Deconstructing Cultural Monogamy

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Disclaimers and Notes

Moving fast

Questions are good, but please keep them short

Referring to the ideology of monogamy

No issue with the actual practice of monogamy
Plenty of power dynamics in polyamory as well

This is mostly theory

In many cases lacking statistical backing
Generalizing heavily
Giving the mainstream viewpoint
System of Power

The cultural forces and ideological mechanisms that deter people from non-monogamy and reward monogamy

Many names in literature: mono-normativity, compulsory monogamy, monocentrism, monogamism, polyphobia

Maintains itself with a micro/macro feedback loop between interpersonal relations and cultural ideology
Questions

How does mono-normativity maintain itself over time?

How is mono-normativity personally advantageous to people?

How do monogamous power relations create a cultural zeitgeist, and are in turn supported by culture?

What are the weak points in mono-normative reinforcement mechanisms?
Conformity Mechanisms

1) Jealousy
2) Cheating
3) Sex versus love
4) Attached meaning
5) Hegemony
6) Couple-centrism
7) Ownership / possession

(not an inclusive list!)
Prime Rule of Monogamy

“Don’t have sex with anyone else”

Visible in violations of monogamy: sex with others is always infidelity

Other acts are not always violations of monogamy, though are often related to the prime rule

Framed this way, monogamy is a restriction
Jealousy

Jealousy is primarily a response to an embodied threat to the relationship

Jealousy makes perfect sense in monogamy!

Visible jealousy is also seen as a sign of weakness

Jealousy is useful to people

In averting threats to the relationship

Creating influence over partner via demands or incitement

As proof of love
Cycle of Jealousy

Mono-normativity creates a situation where jealousy is advantageous

People use power mechanisms of jealousy, requiring / encouraging hegemony

Jealousy is conditioned as an emotional reaction

Jealous reactions prevent non-monogamy, making monogamy compulsory
Infidelity / Cheating

A system as restrictive as monogamy inevitably has a decent failure rate

Cheating / infidelity is the expected failure mode of monogamy

These failures are spectacularized in culture for various purposes:

- Moral parable holding up monogamy as positive
- Punishing the infidelitous
- Corralling of non-monogamous urges into infidelity
- Maintenance of a false monogamy/cheating duality
Cycle of Infidelity

Compulsory monogamy creates a certain amount of infidelity
Which is spectacularized to buttress monogamy, punish cheaters, and generally maintain control
Which creates a false duality whereby all non-monogamy is infidelity
Which makes it difficult to be non-monogamous, making monogamy more compulsory
Love Versus Sex

“In love” and “just sex” are dichotomized views of sexual relating

Conceptual / cultural access to “in love” reserved for a charmed circle of normativity

Sexuality (“just sex”) heavily discussed, but as deviance, to reinforce normativity

Non-normative practices are sexualized in culture to maintain the charmed circle
Love and Monogamy

Love requires monogamy as part of the charmed circle

Concepts of monogamy are built into the idea of love itself – monogamy preceded love

Non-monogamy therefore is seen as incompatible with love

Non-monogamous people seek acceptance by adopting the conceptual language of love
Relationship Meaning

Not just love which is strongly associated with monogamy, but also:

- Trust, commitment, morality, maturity, depth of feeling, health, naturalness, stability
- Relationship, marriage, child-rearing, social acceptability

Non-monogamy is therefore the negative opposite of each thing

Non-monogamous people find themselves lost without the conceptual linchpin of monogamy

Build new words, reassign concepts, create new systems of conformity
Hegemony of Monogamy

Monogamy functions as an unexamined norm

Rarely discussed directly
Instead, deviances from monogamy are endlessly critiqued: cheating, polygamy, etc
Monogamy is rarely defended on its personal merits

Cultural dominance of monogamy therefore depends on the lack of visible alternatives
Making viable visible non-monogamy highly threatening
But also very powerful and attractive, as dialogue on non-monogamy takes the conceptual field
Questions?

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