

Compulsory Monogamy and Sexual Minorities

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Introduction

Compulsory monogamy is the simple idea that in our culture, monogamy is somewhat less than optional. This paper is intended to be a basic description of compulsory monogamy, using exercises and examples.

As a system of cultural conformity, compulsory monogamy intersects with various oppressions. This paper will give some examples of the manner in which culture-wide forms of monogamous ideology are used against particular groups.

Disclaimers

Unfortunately, it will be easy to read this paper as a criticism of monogamy itself. I have no criticism of the practice of monogamy, or of monogamous people. This paper should not be interpreted as such criticism. Monogamy only becomes a problem when its ideology becomes hegemonic. In other words, when there is no real way to be something other than monogamous.

Along similar lines, nothing I say here should be taken to imply that no one would want to be monogamous if given a choice, or that nonmonogamy is somehow more evolved than monogamy. It is not.

In this paper I will be treating compulsory monogamy as a structuring system of power, and this will implicitly draw comparisons with systems of inequality, such as compulsory heterosexuality, sexism, and so on. Also, at times I will make explicit comparisons. Let me state clearly that I do not mean to imply that any system of power or inequality is equivalent to any other, either in mechanism or scope. They are all wildly different, and only on occasion use similar techniques of power. For example, in compulsory monogamy there is no equivalent to queer-bashing or lynching.

Fairy-Tale Romance

Fairy-tale romance is the kind of relationship that occurs mostly in fairy tales. It is the kind of single-minded devotion you see in some romantic movies, especially the really over-the-top sappy ones.

Exercise 1: Describing Fairy-Tale Romance

For a moment, try to think of the qualities that make up fairy-tale romance. In the fairy tales we tell ourselves, how do relationships work? If two people were to have an absolutely perfect monogamous union, what could we say about them? What could we say about their relationship? Their sex lives? What is the place of monogamy in fairy-tale romance? What sort of monogamy is it?

While brainstorming, try to drop the constraints that the real world puts on relationships. Most people are fully aware of those constraints, and adapt to them, but for now we want to consider the sort of roadbump-free relationship that resides best in the imagination.

Also, try to step away from your own ideals, and embrace the ideals of the culture. I fully expect that the majority of my readers are not monogamous, which means that their ideals will clash with what the culture thinks of as a perfect relationship. Step outside of yourself for a minute and pretend to be in full agreement with cultural norms.

Once you have come up with a number of aspects or qualities, turn the page.

The Qualities of Fairy-Tale Monogamy

We could list out the qualities of fairy-tale romance for quite some time without mentioning monogamy. However, for this paper I wish to focus on the monogamous aspects of fairy-tale romance, putting aside other aspects (such as the fact that such romances seem to always involve royalty or the wealthy).

Let us start with the most obvious. When we are talking about the perfect ideal of monogamy, the other person in the union is The One. What does it mean to be The One?

Well, first off, there are no others. Which is to say: no affairs, no adultery, no sly backward glances after passing someone cute on the sidewalk. Definitely no flirting, aside from flirting with The One. Sex only with The One. In fact, proper devotion to The One really requires that sexual and romantic desires only go towards them. Finding other people attractive is a no-no.

This aspect of idealized monogamy extends to activities that may not even involve another person. Pornography? Erotica? Desire for The One should theoretically overshadow any need for such things. Similarly, while most of us probably consider regular masturbation to be perfectly healthy (relationship or no) it has no place in the land of fairy-tale monogamy. In fairy tales, The One is all that you need to be fulfilled.

Second, it is really best if there were no others before The One. While some romantic comedies use the decision process for fun and conflict, in many other movies The One is also The First. *Pride and Prejudice* is an example of this. Virginity is implied by this particular aspect of fairy-tale monogamy. It is best if both are virgins, though of course the virginity of women somehow ends up being more important, as a direct result of cultural sexism.

We cannot discuss before without describing after. “Til death do you part” is in most marriage vows for a reason. Even after death has in fact parted you, it is somewhat unseemly to take another lover or spouse.

Marriage vows bring up the subject of marriage itself. In fairy-tale romance of any sort, marriage is a must, and early marriage is best. Think *Romeo and Juliet*.

I am trying to build a picture here. When we think of the ideal of monogamy, it is a single love in a lifetime. It is a single desire. It is an attraction that is so intense it becomes the single attraction in the course of one's life.

Pragmatic Monogamy

Of course, most people are fully aware that they will not be living this type of idealized monogamy. I suspect that most people do not actually want this life.

However, I contend that fairy-tale monogamy is in a sense always present in people's heads. It forms a sort of reference point, a single shared idea across the culture. While representations of monogamy in culture are varied, the fact that a decent percentage of such representations use this idealized monogamy (even though it is usually considered to be impractical) tells us that this idealization has currency.

Individual people pick and choose from the aspects of idealized monogamy, or use well-known adaptations. One person may fall deeply and wholly in love, and then back out of love after seven years. Another may consider it crucial to get married before having sex. Someone may not mind if their partner seems to flirt a lot, so long as they do not actually have sex with anyone else. People take a pragmatic approach to monogamy, while still referencing idealized monogamy in various ways.

It may seem strange to have a monogamous standard that is largely unattainable. However, impracticality is not really a factor here. Consider modern beauty standards for women. They are entirely unachievable for the vast majority of women. At the same time, they remain *the standard* by which beauty is judged.

The Scope of Monogamy

The reason I bring up idealized monogamy is to demonstrate that monogamy does not just happen in the bedroom. Fairy-tale monogamy describes the entire lives of two people. It affects their thoughts and desires during every moment. It has all kinds of implications for what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable social behavior.

This begs the question, "how far?" Specifically, how far does the idea of monogamy stretch? Clearly it is not just a matter of who has sex with whom, but it extends out into the social world.

Exercise 2: Monogamous Assumptions

Because monogamy is a default assumption in our culture, assumptions of monogamy show up in various social situations that have little direct connection to sexuality. What are some of these situations? What cultural artifacts reflect monogamy, or assume monogamy? How do these assumptions occur?

This is a hard question, so let me give an example: the company social event or holiday party. Corporations hold these events all the time. For the gala events, it is typical to allow each employee to bring one other (adult) person from outside the company. It is assumed that this person is the employee's lover, spouse, partner, or significant other. It is assumed that the employee only has one such person they would like to bring. And thus monogamy is present in this very unlikely setting.

When you have come up with a number of cultural scenes where assumptions of monogamy exert some influence, turn the page.

Monogamous Assumptions

Any attempt to list monogamous assumptions in the culture will necessarily be incomplete. Let me hit some of my favorite examples.

(On a side note, the most foolproof way to expose these assumptions is to try to be nonmonogamous. Then, monogamous assumptions tend to become clear as they impact one's life, often in surprising and uncomfortable ways.)

A wedding or engagement ring is usually considered to be a sign that someone is "taken".

Monogamy is usually considered to be a prerequisite for having children. Fears that paternity will not be clear play a part in this, though not a strong one. Instead, it seems that a lack of monogamy constitutes clear evidence that two people are not settled enough to properly consider bearing children.

When people speak of their boyfriend or girlfriend, it is assumed that they only have one. I expect that it is fairly rare for someone to ask "is that your only boyfriend?" without having seen some direct evidence of other boyfriends.

When someone flirts at a bar, it is assumed that they are single. When someone with a wedding or engagement ring flirts at a bar, it is assumed they are cheating.

The point I am making here is that assumptions of monogamy are used to structure interactions in all kinds of situations. A shared understanding of monogamy is in fact a major structuring element in social settings. It determines who sits next to whom, what sort of behavior is inappropriate, how the social web is understood, and so on.

Similarly, a shared understanding of monogamy is a structuring element within relationships. People in monogamous relationships are able to take quite a bit for granted, on the assumption that the other person has a similar understanding of monogamy. The "monogamy talk" that often happens in the first couple months of a relationship is an explicit affirmation that an agreement is being entered into, one that depends on this shared understanding of monogamy. Monogamy affects what sort of behavior a person in a relationship will consider appropriate, both for themselves and their partner. It also affects how they understand the relationship itself. On occasion, two people will come to a relationship with significantly different ideas of how monogamy works, and this can cause trouble down the line.

Monogamy provides various cultural scripts, both in relationships and in the social world. By using these scripts, people can often communicate or share understanding without explicitly describing their situation. Overall, this is a good phenomenon. Shared cultural understanding serves an important function in the culture, functioning as a sort of cultural shorthand. It is only becomes a problem when this shorthand causes people to make bad assumptions, or when it is used as a basis for enforcing conformity.

Compulsory Monogamy

Modern systems of cultural conformity perform the miracle of allowing us to think that we are making a choice, when the choice we are making is really not much of a choice at all. Monogamy is one such choice. On the surface, it seems like something we choose. Indeed, people moving into a relationship often have the “we should stop seeing other people” conversation as evidence of this choice. But in actuality, when a person attempts to choose something other than monogamy, they run into numerous forms of resistance.

Exercise 3: Forms of Monogamous Compulsion

The purpose of this exercise is to come up with the various ways that our culture pushes us towards monogamy. When a person decides to be openly nonmonogamous, who will argue with them over it? How will the argument go? What legal, financial, and social structures require or enforce monogamy? How do personal emotions and relationship expectations push us towards monogamy? What monogamous assumptions end up self-ratifying, creating monogamy as a result of false assumption?

Note that these forces are not applied evenly, so we can expect that a particular openly nonmonogamous person may not encounter all of them, or indeed any of them. However, we can still analyze them in terms of generalities, by brainstorming a number of things that could potentially push a person towards monogamy.

When you have come up with a number of monogamous compulsions, turn the page.

Forms of Monogamous Compulsion

Again, it is impossible to list all the ways that monogamy is pushed in our culture. However, we can separate them out into general categories. I will start with the most general (and most obvious) and work my way down to the most specific.

First, the legal and institutional arrangements all assume monogamy, and tend to punish those who stray. Sometimes this effect is inadvertent, other times it is purposeful. Divorce and custody courts tend to punish nonmonogamy, both financially and by removing children. Legal marriage, with all its attendant benefits, does not adapt to nonmonogamy.

Second, broadcast culture admits no possibility of nonmonogamy, aside from the occasional ill-fated (usually violently ill-fated) affair. When television discusses monogamy, it is usually on talk shows, with admissions of cheating. Nonmonogamy is rarely displayed in a positive light, when it is displayed at all. The lack of openly nonmonogamous cultural scripts means that people attempting nonmonogamy usually have to make it up as they go.

Third, there is a heavy social pressure to be monogamous. Nonmonogamy is considered immoral. Admissions of such disqualify a person for public office, and often for teaching positions. People will disown children, parents, or friends upon discovering a tendency to stray. Parents will assume that nonmonogamy on the part of their children means no grandchildren, no marriage, and no future to the relationship. Nonmonogamy will be put down in social settings, sometimes with “logical” argument, other times through expressions of disgust. Admitting a lack of monogamy opens a person to a host of other accusations: unstable, diseased, selfish, and so on.

Fourth, the act of being nonmonogamous requires two other people to do it with you, and finding these people can be very difficult. Even when one’s partner(s) want to be nonmonogamous, often their feelings of jealousy prevent them from doing so, or cause them to pursue a double standard. Other times, jealousy or other excuses will be used as an attempt to create monogamy when one partner wants it and another does not.

Fifth, monogamous assumptions are buried in the way we think, and this remains largely true even when a person commits to being nonmonogamous. Analyzing these assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper, but let me discuss one of my favorites. People assume that any sort of nonmonogamy is really cheating, with all that that entails. So a person may be in a relationship (or multiple relationships) where nonmonogamy is fine, and may in fact have permission to do so. But at the same time they may have internalized this assumption, and this can show up as guilty feelings, even when there is nothing to be guilty about.

Monogamous Compulsions and Power

While some of these monogamous compulsions are enforced in an impersonal manner (via the media or laws), most of them are enforced by a person. That person can be a friend, coworker, landlord, family member, or partner. In other words, monogamous compulsions are typically operations of influence between people. Monogamy is therefore a sort of common language, a way of transmitting influence between people. If we consider interpersonal influence a kind of power, shared monogamous ideology becomes a conduit for this sort of power.

In other words, compulsory monogamy is not just a system of cultural conformity. It is also a system of cultural power. It is one where there are visible winners and losers, those who conform and those who do not. When monogamous ideology is present in a situation (and it often is, due to its wide scope), it becomes available as a sort of toolkit of influence, which can be used in various ways by various people to get other people to do things, or not do things. Compulsory monogamy forms a portion of the web of influence that exists in social, familial, and relationship networks. It is a way to get things, and every time a person uses it to get something, they strengthen the whole system of compulsory monogamy.

The three exercises so far form a complete picture. A highly idealized shared understanding of monogamy is used as the basis for a system of interpersonal power. Because people like power, they extend that system to its rational limits, widening its scope to cover as much as possible. The possible scope is quite wide, specifically because the (usually unattainable) idealized standard of monogamy means that one can always find ways to be more monogamous. For the system of power to work effectively, it needs to be mandatory.

In this manner, we can see that compulsory monogamy is actually mostly used among monogamous people. However, to be effective, it must find ways to enforce monogamy on those who would not desire it.

In the operation I have just described, compulsory monogamy is similar to other systems of cultural power, especially those that are not necessarily marked on the body, and are mediated through sexuality. (Though let me say that it is in no way equivalent in operation to any other system of power, but rather that they share some mechanisms.) Compulsory heterosexuality is one such system. It is built on shared understanding (of proper gender roles and gendered sexuality), and it is primarily used as an enforcement mechanism between heterosexuals. However, to be effective, it must recognize queer people, and find ways to punish them or force them towards heterosexuality.

Intersections

In activist circles, it is commonly recognized that systems of power intersect. In other words, they are used to shore each other up. For example, homophobia is used to enforce

sexist gender roles, by labeling gender deviants as homosexual or queer. Highly gendered accusations of rampant sexuality are used to falsely portray African-American men as insatiable and African-American women as available. Shrill fears of rampant polygamy are used to shore up feeling against gay marriage. And so on.

Since we have established compulsory monogamy as a system of cultural power, we should expect that it will be used in the service of other codified systems of power. (We will leave the analysis of how other forms of power are used to shore up compulsory monogamy for another day.) The only question is how this occurs.

Exercise 4: Monogamous Ideology in the Service of Power

How are culture-wide expectations of monogamy used to reinforce existing power inequalities? How are these expectations used against particular groups? For this exercise, it may help to think of the group first, and then ask yourself if compulsory monogamy is used in some way to discredit this group, or to make its members conform to some expected behavior.

When you have come up with a couple examples of this in action, turn the page.

To answer the question of intersections, I have assembled a list that is in no way exhaustive.

Women

Prior to the early 1900's, monogamy was mostly for women. It grew out of the fact that women were essentially property, and were largely valued for their reproductive organs. It was considered bad form to let other people play with your property. Modern monogamy is a derivative of this control over women.

It should come as no surprise then, that the system of compulsory monogamy is often used against women as a class. In general, expectations of monogamy currently fall much harder on women than on men. There is a sort of culture-wide double standard here, where men are expected to sleep around (even if it is considered vaguely immoral), and women are required to not do so.

We can see this in the fact that most nonmonogamous epithets are gendered for women: "slut", "tramp", "whore", "easy", "nymphomaniac", and so on. "Sex addict" is the only one I can think of for men, and it does not carry much bite. These terms are typically used against women, for the purpose of keeping them in line. "In line" can mean monogamous, but it can also mean wearing certain sorts of clothes, acting a certain way, or not going out alone. Really, these terms are flexible enough to be used almost any time that some man does not like what some woman is doing. (Or for that matter, if some woman does not like what some other woman is doing.) So we can see that threats of nonmonogamous stigma are being used to control women.

Sometimes these threats have very real legal consequences. For example, bringing a woman's sexual character into question is a common tactic of the defense in rape cases, and if accusations of nonmonogamy can be made to stick, it gets much harder to convict.

Of course, compulsory monogamy is only one player here. These terms also partake of a certain ideology of sexual purity, where some women are pure and worthy, and others have too much sex. However, it is telling that insulting a woman often boils down to calling into question her monogamous credentials.

In addition, the power mechanisms of compulsory monogamy are more likely to be used against women, because of existing power inequalities in the culture. For example, consider jealousy-fueled domestic violence. While control is always the purpose of such violence, jealousy is sometimes used as an excuse to exert this control. As women are usually (though not always) on the painful end of domestic violence, we can surmise that compulsory monogamy is sometimes being used to enable violence against women. (Jealousy has been determined to be a statistically significant risk factor for domestic violence by Dutton, van Ginkel, & Landolt (1996) and Barnett, Martinez, & Bluestein (1995), among others.)

Note that even though women are definitely on the losing end of compulsory monogamy, our culture generally considers monogamy itself to be a boon to women, and also thinks (incorrectly) that women are more likely to want monogamy. This is an obfuscation. While women are certainly able to use the power mechanisms of compulsory monogamy, and are often winners in particular situations because of it, women as a class do not benefit from the regime of compulsory monogamy.

Sex Workers

Sex workers who are also women are on the losing end of some of the effects I have described in the last section. Also, sex workers of any gender are considered to be impure by our culture, and face stigma because of that.

However, I want to focus on one particular way that sex workers are attacked by our culture. Specifically, their relationships are devalued, either because they are assumed to be nonmonogamous, or because they are thought of as impure. In either case, they are typically not seen as fit for a proper (monogamous) relationship.

This has a very real effect. When governments pass laws, they assume that any relationship a sex worker has must be exploitative. As a result, anti-pimping laws often criminalize these relationships. These laws are usually written to criminalize the act of living off the proceeds of sex work (when one is not the sex worker), which effectively criminalizes any relationship a sex worker has, exploitative or not. For this reason, anti-pimping laws are regularly criticized by sex workers' advocacy groups (along with any kind of prostitution criminalization).

It is hard to say whether this governmental blind spot is primarily caused by notions of sexual impurity or effects of compulsory monogamy (and indeed it is impossible to fully separate the two), but in any case compulsory monogamy is a factor in this very particular oppression of sex workers.

Gay Men

Allegations of promiscuity are constantly leveled against gay men by the right wing. This is somewhat based on gendered notions of sexuality: without women to somehow tame them, gay men are assumed to embody out-of-control male sexuality.

Because we live under the regime of compulsory monogamy, the alleged promiscuity of gay men leads people to conclude that gay men cannot be happy, that they must be diseased, and that they cannot be integrated into proper (monogamous) society, or indeed civilization. Unhappiness and disease are seen as the inevitable end to any type of nonmonogamy. Compulsory monogamy is therefore brought into service against gay men.

We have seen this process in action during the fight over same-sex marriage. Currently, right-wing commentators consistently use a slippery-slope argument against queer rights,

and against same-sex marriage in particular. They say that if we grant LGBTQ people recognition, then polygamy, bestiality, and necrophilia will surely follow, along with the collapse of civilization as we know it. Polygamy is the only one of those outcomes that is likely to attract any following at all. Recently, these same homophobes have been pointing at polyamory as proof that their predictions are coming true. They are making a basic assumption that queer men are somehow unsuited to monogamy, and then using this assumption to undermine the argument for same-sex marriage, on the assumption that nonmonogamy is always bad. In this way, the system of compulsory monogamy is being used against the queer community.

Bisexuals

Bisexuals are persistently associated with nonmonogamy in our culture. Quite often this association is dead wrong: plenty of bisexuals are monogamous, perhaps the majority. However, the association persists none the less. The conceptual reasons for this association run deep, and I will deal with them in a separate paper.

In a similar manner to gay men, the association of bisexuals with nonmonogamy lets people assume all kinds of nasty things. Bisexual men are assumed to be sexually out of control and carriers of disease. Bisexual women are assumed to be wild and available. Both are thought of as untrustworthy and inevitably dissatisfied. These are the standard stigmas that are consistently used against bisexuals.

The assumptions of compulsory monogamy therefore contribute heavily to the stigmatization of bisexuals.

“The Down Low”

(I have put quotes around “the down low” because at this point, using the term to unproblematically refer to people or behavior is effectively racist and biphobic. Media mistreatment of men of color who sleep with men over the past ten years has contributed to a general moral panic, and the actual details of the actual lives of these men have been lost or obscured in the rush to moralize. When I refer to the down low here, I am referring to this process of demonization, not these men or what they might do.)

The down low media storm focused on the lives of African-American and Latino-American men who sleep with men. These men were assumed to have wives or girlfriends who did not know about the sex with men. (This assumption was often incorrect, as evidenced in statements in some of the articles themselves.)

Because of compulsory monogamy, cheating tends to carry connotations of disease. In the case of the down low, the media jumped from the assumption that these men were cheating to the assumption that they were spreading HIV to their wives and girlfriends. This logic was used to blame these men for the very real high rates of HIV infection among African-American women. As it turns out, a further study has shown that this conclusion was false. However, that did not stop it from being used for a process of

stigmatization that is still ongoing. Compulsory monogamy contributed to this process. (For more information, see “Focusing ‘down low’: bisexual black men, HIV risk and heterosexual transmission” by Millet, Malebranche, Mason, and Spikes.)

Conclusion

Compulsory monogamy is a cultural system of interpersonal power. It is supported by a largely unattainable monogamous standard, making violations of monogamy a fairly subjective matter. Because it is a system of power, it has spread into various social, cultural, and ideological venues – basically any place that the high standard of idealized monogamy can be rationally applied.

Compulsory monogamy is used to help maintain various codified systems of unequal power. Indeed, it derives from the historical oppression of women. Today, it has partially detached from women (though they are still a primary target) and its ideological mechanisms can be used against disparate groups, particularly sexual minorities. To be more effective, analysis of the oppression of these groups should incorporate an analysis of monogamous ideology and/or notions of sexual purity.