

# What can be learned from Polyamory?

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## *Introduction*

Different cultures identify love the way they see it, even in the United States we have a variety of interpretations and they have changed from century to century. Monogamy is the most widely accepted view on love. It is the basis of the most popular aspect of romance, finding “the one”. Through this lense, love is reserved for that one special person who you will spend the rest of your life with. However, the myth is often dispelled as much as it is proven. Monogamy has a fifty percent success rate according to mainstream marriage statistics (Explained).

Polyamory is the alternative for someone who feels they do not fit in the monogamous way of living. In polyamory, a person does not have to settle for “the one”, by mainstream standards, but can experience true love in more than one person. This idea can seem radical to those who were raised with the monogamous mind set, and has a lot of misconceptions. Are there advantages monogamous people can learn from polyamorous people to develop more fulfilling relationships? I believe they can.

## *The struggle of monogamous relationships*

Comedian Daniel Sloss has a wonderful analogy he was taught by his father growing up. Life is a jigsaw puzzle and in the center of that puzzle is the partner piece, “the one”. Sloss

claims that his father's analogy led him to believe that if you are not with someone, you are broken and therefore not whole. "You want this perfect person who you've never met before to come out of nowhere, fit your life perfectly, complete you, and make your life whole for the first time," Sloss puts in his Netflix special *Jigsaw* (Oron). In 2016, 2.2 million couples got married in the United States, and over 800,000 called it quits after (Explained). Daniel Sloss keeps count of how many couples have broken up over his analogy bit, as of October 2018; 7,400+ break ups, 34 cancelled engagements, and 42 divorces (Oron).

Romantic jealousy is so common place that no one bats an eye when it occurs and it is deemed a very normal thing. It is also seen as a major obstacle to anyone who thinks polyamory would never work, because jealousy should be enough to stop it from happening. However, researcher Jorge N. Ferrer takes a look into evolutionary psychology to find what may possibly be the link to jealousy. Ferrer believes that jealousy and monogamy are intimately connected in our primeval human history and that jealousy emerged as a defense mechanism to defend against the possibility of your partner producing a child with someone else (Ferrer). He also brings up that many people may appear monogamous but "both anonymous surveys and genetic studies reveal that many are so socially but not biologically." (Ferrer).

### ***The misconceptions of Polyamory***

A trio of researchers; Daniel Cardoso, Patricia Pascoal, and Pedro Rosa, studied a sample of opinions from a Portuguese survey of 609 volunteer participants. The subject of this survey was their thoughts on polyamory. The biggest misconception about the polyamorous community is equating their relationship handling with everything else in life. In their article a concept appears called the "halo effect". The trio of researchers found that people would associate more positive

characteristics with monogamous people than with non-monogamous people, even when those characteristics are completely unrelated to their partnering or sexuality (Cardoso, Pascoal, Rosa). These views can include diminished trustworthiness in a person and less than optimal sexual health. This may be contributing to the sustaining discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards polyamorous people.

### ***Strengths of Polyamory and what Monogamy can learn from them***

The expectations and communication practices that are common in polyamorous relationships aid people in navigating practical changes. Psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Sheff has studied polyamorous relationships and concludes that “in an age when change is rapid and pervasive, poly families are especially flexible, and resilient, adept at surfing the post-modern currents of modern family life” (Ben-Ze’ev, Brunning). Individuals in a monogamous relationship are more likely to become distant from those outside the relationship, however, polyamory empowers individuals with a greater range of interpersonal connections and broader social networks than they would otherwise experience (Ben-Ze’ev, Brunning).

Polyamorous relationships possess an ability to enhance the personal capacities and social structures required to productively confront emotional complexity (Ben-Ze’ev, Brunning). Researchers Aaron Ben-Ze’ev and Luke Brunning suggest there is an extra dimension to the way polyamorous relationships facilitate emotional intensity. These relationships also provide a framework to discover new desires, and accommodate them as they manifest in certain conditions (Sheff). With the advantages of polyamorous practices and expectations, individuals come to the discovery and development of personal desire. This ensures that polyamory is well placed to resist what is known as “hedonic adaptation”, which is the human ability to return to

stable levels of happiness despite any major positive or negative events that occur in life. In other words; polyamory is never boring. With techniques showing such high results in couples' development of happiness, researchers like Dr. Elizabeth Sheff, Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning suggest some of these strategies should be adopted by monogamous couples (Sheff, Ben-Ze'ev, Brunning).

A lot of pitfalls for monogamous relationships can be attributed to the failure to communicate truthfully, something polyamory confronts with encouraged transparency. Polyamorous partners often define boundaries and form agreements about what each relationship should look like, and these types of negotiations can be beneficial to monogamous relationships (Cooney). According to a TIME article, a couples therapist has observed monogamous couples avoid addressing jealousy altogether, whereas non-monogamous couples are more vocal with their feelings. "Perhaps due to its prevalence, jealousy is widely accepted as normal..." but it does not have to be (Cooney). In a 2017 investigation of consensually non-monogamous relationships it was found that monogamous couples are more likely to sacrifice their individual needs for the sake of making the relationship work (Cooney). A theme that seems to reoccur in this paper as it harkens back to the analogy of the jigsaw puzzle and the research conducted by Ben-Ze'ev and Brunning with romantic compromises.

### ***Findings***

Polyamory is more than meets the initial eye. The deeper the understanding of it the more realization comes that there can be a lot to learn from these types of relationships. The techniques employed in polyamorous relationships have large potential to be solutions to the downfalls of monogamous relationships. Contrary to the monogamous ideology, polyamorous

discourse is very clear that ambivalence and conflicts will arise in relationships but are very survivable (Sheff).

This clarity helps defuse anxieties that arise when people prohibit themselves from feeling conflicted about their relationships and their partners. These anxieties have a tendency to transform clashing feelings into something painful (Ferrer). However, learning to communicate more clearly and being able to sustain individual desires with minimum compromise may lead some to more fulfilling relationships. While romance can be a complex subject, one has many tools to help navigate them.

### *Conclusion*

My goal was never to convince anyone that polyamory is superior to monogamy, but rather expose holes that can be patched with borrowed techniques from polyamory. Not everyone will be one hundred percent comfortable with, or attempt, a polyamorous relationship. However, increased communication and learning to experience sympathetic joy in one's partner are skills that can benefit any and all kinds of relationships. It is not likely we will ever see the story of "the one" disappear from our mythology but we learn that we do not always need to settle for stories and adapt to whatever romantic situation we find ourselves in, to treat each relationship with individual standards that suit our needs. Hopefully, polyamory no longer seems very radical and can now be seen as something that can be very advantageous to those seeking something different. The exposure of new ideas can open up discussions. Professor Marston, creator of Wonder Woman, said it best, "You cannot corrupt people with ideas. It is ignorance that is corrupting." (Robinson).

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