

Closed Minds, Open Relationships Communication Failures with Poly Clients

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I have no financial relationships
or affiliations to disclose.



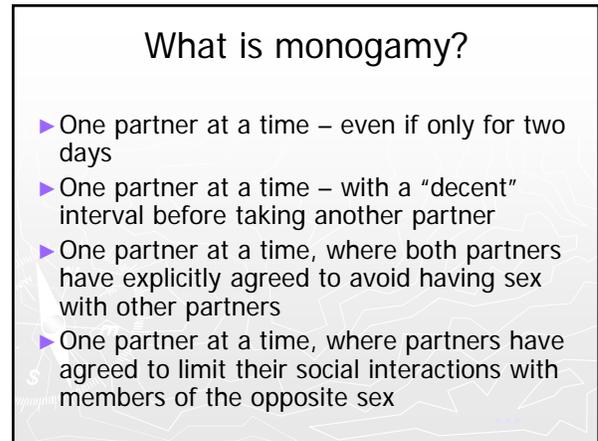
Agenda

- 2:45 - Intro to the language of ethical non-monogamy, common relationship styles, and non-relationship forms of non-monogamy
- 3:05 - Sexual health risks in open relationships
- 3:20 - Parenting in open relationships
- 3:30 - Exploration of examples of therapeutic-alliance problems with poly individuals/couples
- 3:50 - Discussion of common relationship concerns for non-monogamous individuals
- 4:05 - Review of sample polycules, followed by role-playing the creation of polycules with clients
- 4:30 - Question & Answer, Wrap Up



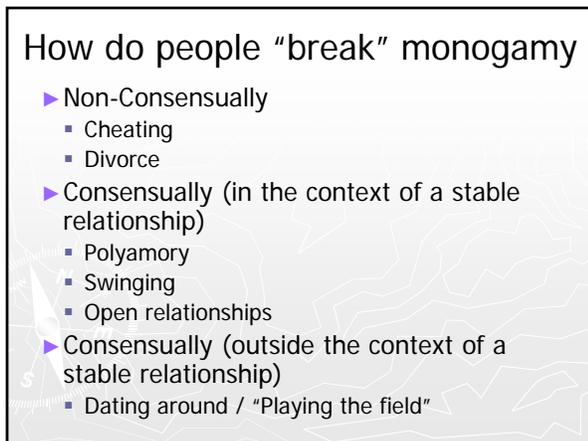
What is monogamy?

- ▶ One partner at a time – even if only for two days
- ▶ One partner at a time – with a “decent” interval before taking another partner
- ▶ One partner at a time, where both partners have explicitly agreed to avoid having sex with other partners
- ▶ One partner at a time, where partners have agreed to limit their social interactions with members of the opposite sex



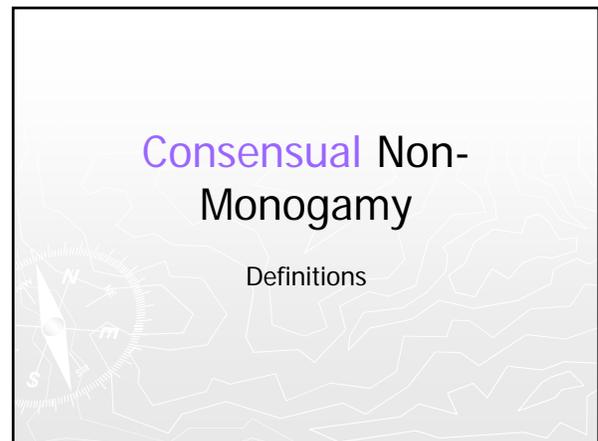
How do people “break” monogamy

- ▶ Non-Consensually
 - Cheating
 - Divorce
- ▶ Consensually (in the context of a stable relationship)
 - Polyamory
 - Swinging
 - Open relationships
- ▶ Consensually (outside the context of a stable relationship)
 - Dating around / “Playing the field”



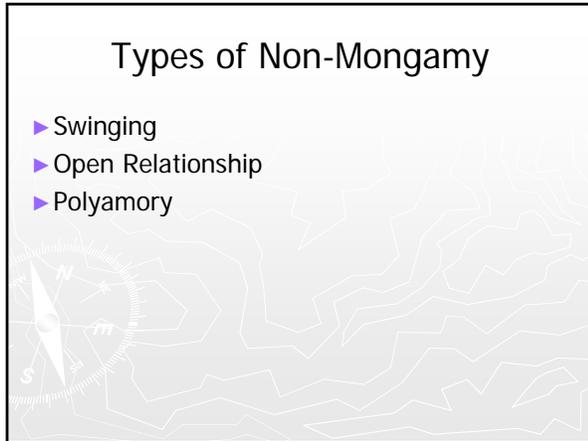
Consensual Non-Monogamy

Definitions



Types of Non-Mongamy

- ▶ Swinging
- ▶ Open Relationship
- ▶ Polyamory



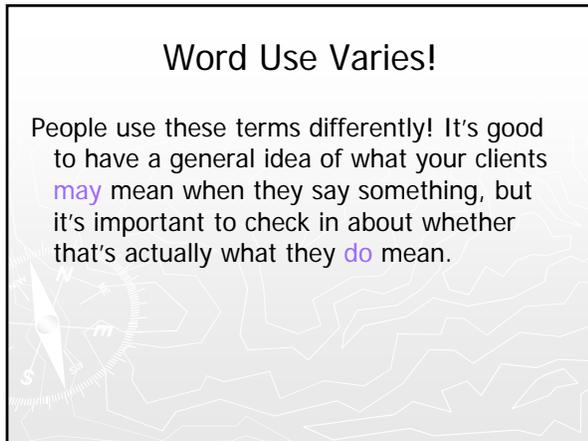
Terms You Might Hear

- ▶ Hierarchical polyamory
- ▶ Non-hierarchical polyamory
- ▶ Polyfidelity
- ▶ Primary
- ▶ Secondary
- ▶ Triad/Quad
- ▶ "Opening up"
- ▶ Veto power
- ▶ New Relationship Energy/NRE
- ▶ Compersion



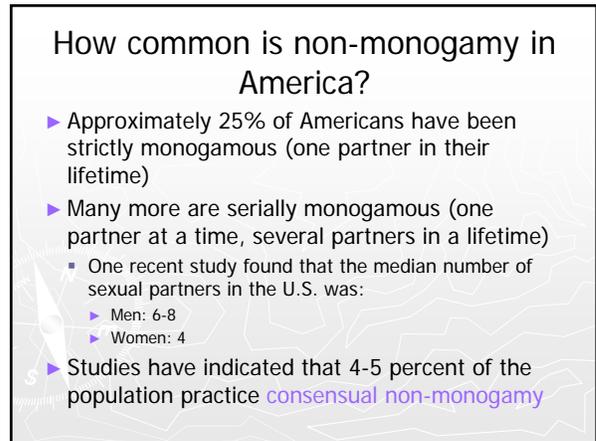
Word Use Varies!

People use these terms differently! It's good to have a general idea of what your clients **may** mean when they say something, but it's important to check in about whether that's actually what they **do** mean.



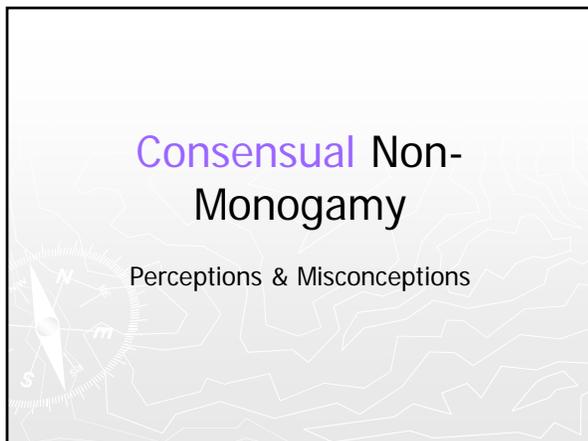
How common is non-monogamy in America?

- ▶ Approximately 25% of Americans have been strictly monogamous (one partner in their lifetime)
- ▶ Many more are serially monogamous (one partner at a time, several partners in a lifetime)
 - One recent study found that the median number of sexual partners in the U.S. was:
 - ▶ Men: 6-8
 - ▶ Women: 4
- ▶ Studies have indicated that 4-5 percent of the population practice **consensual non-monogamy**



Consensual Non-Monogamy

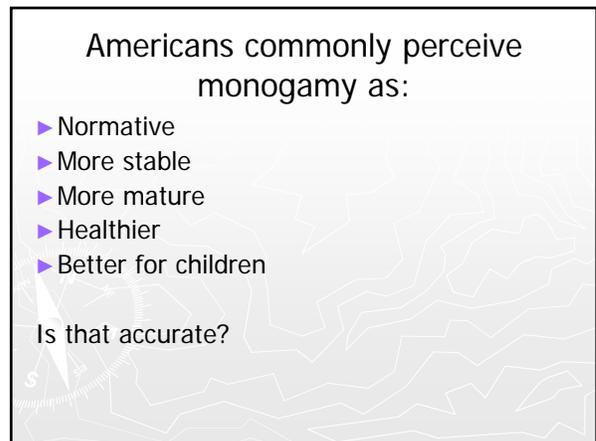
Perceptions & Misconceptions



Americans commonly perceive monogamy as:

- ▶ Normative
- ▶ More stable
- ▶ More mature
- ▶ Healthier
- ▶ Better for children

Is that accurate?



Perception – Non-monogamous people are abnormal

- ▶ Research has demonstrated
 - No significant differences in psychological function between non-monogamous and monogamous people on
 - ▶ MMPI, California Psychological Inventory, other measures

Perception: Monogamous marriages are more functional than non-monogamous ones

- ▶ Reality:
 - Research has shown there is no significant difference in
 - ▶ Marriage satisfaction
 - ▶ Marriage stability
 - Although reasons for breakups differ

Perception: Monogamous people are happier and less jealous

- ▶ Reality:
 - Studies in gay men suggest that consensual non-monogamy is not linked to relationship satisfaction (i.e. men in both monogamous and CNM relationships are similarly happy with their partners.)
 - Some studies have found that jealousy is more manageable in people with CNM relationships
 - ▶ Expectation management
 - ▶ Improved communication

Perception: Stable monogamous couples have more, and better, sex

- Because they're free of STI worries
- Because they know each other better
- ▶ No good research, but:
 - Sexual frequency is known to decrease overtime in monogamous couples
 - Habituation has been shown to lead to decreased desire
 - Relationship length is associated with a higher risk of hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD)
 - ▶ HSDD can be diagnosed as a lack of desire for one, specific partner

Perception: Monogamy prevents STIs

- ▶ Reality:
 - Only if people come into a relationship STI free
 - ▶ Which requires testing and discussion, even for first partners
 - Only if both partners are, in fact, faithful
 - ▶ Studies estimate that
 - 55% of married men and 45% of married women have engaged in sexual infidelity
 - Up to THREE QUARTERS of all marriages may experience an infidelity
 - People in CNM relationships are often **better** at protecting themselves and their partners from STIs

Table 1 Sexually unfaithful and negotiated nonmonogamous individuals and safer sex behaviors*

	Sexually unfaithful M (SD)	Negotiated nonmonogamous M (SD)	P value
Safer sex behaviors with primary partner [†]			
When having sexual interactions with your partner, do you use condoms for vaginal intercourse? N = 708	1.62 (1.00)	1.78 (1.16)	P < 0.02
When having sexual interactions with your partner, do you use condoms for anal intercourse? N = 535	1.58 (1.07)	1.99 (1.28)	P < 0.001
When having sexual interactions with your partner, do you use gloves for genital touching? N = 787	1.06 (0.36)	1.16 (0.50)	P < 0.02
When having sexual interactions with your partner, do you cover or sterilize sex toys before using them? N = 654	2.28 (1.32)	2.71 (1.28)	P < 0.001
Safer sex during the most recent extradyadic encounter [‡]	% Reporting this behavior	% Reporting this behavior	
Were you under the influence of alcohol or other drugs at the time of the encounter? N = 793	33%	21%	P < 0.001
Did you discuss STI testing history with the individual, or had you discussed STI testing with the individual in the past, before engaging in any sex acts? N = 780	34%	63%	P < 0.001
Did you discuss partner history with the individual, or had you discussed partner history in the past with the individual, before engaging in any sex acts? N = 801	42%	64%	P < 0.001
During the encounter, did you use condoms for penetrative vaginal sex? N = 591	48%	66%	P < 0.001
During the encounter, did you use condoms for penetrative anal sex? N = 293	32%	49%	P < 0.01
During the encounter, did you cover or sterilize sex toys before using them? N = 654	30%	60%	P < 0.001
During the encounter, did you use gloves for genital touching? N = 695	2%	8%	P < 0.001
Did you tell your [primary] partner about the encounter? N = 654	29%	81%	P < 0.001

*All results considered significant if P < 0.05 for two tails, with a Holms sequential Bonferroni correction for experimentwise error across the analyses. For the ANCOVAs, age of respondent and sexual orientation were included as covariates.
[†]The unadjusted means and standard deviations are reported.
[‡]Responses ranged from "1 = Never" to "4 = Always." Response option of "5 = Not applicable/we do not engage in that activity" was also included. Those who responded that they did not engage in a particular act (and accordingly, could not practice safer sex during that act) were excluded from the analyses.
[§]Response options were "yes," "no," or "can't remember." Those who responded that they could not remember were excluded from these analyses. Chi-square tests of independence were used for these analyses.

Conley et al 2012a

Who were these people?

NON RANDOM SAMPLE

- 1647 individuals were recruited from various websites, including craigslist.
- 801 had had extradyadic relationships (stayed in sample)
- 308 unfaithful / 493 NN

Table 2 Sexually unfaithful and negotiated nonmonogamous individuals and demographic variables*

	Sexually unfaithful M (SD)	Negotiated nonmonogamous M (SD)	P value
Sociodemographic variables[†]			
Age N = 798	33.87 (12.31)	37.02 (11.27)	P < 0.01
Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale N = 800	10.90 (1.41)	11.35 (1.43)	P = n.s.
Sexual orientation			
P < 0.01			
Heterosexual	200 (85)	192 (39)	
N (row %)			
Homosexual	42 (14)	52 (11)	
N (row %)			
Bisexual	65 (21)	248 (50)	
N (row %)			
Gender			
P = n.s.			
Female	166 (54)	254 (52)	
N (row %)			
Male	141 (46)	227 (46)	
N (row %)			

*All results considered significant if P < 0.05 for two tails, with a Holm sequential Bonferroni correction for experimentwise error across the analyses.
[†]The unadjusted means and standard deviations are reported.
[‡]Chi-square tests of independence were used for these analyses.

Perception: Monogamous people are better parents

- ▶ Not a lot of research, but existing research suggests children can do quite well in CNM relationships
 - Likely varies with the type of consensual non-monogamy
- ▶ Multiple concurrent relationships containing some level of involvement with the children can:
 - Reduce time spent in day care
 - Increase one on one time with adults
- ▶ Infidelity has been shown to have negative effects on children
 - Possibly due to the breach of trust rather than presence of extra-dyadic relationships

Perception: Monogamy is more socially acceptable

- ▶ Reality: CNM is highly stigmatized
 - Observers can have difficulty differentiating from infidelity
 - No legal protection
 - ▶ Potential for loss of employment
 - ▶ Potential for loss of children
 - ▶ Difficulty finding an accepting therapist – even for problems unrelated to CNM
 - People, rightly, fear discrimination and judgment if they are open about their relationships with friends, colleagues, and [therapists](#)

Other Potential Advantages of Consensual Non-Monogamy

- ▶ Improved interpersonal (particularly romantic and sexual) communication skills
 - Needed to function in an open relationship
- ▶ Increased emotional security
 - Fewer worries about cheating
- ▶ More options for managing sexual desire disparities and related relationship problems
- ▶ More time for work/other emotional engagements
 - Not expected to fulfill all partner's emotional needs

Poly Clients' Problems with the Therapeutic Alliance

(i.e. "Why I'm giving this talk")

Types of Problems

- ▶ Therapist does not believe non-monogamous relationships are healthy, and projects this onto clients
- ▶ Therapist assumes non-monogamy is the core problem, rather than the client-identified problem
- ▶ Therapist eroticizes or exoticizes open relationships, focusing on these aspects out of curiosity rather than client need

Reasons Why Couples Open Up

Common Reasons for Opening Up

- ▶ Interest in exploring sexual and romantic relationships without disrupting the dyad
 - Including explorations of same-sex/opposite-sex attractions, fetishes, kinks, etc.
- ▶ Wanting a specific type of emotional/physical interaction not available from (or wanted by primary partner)
- ▶ Lack of sexual satisfaction with primary partner
 - Combined with commitment to a romantic/parenting relationship
- ▶ Change in dynamic within the dyad
 - Gender transition
 - Serious physical or mental illness
 - Childbirth

Common assumptions about opening up...

- ▶ Partners don't really love each other
- ▶ Partners aren't sexually attracted to each other
- ▶ Partners aren't committed to each other
- ▶ Partners are really prepping to leave the relationship

These assumptions may be true sometimes, but they are not true ALL the time. It's important to examine them before applying them to a relationship.

Not all non-monogamous relationships originate in a dyad...

- ▶ Some people identify polyamory as a type of sexual orientation
 - Do not define "dyad" as the basic unit of relationships
- ▶ Some people start out dating multiple individuals, who may or may not be in relationships with each other

Common Relationship Problems Faced by Polyamorous Clients

Safe sex negotiations

- ▶ What types of conversations are necessary before having sex (of various kinds)?
- ▶ What types of sex are acceptable outside the dyad?
- ▶ What types of sex need to be protected?
- ▶ Are any STDs deal breakers?
- ▶ Are any PEOPLE deal breakers?
 - I.e. "I can't cope with you being in a relationship with someone sleeping with Jane."

Other types of intimacy negotiation

- ▶ What types of emotional and physical intimacy need to be pre-negotiated? Post negotiated?
- ▶ How do people establish relationship "rules"?
 - Broken rules and how they are handled
 - Do any partners have veto power?
- ▶ How much intimate information can be disclosed to other partners?

Scheduling

- ▶ Conflicting needs and desires
 - Miscommunications
 - Preferences about who should be doing what, where, and when
 - Losing track of commitments
 - Shared vs. unshared calendars
 - ▶ Reading/Writing
- ▶ Expectation management
- ▶ Time management

Common polyamory joke – "How did we survive before Google Calendar?"

Time Planning

- ▶ Are there certain days of the week/holidays/etc. that one partner wants reserved for them?
- ▶ How much time can partners and potential partners be allotted during the week?
- ▶ How is scheduling negotiated?
- ▶ How are schedule changes negotiated?
- ▶ What partner needs require plan changes?
- ▶ Can date nights be coordinated?

Role of Other Partners in Child Rearing

- ▶ How does child interact with other partners?
 - Friend/Honorary Uncle/Etc.
- ▶ Are partners expected to enforce rules?
 - Which ones?
- ▶ Do partners babysit? Have alone time with children?
- ▶ What type of affection is acceptable in front of children?

Level of being "out"

- ▶ Are families aware?
 - Whose families?
 - How are partners referred to?
 - What are expectations about familial behavior?
- ▶ Who is and isn't out at work?
- ▶ What are the advantages and disadvantages of being "out?"
- ▶ Values conflicts

Jealousy

- ▶ Not always about sex!
 - Time spent with specific activities or partners
 - Child rearing obligations
 - Insecurity wrt partners or partners-once-removed
 - Emotional demands of other partners
- ▶ Sexual jealousy
 - General
 - Specific acts
 - Different negotiated precautions
- ▶ Lack of parity in extra-dyadic relationships

A Note About Jealousy

- ▶ Polyamorous people may seek to deny that jealousy can exist, even when it does. It is important to affirm that while people can't always help feeling jealous in any given situation, they can choose how they deal with it.
- ▶ Developing skills for dealing with jealousy is a critical component of many relationships.

Therapists Can Help Polyamorous Clients: *

- ▶ Determine if polyamory is right for them
 - Including what relationship configurations might work best
- ▶ Discuss the possibility of opening a relationship with their partner
- ▶ Negotiate relationship agreements and boundaries
- ▶ Make decisions about coming out
- ▶ Develop an exit strategy – for a relationship or the lifestyle
- ▶ Locate helpful community, literature, and internet resources

* Shamelessly stolen from the NCSF guide

When First Working With New Non-Monogamous Clients:

1. Be aware of any biases you may have about relationship structures and how they may affect the therapeutic relationship
2. Don't make assumptions about what is bothering a client/couple.
3. Understand that every polyamorous relationship has negotiated its own, unique rules
 1. Often explicitly, but not always
 2. Explicit negotiation about relationship concerns can be a useful couples intervention.

Communication is a core value of consensually non-monogamous relationships...

... but it doesn't mean people are doing it well

What Do Poly Relationships Look Like?

Polycules are a great tool for understanding polyamorous families!

Benefits of Creating Polycules in Session

- ▶ Provides an opportunity for clients to discuss the relationships they are involved in, in ways that are meaningful to them
 - Clients choose what relationships are included, the details they provide, how far out into their network they want to discuss
- ▶ Providers develop a deeper understanding of relevant client relationships for use in their practice, allowing them to explore any relationship stressors in context

Role Play – Creation of Polycules

Form groups of 2-4 people. One of you will be the therapist, the others will be part of a non-monogamous relationship. The therapist will elicit details of the relationship to draw a polycule

Any Questions?

Resource List For Professionals

- ▶ What Psychology Professionals Should Know About Polyamory - https://ncsfreedom.org/images/stories/PolyPaper/72548_NCSF_2012poly7.pdf
- ▶ An up-to-date list of books about polyamory: <http://polyinthedia.blogspot.com/2012/12/book-about-polyamory-all-31-since-1992.html>
- ▶ Conley, T. D.; Moors, A. C.; Ziegler, A., and Karathanasis, C. Unfaithful individuals are less likely to practice safer sex than openly nonmonogamous individuals. *J Sex Med.* 2012a Jun; 9(6):1559-65.
- ▶ Conley, T. D.; Ziegler, A.; Moors, A. C.; Matsick, J. L., and Valentine, B. A Critical Examination of Popular Assumptions About the Benefits and Outcomes of Monogamous Relationships. *PersSacPsychol Rev.* 2012b Nov 21.

Resources for Patients

- ▶ **Polyamory & Open Relationships**
 - [More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory](#) by Franklin Veaux and Eve Rickart
 - [Opening Up: A Guide to Creating and Sustaining Open Relationships](#) by Tristan Taormino
 - [The Ethical Slut: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Adventures](#) by Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy
 - [Polyamory: The New Love Without Limits: Secrets of Sustainable Intimate Relationships](#) by Deborah Anapol
 - [Love In Abundance: A Counselor's Advice On Open Relationships](#) by Kathy Labriola
- ▶ **Swinging**
 - [The Lifestyle: A Look at the Erotic Rites of Swingers](#) by Terry Gould (more of a history book)
 - [Swinging for Beginners: An Introduction to the Lifestyle Paperback](#) by Kaye Bellemeade

Contact Info

- ▶ Handouts are posted at <http://www.sexualityeducator.com>
- ▶ If you are a trans-competent provider, please put in your info at transcaresite.org
- ▶ Feel free to e-mail me at elizabethboskey@gmail.com