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Abstract

This commentary on *The Fewer The Merrier (TFTM)* adopts a lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) lens. Whilst LGB people commonly construct successful CNM relationships, and the focus on opposite-sex relationships obscured some aspects of United States society that are actively resisting the stigmatization of CNM relationships as a result. I call attention to the historic ways that ‘adultery’ has been legally defined in gendered terms, and argue for an analysis of social stigma that engages substantively with qualitative research about how CNM is lived among people of diverse sexualities.

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Non-monogamous relationships are common in human societies (Murdock, 1949) but are considered problematic by many people in the United States. *The Fewer the Merrier (TFTM)* reports four empirical studies that draw attention to “our society’s obsession with romantic ideals of fidelity,” a welcome intervention “in the context of recent debates about same-sex marriage.” There has been an explosion of qualitative work on non-monogamies in the past decade (Barker & Langdrige, 2010), and the quantitative studies reported here triangulate a *halo effect* surrounding monogamous relationships and the stigmatization of consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships. In this commentary, I argue that the contribution to this paper is best measured is seen through a lens that makes same-sex relationships more central to the analysis.

It is not news that lesbians and gay men commonly inhabit consensual non-monogamous NM relationship (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), as do many self-identified bisexual people (Barker, 2005). LGB people evidence ‘normative creativity’ (Brown, 1989) by successfully assembling CNM relationships, in spite of societal stigma. *TFTM* rightly notes that fear of CNM is used by conservatives in the United States to argue against marriage equality in that country, whilst gay men in the United States commonly experience relationship satisfaction in CNM relationships. People in CNM relationships are also *analogized to* lesbians, gay men and bisexuals; *TFTM* suggests that the former group - like the latter group - should enjoy legal protection from discrimination. By rejecting the idealization of fidelity, and by crafting their own norms, some same-sex couples have achieved a level of social recognition that some heterosexual people might envy. LGB people could be described as leading in the deconstructing the ‘halo effect’ surrounding monogamy in United States society.

However, this frame was not evident in the article, in which ‘relationships’ and ‘heterosexual relationships’ were, at times, conflated. In two vignette studies, student participants rated a monogamous opposite-sex couple more positively than a CNM heterosexual couple. Of course, these students inhabit a society in which there are many satisfying CNM same-sex relationships, as sex columnist Dan Savage advertises widely. However, the vignette studies considered only heterosexual couples and the participants’ sexual identities were not reported. Any influence of LGB cultures on participants’ judgments about CNM relationships would have been obscured by these methods.

The intersecting ways that people are treated differently on the basis of their partner’s number and gender create revealing policy conundrums. I write from the United Kingdom where Civil Partnership for same-sex couples differs from heterosexual marriage in that only the latter can be dissolved on the grounds of ‘adultery.’ In UK law, ‘adultery’ is a heterosexual act by definition. In

English law, into the 19th century, a man who had sex with another's wife, could have been sued for 'debauching' the woman, considered the husband's chattel. But a woman could make no claim on an adulterous husband on her own behalf. For this reason, to this day, if two married man in the UK have sex with each other, they have not *legally* committed 'adultery' whatever their wives might say to the contrary.

This history of marriage law puts *consensual* heterosexual non-monogamy in context. *TFTM* "focuses on relationship disagreements" and the vignette studies describe Sara and Dan who "mutually agreed that it would be fine if they saw other people." Free-choices is increasingly seen as sound basis for intimate relationships in the current postmodern moment (Baumann, 2003), a factor that psychologists have already been theorized as related to the rise of CNM (Barker & Langdrige, 2010). I wondered if participants in the vignette experiments had implicit theories of gender differences that would affect the way they judged CNM relationships. If the participants explained Sara's or Dan's reasons for consenting to non-monogamy, would they give the same answer? *TFTM* argues that CNM is considered 'unnatural' in US society. However, evolutionary theories, among others, describe it as 'natural' for men to pursue short-term non-monogamous arrangements. It would be interesting to know if women and men in heterosexual arrangements share the stigma of CNM 50:50, or if non-monogamy is sometimes seen as a natural thing for men to want, but not for women to want.

I have argued for an LGB lens on this paper, in part because of my experience of teaching LGBT psychology to heterosexual-identified students on both sides of the Atlantic. In those classrooms, I have challenged such students with readings such as LaSala (2005). Some students only experience of non-monogamy is of non-consensual cheating, and these students struggle to square commitments to LGBT-affirmative perspectives with empirical research of gay men's non-monogamous arrangements, and often alight on evolutionary ideas about men's 'nature' to resolve the dissonance. I do not mean to endorse that evolutionary view here, only to point out that it is a view of men's sexuality that has long influenced the legal rights and responsibilities of marriage, including the sanctions around adultery. An analysis of the stigma of CNM will be strengthened by keeping the deep-rooted historical reasons for that stigma in view, and their relationship to long-standing heteronormative constructions of gender differences. Thankfully, researchers and policy makers are the happy position of being able to draw upon this article's insights, to combine them with a rich tradition of qualitative research on CNM practitioners, and to go further in analyzing these social dynamics.

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