

# Mononormativity, Polypride, and the “Mono–Poly Wars”

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**Abstract** Both in everyday life and scholarly discourse, monogamists and polyamorists tend to unfavorably portray one another as somehow flawed, misguided, or, in a word, “inferior.” This article documents and critically examines two pairs of interlocked psychosocial attitudes—monoprude/polyphobia and polypride/monophobia—mediating this predicament of mutual competition in the context of Western mononormative culture. The ideological nature of these “mono–poly wars” is demonstrated through a brief review of empirical literature on the psychological health and relationship quality of monogamous and polyamorous individuals and couples. The article concludes by outlining a critical pluralist approach that eschews universalizing hierarchies between monogamy and polyamory, and provides tools for making qualitative distinctions within and among relational styles.

**Keywords** Monogamy · Polyamory · Nonmonogamy · Mononormativity · Polyphobia · Polypride · Critical pluralism

*Monogamy* and *polyamory* are loaded terms for almost everyone in Western culture, tending to awaken visceral reactions ranging from the radically positive to the extremely negative. On a positive note, monogamy—generally referring to sexually exclusive, pair-bonding romantic relationships—evokes a sense of stability and security, emotional depth and fulfillment of romantic fantasies, enduring or everlasting love, shared labor and resources, cohabitation and family, and moral and religious rectitude. On the negative side, it conjures a loss of freedom and entrapment, routine and boredom, mate-guarding behavior and jealousy, adultery and affairs, patriarchal domination and domestic abuse, and even passionate

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homicide. The same goes for polyamory—a relational paradigm based on consensual, multiple affective and sexual relationships.<sup>1</sup> Positively, the term is connected with sexual and emotional freedom, personal empowerment, liberation from patriarchal oppression, ethical interpersonal behavior, honesty and communication, nonpossessive love and overcoming of jealousy, and psychospiritual growth. Negatively, polyamory is linked with shallowness and irresponsibility, psychological immaturity and character flaws, attachment issues and inability to commit, promiscuity and philandering, hedonistic narcissism, lust and sexual greed, one partner bullying the other into nonmonogamy, moral and spiritual failure, and religious sacrilege or sinfulness.

Nothing indicates better that a phenomenon merits careful scrutiny than its power to catalyze such drastically polar—and emotionally charged—reactions. Three factors seem to play a role in these conflicting responses. First, these relational choices arguably appeal to two equally legitimate but often conflicting human needs: the need for emotional (and sexual, at times) stability and security, on the monogamy side, and the need for the sexual (and emotional, at times) diversity and novelty, on the polyamory side (Anderson 2012; Ashkam 1984; Brandon 2010). Second, as with most existential options, monogamy and polyamory can cast “light” and “shadow”—that is, both relational styles can be engaged with mindfulness, integrity, and respect, but also unconsciously, deceitfully, or out of insecurities, conditionings, and internalized ideologies (e.g., Anapol 2010; Ferrer 2007, in press; Masters 2007). Third, diverging reactions to monogamy or polyamory may be also rooted in genetic and biological variables (van Anders et al. 2007; Walum et al. 2008, 2012), developmental junctures (Conley et al. 2012c), sociopolitical situations (Robinson 2013), and cultural and religious dispositions (Ho 2006; Kolesar 2010). Taken together, these and other possible factors (e.g., gender variances and identity, sexual orientation) weave a very complex relational tapestry suggesting the need to scrutinize the roots of the prevailing attitudes toward these relational identities, orientations, or choices (e.g., Barker 2005; Klesse 2014; Robinson 2013).<sup>2</sup>

My aim in this paper, thus, is to examine some central dynamics mediating dominant socially and scholarly views of monogamy and polyamory, as a groundwork to destabilize and ultimately overcome the mono/poly binary (see Ferrer 2017a). To this end, I first introduce what I call the “mono–poly wars,” that is, the predicament of mutual competition and condescension among monogamists

<sup>1</sup> The term *polyamory* is a hybrid word etymologically meaning “many loves.” Also known as responsible nonmonogamy (e.g., Anapol 1997; Klesse 2006), polyamory is both a philosophy of love and “a relationship orientation that assumes that it is possible to love many people and to maintain multiple intimate and sexual relationships” (Barker 2005, p. 75; cf. Sheff 2006). Polyamory has also been described as a form of nonmonogamy grounded on the belief in “people’s capacity to share and multiply their love in honest and consensual ways” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004, p. 165). As discussed below, polyamory is usually contrasted to not only monogamy and polygamy, but also swinging, casual sex, and promiscuity.

<sup>2</sup> Although this paper cannot address relational malleability and gender differences, research shows that not only can males and females undergo important changes in their sexual and relational orientations (for discussions, see Conley et al. 2012c; Ferrer, in press), but also that individual women show greater sexual plasticity than men over time arguably due to a variety of evolutionary and sociocultural forces (Baumeister 2000).

and polyamorists,<sup>3</sup> as well as describe and document two pairs of interlocked psychosocial attitudes—monoprider/polyphobia and polypride/monophobia—which, in the context of Western mononormative culture, shape and energize those wars. I then show the ideological nature of many of the assumptions behind these attitudes through a brief review of available empirical literature on the psychological health and relationship quality of monogamous and polyamorous individuals and couples. In conclusion, I argue for the value of holding a critically pluralist stance when contrasting monogamy and polyamory—one that eschews universalizing hierarchies and provides tools for the making of qualitative distinctions both within and among relational styles.

### The “Mono–Poly Wars”

Mononormativity and its discontents shape the predicament of mutual competition and condescension among monogamists and polyamorists that I call the “mono–poly wars.” Although the origins of human monogamy are highly controversial and probably multifarious (e.g., Clark 1998; Fisher 1992; Kanazawa and Still 1999; Lukas and Clutton-Brock 2013; Morell 1998; Ryan and Jethá 2010), the ideal of a sexually exclusive couple as the optimal model for healthy relating has prevailed in the West for many centuries (Herlihy 1995; MacDonald 1995). It is also well established that this ideal became normative and even today is socially enforced through a variety of cultural, institutional, and legal mechanisms (see Bergstrand and Sinski 2010; Emens 2004; Kipnis 2003; Rosa 1994). In this regard, Pieper and Bauer (2005) coined the term *mononormativity* “to refer to dominant assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of monogamy, analogous to such assumptions around heterosexuality inherent in the term *heteronormativity*” (as cited in Barker and Langdridge 2010b, p. 750). Similarly, Bergstrand and Sinski (2010) called monocentrism “the unquestioned assumption that monogamy, or marriage to one person only, is morally superior to all other marital forms” (p. 99). Whether one calls it mononormativity (Pieper and Bauer 2005), monocentrism (Bergstrand and Sinski 2010), monogamism (Anderson 2012), compulsory monogamy (Emens 2004; Schippers 2016; Willey 2015), socially imposed monogamy (MacDonald 1995), or heteronormative monogamy (Noël 2006), this belief system not only establishes the monogamous (and heterosexual) couple as natural, optimal, and morally loftier, but also stigmatizes nonmonogamous alternatives as unnatural, dysfunctional, or even perverse (see Conley et al. 2012a; Grunt-Mejer and Campbell 2016; Sheff and Hammers 2011).

It is understandable that—probably in part as a defensive strategy against standard criticism—most poly authors sharply distinguish polyamory not only from monogamy and polygamy, but also from promiscuity, casual sex, and swinging

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<sup>3</sup> In what follows, I differentiate between monogamists/polyamorists (who ideologically hold their preferred relational style as natural, superior, or advantageous) and monogamous/polyamorous (who do not).

(e.g., Ritchie 2010).<sup>4</sup> As Klesse (2006) pointed out, “The presentation of polyamory as ‘responsible non-monogamy’ is based on the attempt to challenge the negative assumptions of non-monogamous people as promiscuous, over-sexed, self-obsessed, irrational and pathological” (p. 577). In addition, the emphasis on love (vs. sex) permits poly activists to present monogamous people as the ones who are sex-obsessed in their elevation of sexual fidelity to sacrosanct status (e.g., Rowan 1995). Discourse in advocacy of both nonmonogamy and polyamory<sup>5</sup> has consistently included both a vigorous critique of monogamy as patriarchal, capitalist, racist, hypocritical, or sexually and emotionally pernicious (e.g., Anderson 2012; Jackson and Scott 2004; Ryan and Jethá 2010; Robinson 1997; Rosa 1994; Schippers 2016; Stelboum 2010; Willey 2006); and the elevation of polyamory as biologically, psychologically, socially, morally, or spiritually natural or advantageous (see Petrella 2007; Wilkinson 2010; Willey 2016).<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the scholarly arguments reviewed below, I have consistently observed that, at the ground level of everyday conversation, monogamists and polyamorists tend to look down at each other.<sup>7</sup> Monogamists generously but condescendingly assume that polyamorous people have not yet found true love or their soul mate—a time in which many monogamists confidently believe the polyamorous will surely “convert” to monogamy. Likewise, candidly but patronizingly, many polyamorists believe that monogamous people have not yet accessed the nonpossessive essence of human love—which would allow them to open up their limiting exclusive relationships. Vastly different interpretations of the historical and evolutionary evidence lead members of both camps to claim that monogamy or polyamory is the “natural” relational or sexual way of human intimate bonding (for a cogent critique of these “naturalizing” discourses, see Willey 2016). What is more, in the eyes of their respective antagonists, both factions are seen as unmistakably patriarchal. Whereas polyamorists appeal to feminist accounts of the historical and structural links between monogamy and male’s ownership of women for reproductive control, monogamists point to how closely polyamory resembles the male polygamous dream of having many female consorts,

<sup>4</sup> As Rambukkana (2015) argued, the culturally prevalent, essentializing portrayal of polygamy as patriarchal polygyny perpetuates mononormative values. Interestingly, both monogamous and polyamorous individuals tend to position themselves as superior to polygamous people (e.g., Klesse 2006; Ritchie 2010).

<sup>5</sup> *Nonmonogamy* is a more encompassing term than polyamory. Whereas the former includes any type of nonmonogamous relationship—including open marriage, swinging, and promiscuity—the latter is normally used to refer to the consensual, long-term maintenance of more than one romantic, sexual, and/or emotional bond (see Barker and Langdridge 2010a, b; Haritaworn et al. 2006; Klesse 2006; Sheff 2006). Although this essay mostly focuses on polyamory, much of what is said about the “mono-poly wars” may well apply to other nonmonogamies.

<sup>6</sup> Although virtually all poly activists and scholars critique compulsory monogamy, some neither reject monogamy per se nor hold polyamory as categorically superior (e.g., Anapol 1997, 2010; Barker 2012; Taormino 2008; Veaux and Rickert 2014).

<sup>7</sup> The following account is informed by almost three decades of personal exchanges in Spain and the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as many European (e.g., England, Germany, Italy), Asian (e.g., Japan, India, Indonesia), and Central and South American countries (e.g., Mexico, Peru, Argentina). Although aspects of the following discussion might apply to other cultures, I limit its validity claims to modern Western countries (e.g., European nations, Canada, the United States).

as evidenced in the historical reality of harems (see Betzig 1986; Summers 2005). These charges are often backed up with evolutionary arguments about males’ pressure to secure paternity (e.g., Ryan and Jethá 2010) and interest in increasing procreative power through spreading their genetic code (e.g., Buss 1994), respectively.

In what follows, I argue that these “mono–poly wars” are rooted in—or mediated by—two pairs of interlocked psychosocial attitudes: monoprize/polyphobia and polypride/monophobia. Before discussing the ideological nature of many of the claims used to back up these attitudes, I offer some examples from the literature.

### On Monoprize/Polyphobia

The monoprize/polyphobia system is firmly rooted in mononormativity, which, as described above, “present[s] monogamous coupledness as the only natural and/or morally correct form of human relating” (Barker and Langdrige 2010b, p. 750). Briefly, I use *monoprize* to refer to the psychosocial consideration of monogamy as variously natural, optimal, or superior. While normally exalting the virtues of monogamy, monoprize can also manifest in more concealed ways, such as in the denial or downplaying of the prevalence of affairs in the modern West despite overwhelming statistical evidence (see Anderson 2012; Buss 2000a; Schmitt 2005; Treas and Giesen 2000). Or it can take the form of perpetuating what Vaughan (2003) called the monogamy myth—that is, the belief that people are essentially monogamous and that affairs happen only to “bad” or “weak” people. Monoprize usually comes together with *polyphobia*, which has been defined as (conscious or unconscious) fear of or disgust toward nonmonogamy (Halpern 1999). Polyphobia is rationalized through discourses that condemn nonmonogamy as psychologically immature, morally pernicious, and even religiously sinful (Christianity, the prevalent religion in the modern West, typically considers a sin to have more than one sexual partner or spouse; see Witte 2015). Polyphobia can be either externalized through expressions of fear, revulsion, moral judgment, or spiritual condescension toward polyamorous people; or internalized through the feeling that there must be something wrong with oneself if one wants to love more than one person simultaneously (see Halpern 1999).

Examples of monoprize and polyphobia abound in the literature. Jenkins (2015) called modal monogamy the belief that “the only metaphysically possible romantic love relationships are monogamous ones” (p. 175), and documented how most Western philosophers of love—such as Solomon (2006) and Soble (1987)—associate romantic love with sexual exclusivity (cf. McKeever 2015). Summing up the findings of the Hite’s (1991) report on attitudes toward love and sexuality in England, Robinson (1997) pointed out, “Non-monogamy is associated with promiscuity and shallowness of emotions, whilst monogamy is seen as emotionally and spiritually superior to it” (p. 151). Couples counselor Kane (2010) exemplifies this mindset: “Monogamy is a vehicle for creating deep spiritual connection, and it supports sacredness and depth in ways that open relationships do not” (p. 8). He continued, “The spiritual value of monogamy can also be articulated by viewing how non-monogamous relationships are often felt to be superficial or lacking in

intimacy” (p. 9). Charny (1992), another couples therapist, stated that sexual activity beyond the monogamous dyad is an unequivocal sign of relationship problems. Furthermore, women who have affairs are often associated with diagnostic categories such as “histrionic personality” (Apt and Hurlbert 1994) and narcissism (see Buss and Shackelford 1997). As these examples illustrate, many professional health providers tend to pathologize nonmonogamous relationships and individuals (see Hymer and Rubin 1982; Page 2004; Weitzman 2006).

Other authors accept the “natural” presence of nonmonogamous feelings and desires, but recommend their transformation to achieve “superior” emotional and relational maturity. For example, Masters (2007) claimed that the achievement of mature monogamy—which he characterized as “liberating bondage” (p. 18)—entails the utter eradication of nonmonogamous behaviors, feelings, and desires. After stating that polyamory avoids romantic attachment, uses other connections as distractions or consolations, and confuses love with sexuality, he situated polyamory and mature monogamy in a developmental continuum: “multiple-partnership is an avoidance of mature monogamy...immature monogamy and multiple-partnership are two aspects of a stage of relatedness that must be outgrown before mature monogamy can take the stage” (p. 18).

Other scholars seek to ground their defense of monogamy (and explicit or implicit critique of nonmonogamy) on biological or evolutionary arguments. Including polyamory as a viable alternative for some couples, Brandon (2010) wrote that although people should not be ashamed of their natural nonmonogamous instincts, they “can rise above [their] more animalistic drives” (p. xiv). Similarly, accepting that monogamy is not natural, Barash and Lipton (2009) wrote: “what truly distinguish human beings from other animals” is precisely their capability to “counter some of their biologically given inclinations” (p. 56). In addition to identifying the evolutionary pay-offs of monogamy such as the value of cooperation for parenting, survival, and accumulation of resources (cf. Chapais 2010; Opie 2013; Tucker 2014), Barash and Lipton (2009) claimed to identify a “pro-monogamy hardware” or “neural and hormonal infrastructure to support monogamy” (p. 128) consisting in what they called the Four Horsemen of the Monogamist: attachment theory, mirror neurons, neuroplasticity, and endogenous “love” hormones such as oxytocin and vasopressin. In a similar vein, anthropologist Chapais (2013) argued that the emergence of monogamous bonds granted hominids a crucial evolutionary advantage over other related and extinguished species. The account of monogamy as the distinguishing feature separating humans from animals, as well as the foundation of human civilization, was also vigorously defended by Tucker (2014).

In terms of polyamory’s social perniciousness, the French conservative intellectual Faye (2014) wrote, “the transparent polyamory model...can only result in a multitude of micro-tragedies and, finally, in the solitude and isolation of everyone, culminating in social despair” (p. 42). What is more, Young (2004) wrote, “polyamorous relationships replicate the disposable throwaway values of our capitalist society, treating other people as objects to satisfy our cravings, interchangeably as we please, useful to us only as long as they work for our own purposes” (p. 39). Lastly, in her study of polyamorous families, Sheff (2014) reported her respondents’ experiences of fear, mistrust, and projections of

hypersexualizing by monogamists. Having illustrated the nature of monoprude/ polyphobia, I now turn to its converse system: polypride/monophobia.

### On Polypride/Monophobia

Diametrically opposed to monoprude, *polypride* stands for the consideration of polyamory as variously natural, advantageous, or superior. To my knowledge, Halpern (1999) provided the earliest expose of this attitude: “one can begin to see oneself as more highly evolved and special for wanting and being able to do this really wonderful thing—loving more than one” (p. 159). Polypride is usually attended by *monophobia*—that is, a critical characterization of monogamy as unnatural, hypocritical, or morally and spiritually bankrupt. As Taormino (2008) put it:

A disturbing trend among some nonmonogamous people is to turn their noses up at those who chose monogamy, casting them as naïve, boring, brainwashed, unfulfilled, and unevolved—as if everyone in an open relationship is worldly, exciting, freethinking, fulfilled, and evolved simply by being nonmonogamous! (p. 29)

Similarly, Sheff (2014) identified a poly “stigma against monogamists” (p. 65), which leads many poly people to describe “monogamous people as small and grasping, too weak to face the self-awareness boot camp that poly family life can be” (p. 65), in contrast to “poly people [who] are more evolved, stronger, and self-realized than mere monogamists” (p. 65). As suggested above, it is likely that the polypride/monophobia system emerged at least in part as a reaction to mononormativity, gradually giving shape to an emerging polynormativity. Although the term *polynormativity* normally refers to standards about the “right” way to be poly (e.g., couple-centered, love-based, or rule-regimented) in contrast to other forms of nonmonogamy (see Haritaworn et al. 2006; Schippers 2016; Wilkinson 2010; Zanin 2013), I suggest that polynormativity can be extended to any discourse defending polyamory as the right, best, or superior way of intimate relating. This expanded use would also include Wilkinson’s (2010) polyromanticism, which presents polyamory as an antidote to the problems intrinsic to compulsory and serial monogamy. In any event, the rest of this section offers a selection of examples of polypride and monophobia.

To begin with, some scholars have presented polyamory as historically primordial, evolutionarily more complex, and sexually optimal. For example, polyamory has been portrayed as the natural human sexuality or “original love” (Easton and Liszt 1998, p. 135) before the advent of the patriarchal control of women (cf. Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2004; Ryan and Jethá 2010).<sup>8</sup> In addition to

<sup>8</sup> Challenging the standard evolutionary narrative of an ancestral pair-bonding culture and archaically seated sexual jealousy, Ryan and Jethá (2010) argued for a far more sexually promiscuous human prehistoric past and a link between the origins of patriarchy and the emergence of agriculture about ten thousand years ago; for critiques of this proposal, see Ellsworth (2011) and Saxon (2011). Although the emergence of agriculture (and thus of human settlements and private property) very likely increased men’s concern for paternity and thus sexual possessiveness (e.g., Stearns 2009), the exact (pre-)historical origins of sexual jealousy are probably manifold and far from clear-cut; after all, many hunter-gatherer cultures practice marriage (Walker et al. 2011) and sexual jealousy exists even in cultures practicing shared paternity (Beckerman and Valentine 2002).



presenting polyamory as the relational style of pre-civilized (and thus more natural) ancient cultures such as precolonial Hawaii (Anapol 2004; for critical discussion, see Willey 2016), Anapol (2010) wrote that polyamory is “a more complex form of relationship for men and women who already master the basics of intimacy and are prepared to evolve into more complex social organisms” (p. 224). In the same vein, after equating individuals to atoms and couples and groups to molecules, Benson (2008) suggested the greater evolutionary complexity of polyamory: “Again with people as with atoms, more and more complex bondings are possible with larger and larger numbers, and along with the bondings come ever more complex and sophisticated interactions and capabilities” (p. xxi). In addition, polyamory is featured as more sexually emancipated or progressive than monogamy. For example, Easton and Liszt (1998) portrayed polyamory as “advanced sexuality” (p. 244), and Anapol (1997) coined the term *sexualoving* to describe the integration of sex and love in multiple intimate relationships—a skill that, by implicit exclusion, monogamous couples do not develop. Another advantage of polyamory is the avoidance of sexual dissatisfaction, infidelity, traumatic separations, and even violence—all of which are attributed to monogamy’s allegedly intrinsic repression of natural sexual desires and proscription of sexual variety (e.g., Anderson 2012; Bergstrand and Sinski 2010). Polyamory’s emphasis on transparent communication and boundary negotiations has been also related to a safer sexuality (i.e., less risk of contracting STDs) than the widespread monogamous clandestine affairs (e.g., Conley et al. 2012b).

Psychologically, in most poly guides, polyamory is portrayed as “a superior way of relating in that it enables and requires more personal autonomy, self-awareness and responsibility, and more mutuality, equality and negotiation within relationships” (Barker and Langdrige 2010b, p. 754). Similarly, Petrella (2007) critically indicated, “Another very important theme is the construction of the polyamorous subject as an autonomous creature, psychologically self-contained and emotionally independent from any other being” (p. 157). Other authors stressed the higher degree of self-reflexivity, trust, and dialogical openness required in polyamorous relationships (e.g., Heaphy et al. 2004). These features, it has been argued, bring polyamory closer than monogamy to Giddens’ (1992) “pure relationship,” that is, a relationship based on choice, trust, and equality, as well as on emotional and sexual democracy (for critical discussions, see Jamieson 1998; Stacey 2011). In addition, polyamory’s commitment to face, work with, and transform jealousy is praised over the typical monogamous treatment of jealousy as an inevitable negative emotion or even sign of love (e.g., Deri 2015; Ferrer 2007, in press; Mint 2010). One of the most vigorous and theoretically sophisticated accounts of polyamory’s psychologically superior status is due to Bergstrand and Sinski (2010). Building on Peabody’s (1982) work, these authors used Loevinger’s (1976) model to situate monogamy, swinging, and polyamory in single developmental continuum. Whereas traditional monogamy adheres to Loevinger’s conformity stage (where individuals observe socially sanctioned values such as the repression of nonmonogamous feelings or the normalization of jealousy), swinging represents the conscientious stage (where people transcend societal values and create their own standards, leading to the greater autonomy and interpersonal communication necessary to practice sexual



nonmonogamy). In this context, polyamory embodies the more advanced autonomous stage, where persons celebrate individual differences and greater autonomy, leading to not only sexual but also emotional nonmonogamy.

Ethically speaking, polyamory is presented as more honest, responsible, and less hypocritical than monogamy and its adulterous affairs (Sheff 2014).<sup>9</sup> As Barker (2005) reported, some poly people believe that monogamous individuals are threatened by polyamory because it represents “an honest way of having more than one lover, something many monogamous people might do, or consider doing, but might not be open about due to the dominant culture rules around infidelity” (p. 81). Similarly, after denouncing monogamy’s violations and double standards, Heinlin and Heinlin (2004) asked: “Why are people so hypocritical?” (p. 103), approvingly citing the view that

monogamy is for the young and idealistic. But for those who have tried monogamy and seen its flaws first hand [sic], non-monogamy is the logical next step. Our society would be much healthier if we were more honest to each other, better informed, and planned better to accept our non-monogamy and revel in our ability to love multiple partners simultaneously. (p. 103)

Double-guessing in a psychoanalytical fashion, Heinlin and Heinlin added, “Some of the most unlikely activists against non-monogamy are those who are fighting their own deep inner urges to be non-monogamous” (p. 188). As mentioned above, polyamory is called “responsible non-monogamy” and regarded as ethically superior not only to monogamy but also to “non-responsible” nonmonogamies such as causal sex, promiscuity, or swinging (see Klesse 2006)

Finally, other scholars have exalted the sociopolitical and spiritual virtues of polyamory. In a political canvass, polyamory is presented as a post-patriarchal relational style through which women (and men) can overcome patriarchal oppression (e.g., Easton and Liszt 1998; Jackson and Scott 2004; Rosa 1994; Sheff 2005, 2006). Although challenging heteronormative monogamy, Noël (2006) contended that “the majority of these [poly] writers limit polyamory’s revolutionary potential by primarily addressing the concerns of white, middle-class, college-educated individuals” (p. 615). More optimistically, Schippers (2016) argued for the emancipatory power of integrating polyamory with other progressive movements—such as feminist, queer, and critical race theory—to critique social, gender, and racial inequalities. From a spiritual standpoint, Anapol (2010) framed polyamory as a growth accelerator and training ground to cultivate unconditional love. Since polyamory is often taken to be more attuned to the all-inclusive, nonpossessive essence of love, “polyamorists are portrayed as some wondrous beings who have an amazing capacity to have many lovers” (Wilkinson 2010, p. 242)—or capable of “loving more” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio 2010) or “without limits” (Anapol 1997). In addition, Heinlin and Heinlin (2004) saw in polyamorous sexuality a gnostic path to the divine (cf. Easton and Liszt 1998).

<sup>9</sup> For a witty—and deliberately polemical—defense of adultery in the context of modern Western mononormative culture, see Kipnis (2003).

## Monopride, Polypride, and Relational Narcissism

In sum, monopride/polyphobia and polypride/monophobia are the prevalent lenses through which both monogamists and polyamorists look (down) at each other; naturally, both camps denounce the open or hidden arrogance they perceive in each other. These patronizing attitudes not only result in unnecessary polarizations between people with different dispositions, but also arguably impoverish human relationships. Due to the mononormative ethos of Western culture, it should be clear that monopride/polyphobia is by far more pervasive and that polypride/monophobia could be understood, at least partially, as a reaction to the former.

As in the case of religious choices, however, human beings display a remarkable tendency to deem as universally superior their preferred relational style over others (for discussions of spiritual narcissism, see Ferrer 2002, 2017b).<sup>10</sup> Although cultural rankings regarding sexual orientation and gender identity have diminished over the last decades, relational hierarchies—whether understood in terms of identity or orientation (see Klesse 2014; Robinson 2013)—thrive in both scholarly and popular discussions. These considerations lead me to suggest that relational narcissism, or the belief in the universal superiority of one’s relational choice, might underlie both monopride/polyphobia and polypride/monophobia. If so, private relational narcissism—intermingled with social, cultural, racial, and religious biases—may often lurk behind public and even putatively “scientific” stances on these relationship styles. The ideological nature of these belief systems, argued in the next section, is consistent with this contention.

## The Ideological Nature of the “Mono–Poly Wars”

According to critical theory, a belief is ideological when it is not supported by empirical evidence (i.e., does not correspond to the facts) and was adopted in a situation of ignorance, coercion, or bondage (e.g., Geuss 1981). The critique of ideology seeks to raise consciousness about the pseudo-objectivity of ideological beliefs and their tainted origin (Fay 1987). In the context of the present discussion, beliefs about the preeminence of monogamy have very likely been acquired over centuries of mononormative indoctrination and coercion (Anderson 2012; Bergstrand and Sinski 2010), while beliefs about the superiority of polyamory arguably emerged as ideological reactions to mononormativity. Despite the variety of arguments reviewed above for the advantageousness of monogamy or polyamory, available empirical evidence (including data regarding other consensual non-monogamies) reveals a more egalitarian and pluralistic scenario.

<sup>10</sup> As a student of religion, I have always been fascinated by the parallels between the “mono–poly wars” and the many-centuries-long conflict between monotheism and polytheism (e.g., Kirsch 2004; Paper 2005), for example, regarding the superiority of the One over the Many, questions around the exclusivity of loving devotion, God’s expressed jealousy toward other Gods, and so forth. The religious underpinnings of the “mono–poly wars” are complex and surely deserve an extended discussion; for some directions, see Rycenga (1995), Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2004), Goss (2004), Willey (2006), and Kolesar (2010).

To begin with, there are no statistical differences between people in monogamous and consensually nonmonogamous relations regarding psychological well-being and pathology, including measures for self-esteem, neuroticism, mood stability, anxiety, or depression, among other markers (see Rubel and Boagert 2014). For example, Kurdek and Schmitt (1986) found no differences in the psychological health and relationship quality of polyamorous and monogamous gay men (cf. LaSala 2004); for a similar outcome in gay male and lesbian couples, see Kurdek (1988). In addition, against the widespread association of both long-term monogamy with healthy attachment style and nonmonogamy with attachment issues (e.g., Birnbaum et al. 2006; Brandon 2010; Miller and Fishkin 1997), research shows that a secure attachment style predominates in both monogamous and polyamorous couples (see Conley et al. 2012c). A recent study of 1308 individuals (73% female) involved in monogamous (85%) and consensually nonmonogamous (15%) relations corroborated this outcome (Moors et al. 2015). This study also showed that there were more individuals with low avoidance style in consensually nonmonogamous than in monogamous relationships—even if those with high avoidance were attitudinally more disposed to engage in nonmonogamy. The link between secure attachment and nonmonogamy receives further support from Franceschi’s (2006) finding that polyamorous women were often exposed to strong mother figures during childhood, and Tibbetts’ (2001) finding of no differences in relationship commitment between monogamous and polyamorous lesbian and bisexual women.

As for relationship quality, when comparing sexually exclusive and sexually open couples, no significant differences were found in marital adjustment and happiness (Rubin 1982), sexual satisfaction (Parsons et al. 2012), or relationship longevity and reasons for breakup (Rubin and Adams 1986). In a recent study of monogamous and nonmonogamous gay male couples, Spears and Lowen (2016) concluded that, despite the lack of social support both populations report receiving in the gay male community, “both monogamous and non-monogamous couples can have enduring, healthy and happy relationships” (p. 83), including “enduring, satisfying sex lives within their primary relationship” (p. 83). Furthermore, in a comparative study of 284 monogamous and polyamorous men and women, Morrison et al. (2013) found no significant group differences in scores indicative of relational quality (i.e., passion, trust, and attachment)—although poly men and women showed greater levels of intimacy as measured by the Intimacy Attitude Scale-Revised (IAS-R; Amidon et al. 1983). Similarly, Mogilski et al. (2017) found no differences in relational satisfaction between monogamous and consensually nonmonogamous couples.

Supporting these findings, two independent reviews of the literature (Conley et al. 2012c; Rubel and Boagert 2014) show no evidence for monogamy as advantageous over polyamory on improved sexuality and relationship quality (cf. Kurdek and Schmitt 1986), healthy or secure attachment style (cf. Morrison et al. 2013; Moors et al. 2015), and benefits for family life and child rearing (cf. Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010; Sheff 2014). Summing up the empirical evidence, Rubel and Boagert (2014) concluded, “Taken together, studies on marital satisfaction and happiness suggest that the quality of consensually nonmonogamous relationships is neither better nor worse than that of monogamous ones” (p. 977). More

theoretically but attuned to empirical studies, Brunning (2016) considered and rebutted four common objections to polyamory: commodification of relationships, avoidance of secure attachment, lack of sufficient practical and emotional resources to nurture relationships, and greater presence of jealousy.

A major practical argument against polyamory (and nonmonogamy, in general) is that a greater number of sexual partners increases the risk of contracting HIV or other dangerous STDs. However, as the aforementioned literature reviews show, sexual safety is not necessarily contingent on being monogamous or being polyamorous (Conley et al. 2012c; Rubel and Boagert 2014; see also Loue 2006). One major factor at play is the staggering number of affairs (i.e., sexual relationships conducted without knowledge or consent of the intimate partner) in self-styled monogamous couples. Summing up the available evidence, Buss (2000b) estimated that “approximately 20–40% of American women and 30–50% of American men have at least one affair over the course of the marriage” (p. 133), and pointed out that surveys suggest the chance of *either* member of a modern couple committing (nonconsensual) infidelity at some point in their marriage may be as high as 76%—with these figures increasing every year and with women’s affairs equaling in number those of men (see Duncombe et al. 2004; Treas and Giesen 2000). Moreover, as Conley et al. (2012b) discovered, individuals having clandestine affairs are less likely to practice safe sex—both in extradyadic encounters and with their partners—than those involved in consensually non-monogamous relationships (cf. Swan and Thompson 2016). In addition to corroborating these findings, Lehmler (2015) also reported that, among 556 surveyed participants, there was no difference in the percentage of STD diagnoses between monogamous and consensually nonmonogamous individuals. Thus, although there is no question that sexual exclusivity would decrease the spread of STDs, the real issue appears to be not necessarily the number of partners (i.e., being monogamous or polyamorous) but the practice of safe sexuality and honest communication among sexual partners (no matter their number).

In any event, in contrast to mono- and polynormative claims, the available empirical literature suggests that human beings are endowed with wildly diverse psychosocial orientations that predispose them toward different relationship styles. In addition, many equally valid personal trajectories may call individuals to engage in one or another relationship style either permanently or temporarily (Conley et al. 2012c). Whereas the psychological foundation for this diversity of mating responses is still unclear, recent discoveries in neuroscience support the possibility of a biological base. When scientists inserted a piece of DNA (a repeated polymorphism in the vasopressin receptor AVPR1A) from a monogamous species of mice (prairie voles) into males from a different—and highly promiscuous—mice species (montane voles), the latter turned fervently monogamous (Young et al. 1999). Strikingly, some human males tending to pair-bonding behavior (e.g., marriage, cohabitation) carry an extra bit of DNA in a gene responsible for the distribution of vasopressin receptors in the brain (a hormone associated with attachment bonds), and that piece of DNA is very similar to the one found in the monogamous prairie voles (Walum et al. 2008; for a similar finding regarding an oxytocin receptor, see Walum et al. 2012). Although the implications of these findings for the

understanding of human mating await further clarification, they suggest that a diversity of relationship styles—both monogamous and polyamorous—might be genetically imprinted in some humans. Another biological mark found in nonmonogamous men and women is higher levels of testosterone, a hormone commonly associated with male sexual drive (van Anders et al. 2007); however, it remains undetermined whether such higher levels (in relation to monogamous people, that is) are a cause or an outcome of this relational style (cf. Brandon 2010).

As Willey (2016) argued after doing ethnographic fieldwork in Young’s laboratory, however, it is important to be mindful of possible ideological biases in the attempts to “biologize” or “naturalize” either monogamy or polyamory. In addition to serious methodological flaws in Young et al.’s (1999) research designs (crucially, in the test to measure the voles’ alleged monogamy), Willey discovered that monogamy was ideologically associated with optimal human development: “In this model, monogamy in voles is compared to social health and promiscuity in voles to autism in humans” (p. 57). Willey’s work is invaluable in revealing the ideological character of “naturalizing” discourses about not only monogamy but also polyamory. In this regard, Robinson (2013) also critiqued the very idea of polyamory and monogamy as “natural” or fixed sexual orientations (like heterosexuality or homosexuality), and proposed instead to regard them as strategic identities that people (bisexual women, in her study) can freely select in different sociopolitical situations. In a similar vein, Klesse (2014) discussed a number of potentially pernicious social and political implications of regarding polyamory as a biologically engrained sexual orientation. This discussion is related to Barker’s (2005) finding that whereas some people think of their polyamory as how they naturally are, others describe it as something they choose to do.

What to make of all these rather disparate views? As further research is necessary to shed light on these questions, both my research and personal experience suggest that people can be situated on a continuum from “very monogamous” to “very polyamorous,” with many falling somewhere in between depending on diverse personal, social, cultural, and religious/spiritual variables (for a deconstruction of the mono/poly binary, see Ferrer 2017a). If this were the case, it is likely that those at both ends of the continuum may think of their relationship style as innate, and those falling somewhere in between may tend to describe it as a personal choice. In any event, as extensive cross-cultural data convey, it seems undeniable that “humans are designed and adapted for more than one mating strategy” (Schmitt 2005, p. 268). As stressed in the conclusion below, however, this plurality of human mating choices should not circumvent qualitative distinctions within and among relational styles or orientations.

## **Conclusion: Beyond Hierarchy and Relativism**

In this essay, I have shown how monogamists and polyamorists critically—and often condescendingly—look down at one another as somehow flawed, misguided, or, in a word, “inferior.” In addition, both camps claim psychological, moral, or spiritual higher ground, pigeon-holing their perceived opponents as suffering from

attachment deficits, interiorized patriarchy, or spiritual short-sightedness. One may raise questions about the general tendency in the West to hierarchically frame binary distinctions and posit one pole as superior to the other (e.g., man/woman, straight/queer, monogamy/polyamory). Perhaps, as Derrida (1981) underlined, hierarchy is intrinsic to Western thinking and language, and no conceptual framework can thus fully avoid privileging one or another perspective: To affirm or deny one thing is said to inevitably deny or affirm, respectively, its opposite, polar, or alternate reality. Besides contemporary Western challenges to such an arguably pessimistic verdict (e.g., Barker 2012; Brubaker 2016; Garber 1992), much could be learnt in this regard from considering non-Western complementary accounts of binary opposites (e.g., Ani 1994; Webb 2012).

In this spirit, one of my aims has been to expose the ideological underpinnings of enthroning any particular relationship style—whether monogamy or polyamory—as somehow “superior” or the most suitable relational style for the twenty-first century. As Willey (2016) wrote, “The privileging of any single model of intimacy...automatically boxes all other models and their ‘adherents’ as problematic” (p. 145). Likewise, Barker (2012) argued against the positioning of either monogamy or polyamory (or any other kind of romantic or sexual love) as intrinsically superior to the other, situating these relationship styles in a continuum versus a binary choice (cf. Ferrer 2017a). Nevertheless, more pluralistic accounts of relationship styles should not necessarily lead to a trivializing relativism that is incapable of critical discernment.

Although these relational styles cannot be placed in any universal developmental or evolutionary continuum, it should be obvious that there can be “higher” and “lower” types of monogamy and polyamory. For example, one might consider these forms as more fear-based to more life-enhancing, more destructive to more constructive, more self-centered to more empathic, and less to more mindful of social privilege. In other words, one can follow a specific relationship style for the “right” or “wrong” reasons, and all relationship styles can become equally limiting ideologies. To deem any particular relational style universally superior on biological, psychological, or practical grounds is thus not only fallacious, but also ideological and misleading.

Once one rejects the spurious belief that relational styles can be assessed as superior or inferior to each other as wholes—ignoring how internally multilayered and diverse they actually are—a more nuanced and evaluative gaze can be deployed. In addition to individual and contextual variables, this gaze recognizes that relational styles—like cultures and human beings—are very likely to be both “higher” and “lower” in relation to one another, but in different regards (cf. Benhabib 2002; McGrane 1989). For example, given the poly emphasis on self-disclosure, communication, and sexual variety, it is understandable that nonmonogamous couples score higher than monogamous ones on intimacy (Conley et al. 2012b; Morrison et al. 2013) and sexual satisfaction measures (Conley and Moors 2014). Likewise, monogamy may offer a safer container than polyamory for sexual and emotional healing, and sexual exclusivity can evoke for many a sense of deeper intimacy and even sacredness (e.g., Masters 2007).

This evaluative approach is aligned with Rambukkana’s (2015) sustained argument that many types of privilege (e.g., heteronormative, patriarchal, sexist) can exist within monogamous and nonmonogamous contexts—and that a replacement of mononormativity with a new polyorthodoxy will not solve the underlying issues. Instead of favoring a particular relationship model, Rambukkana continued, what is needed is to understand “how intimacies can be variously privileged or oppressed in nuanced and intersecting ways [so that] we can start to formulate discursive alternatives to oppressive normativities in ways that actively seek to avoid reifying privilege” (p. 145). I think this position is exactly where one needs to stand—and I would like to propose that nonhierarchical accounts of relational styles need to be attended by a critical outlook able to offer qualitative distinctions, both within and among relational styles, in terms of not only social privilege, but also a diversity of psycho-socio-spiritual markers (e.g., liberation from self-centeredness, healing impact, transformative power). In closing, I hope this essay fosters greater respect between monogamous and polyamorous individuals, as well as advances scholarly discourse on relational styles by laying down a middle path between ideological hierarchies and relativistic egalitarianisms.

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