998 in Memphis, Tennessee, April Divilbiss’s infant daughter was removed to the daughter’s paternal grandparents by court order, because April was polyamorous and pagan. The case ended without April regaining custody. “Pagan Mother Battles for Custody” by Woody Baird, Associated Press, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1999. This article can be found online at [http://www.polyamorysociety.org/Yahoo-Divilbliss\\_Article.html](http://www.polyamorysociety.org/Yahoo-Divilbliss_Article.html).

<sup>12</sup> *The Ethical Slut* (see note ix) has two chapters on communication, conflict resolution, and agreement strategies. *Redefining Our Relationships* (see note ix) says “I strongly recommend the importance of honest communication at the onset of a new connection” and makes other remarks about honesty, and has a section on conflict strategies.

<sup>13</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000). On page 24 Garber states “Visibility is, indeed, what bi’s have said they lacked, for years.” The quest for bisexual visibility is a central theme of the book.

<sup>14</sup> “Bisexuality is the wild card of our erotic life. Now it’s coming out in the open - in pop culture, in cyberspace and on campus. But can you really have it both ways?” by John Leland, Steve Rhodes, Peter Katel, and Claudia Kalb. Newsweek, July 17, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000). p. 147.

<sup>16</sup> “Double Lives on the Down Low” by Benoit Denizet-Lewis, New York Times Magazine, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Both the NYT Magazine article and the Washington Post article (see note ii) brought up bisexuality in this manner.

<sup>18</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2000). pp. 423-428.

<sup>19</sup> One great place to find such surveys is the polyamory community on the livejournal system, [www.livejournal.com/community/polyamory](http://www.livejournal.com/community/polyamory). Dr. Geri Weitzman is currently working on a more formal internet survey of bisexual and polyamorous identities.