

Polyamory: It's Not Complicated

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Free Chapter

Chapter 26 - Orientation or Lifestyle Choice

Is polyamory a sexual orientation or a lifestyle choice?

This question comes up for great reasons and has a major impact on the future of polyamory. It is both philosophical and legal.

If polyamory is an orientation, then we are born with it as an innate choice that has been made for us by nature and cannot be influenced by nurture.

If polyamory is a lifestyle choice, then we are not born with this choice made for us, but can be influenced by nurture.

Philosophical Physics

This question came up in an area that had consequences on the entire field of physics. Was light a particle or a wave. Theories of each couldn't not explain the entire picture. As Einstein wrote, "It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do."

What an interesting take this would be on polyamory. Orientation would explain why people feel a primal urge to have sex and form relationships even after we have mated to another individual. But it would not explain why society has historically and geographically shifted back and forth from polyamory to

monogamy. Orientation would explain why some people cannot seem to help falling in love with others even when they have a partner they already love.

Lifestyle Choice would explain why people can cheat and reconcile, go from monogamy to polyamory and back again. It explains that we can choose whether or not to have sex with someone even when we have just had sex with someone else. But it does not explain why some people, even from traditional upbringings, have sex drives that always push them to have sex with new people.

Legal Definitions

It would matter whether or not we resolve this issue, because sexual orientation and all other human traits with which we are born or are caused upon us later that we cannot control are often given protected legal status.

Skin color, gender, and disability are given protected status from discrimination.

On the other hand, there are clear lifestyle choices that are also given legal protected status. Political affiliation and religion are the foremost protected status that a person chooses for themselves.

The LGBT community has long made the argument that sexual orientation is not a choice. One cannot simply choose to be straight or gay. Of course, because of arguments to the contrary, they have painted themselves into a corner on many issues and have denied the existence of many other orientations.

Gender, for instance, is not at the time of this writing a protected status when it moves from orientation by birth to choice later in life. The transsexual/transgender community is fighting this. They are making two arguments. The hard argument is that sexual orientation is hardwired into the brain, and that they are simply adapting their bodies to match their wiring. But there does exist a soft argument that it doesn't matter what wiring we have or that it is a choice. That argument is that gender is already a protected class and we should be free to choose our gender regardless of our gender at birth.

Another area of contention is how many sexual orientations are there related to gender. For instance, what about bisexuals? Is this a single protected

orientation or the combination of two protected orientations? What about a pansexual or omnisexual that is attracted to transsexuals?

This can be taken further into questioning kink and fetish. If a person can be protected because they find a penis sexually arousing to look at, why can't another person be protected because they find being restrained sexually arousing? What about those known as furies, who are sexually aroused by dressing up in animal costumes?

Fear

We don't have these conversations because there are members of society that point to these very fetishes as proof of moral bankruptcy. Fetishes like crushing, roleplaying bestiality, and the use of pain inducing leather whips are shown as disgusting, immoral, deviant, and perverted.

But as the saying goes, one person's perversion is another's kink.

The question then comes back to polyamory. Some have tried to classify it as a sexual orientation. But sexual orientation usually is matched with a gender. For instance, we might refer to a straight polyamorist or a gay polyamorist or a bisexual polyamorist as the three most common (and not getting into the wide variety of sexual orientations or cis gender issues). Each is prefaced with a sexual orientation, straight, gay, or bi, and then this thing called polyamory added on top of this.

The fear that many in the LGBT community have is that they have fought very hard for a small step forward, monogamous marriage between people of gay and lesbian orientation. This has left bisexuals with the "So, I have to choose a permanent partner of one gender, thus solidifying preference of one orientation over another, because I'm only allowed to marry one person at a time."

This fear is understandable. Many religious conservatives immediately argued that bigamy would be legalized unless the definition of marriage were kept strictly to one man and one woman.

The LGBT community fought hard to expand this definition to one person and one person.

But this expansion still leaves many partners in the legal dark. If I have two people I love and I die, I must choose which one gets the kids and all my worldly possessions. For instance, I cannot consider both to be family.

And in my case, being that my two current girlfriends are already married, I cannot pick either of them. This is true also of triads. One person will always be left out. I cannot imagine a more demeaning treatment of the right of an individual by the law than to force people to collectively chose who must be left out of a loving family.

The Monogamy Compromise

But the truth is that there is a compromise, and it may come as a bit of a shock to many polyamorists who have debated this topic and did not consider one critical question.

Is monogamy an orientation or a lifestyle choice?

Stop and consider this for a moment. We institute marriage and give it special protection and consideration, even though the act of marriage is a lifestyle choice. We premise this on the fact that monogamy is considered a basic human right.

But is monogamy an orientation, something we are born with? If monogamy is an orientation, then like gay or lesbianism, the alternative to the majority orientation must itself be an orientation. If it is a matter of flipping gene sequences on and off to produce monogamy, then it must be a gene sequence to flip on and off polyamory.

We observe this in nature, where certain animals usually mate for life while others mate indiscriminately.

Or is monogamy a lifestyle choice, something we choose to be? If monogamy is a lifestyle choice, then the number of our partners is completely arbitrary to begin with.

Going Beyond Religion

There is one more facet to consider here, and that is the basic tenant for arguing that monogamy is a natural state, and that is parenting. It takes exactly two parents to create a child. No more, and no less.

But this definition of why monogamy should have higher protected status falls apart immediately, and is why gays and lesbians have made inroads into marriage.

For instance, if the protected status of straight monogamists is solely on the basis of children, then no barren woman or impotent man should be allowed to claim this status, as they cannot procreate. This includes the handicapped and the elderly.

It also means that straight monogamists who choose not to procreate, even though they are capable, should be forced into dissolution of their marriage.

So, beyond a religious objection, this natural state argument doesn't hold up to what we practice in society, nor even in religions that make this argument.

We have come to the conclusion then through the expansion of gay and lesbian marriage rights that marriage should be an institution between any two people that love each other.

But that begs the question of why marriage should only be between two people.

There are few valid reasons for this. For instance, one might argue that the law is only set up to handle a single marriage, and that multiple marriages would cause the system to be unable to function.

But family courts in highly contested custody cases have dealt with parents, step parents, grandparents, adopted children, artificial insemination, etc. Our legal system is quite adept at handling situations far beyond the question of multiple marriages.

For instance, my first wife and I had a son. We then divorced and both remarried. The court had no difficulty in dealing with three marriages, separated only by time. Would the same court have difficulty if the original marriage had

not dissolved before the two proceeding marriages? I don't believe so. No fundamental fact would be different. The only thing that might be different would be that it would have been socially acceptable to continue having sex with my first wife. And put bluntly, I had sex with that woman for more than a decade of our lives. The only change was the timeframe in which I had sex with her. Or more to the point, it's only adultery then if we don't change our Facebook status first?

What about my child? He has two parents, two step parents, many more step brothers and sisters, and step grandparents. The polyamorous family resembles the modern blended family almost exactly. And I've yet to hear of anyone calling for me to burn in hell for allowing another man be step father to my son.

The Answer Is Both

The real answer lies with Einstein telling us, "It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty."

Except for the asexual orientation, the true answer is that we all have internal urges that we are given at birth that attract us to other people. Our only control over these urges is to ignore them. If you make a lifestyle choice to ignore them in favor of a single person, you are a monogamist. If you make a lifestyle choice to act on them, you are a polyamorist.

It is then an orientation, and one which we all share to some degree. Choosing whether or not to act on it makes it a lifestyle choice. And more often than not, it is our culture that makes us ignore these urges. We have built quite the strong system that endorses and protects monogamy.

All of those walls built by society were choices, not orientation.

And so, the urge to connect and be intimate is fully an orientation. We do not control getting turned on at the sight of another person, monogamist or not. Therefore, attraction itself is an orientation, and the two polar opposites are to either be sexually oriented or asexually oriented, to varying degrees, and with

multiple genders, to varying degrees. Our lifestyle choice is how we chose to express those orientations through our actions.

When these both match up, such as a gay monogamist, one can be tempted to simply call it an orientation. But while a gay man cannot help being attracted to other men, he would be lying to say he didn't even have attraction to other men, at all, and that he only ever found one other man to be attracted to sexually.

People are simply not built with a photocopy of a soulmate imprinted into their brains. Monogamy is then the choice. It may have been an easier choice. Some individuals are extremely particular about what they find attractive. The options may have been limited in this way, but it was certainly not restricted to a single person on the planet.

It is then the person's own judgement by which they decide whether to act on their natural level of sexual attractiveness to others. They can decide that while they may be attracted to ten other people in a room of twenty, they chose to only have sex with one of them.

The argument then reduces to this simple fact. We are all polyamorous in orientation if we are ever attracted to more than one other person. Anyone with more than one marriage must then admit to having been in such a position. We who claim the label polyamorous have made a lifestyle choice to act on our natural orientation to any extent greater than one.

Even within polyamory, we do not attempt to have a relationship with every single person we find attractive. We cannot therefore claim to fully own our orientation to polyamory any more than a monogamist can. We similar make a choice to limit the number of lovers we have based on similar factors.

These factors include available time, resources, money, distance, compatibility, etc. Monogamists have simply attempted to find the best factor match, eliminate all other contenders, and made vows to not change that choice later even if a better match comes along, valuing time invested into their current person as one of the top factors.

Polyamorists have simply set the same priorities, but have chosen not to eliminate all other contenders. They have also chosen to not find the best overall match, but perhaps something like best matches in certain categories.

One might argue that this means that polyamorists lower the bar by lowering their standards.

But there is another way to look at this, raising the bar.

An example of this is the term “settling for”. A monogamist might put up with a horrible cook with a good body and fun personality. Or, they might settle for a less attractive person who is good with kids and stable.

A polyamorist not wish to put up with as many negatives, and might be less inclined to settle. They may want the good body, the fun personality, the good with kids, and the stable. They might live with the good with kids and stable, and go out on weekends with the good body and fun personality, but never, ever have to eat their horrible cooking.

[This is an oversimplification, and will quite offend many a stable homebody into thinking that their looks are insufficient. That of course, is not the case, and was simply used for the example.]

The point is that one can look at the situation from both angles and see that there are valid reasons that a monogamist might chose to be monogamist, and we all would admit that the strongest reason is that it is a cultural norm. Sure, we all want to fuck one of our wive’s friends. Monogamists simply choose to not do this, often opting instead to simply masturbate to fantasies of what it must be like. Rather than trying to be vulgar, this is simply the truth of human psychology.

What we must focus on is not whether or not monogamy is valid, though.

Our Greatest Mistake

The mistake that we can make as polyamorous is to make the discussion a numbers game. If choosing one person to share your life with is wrong, and we the polyamorists are right, and that becomes our argument, then we must

conclude that the most enlightened polyamorist is the one with the most partners.

I can already read the flame wars in forums. Anyone with only two is a “bi-amorist”, not a real polyamorist. Anyone not in a triad sharing everyone is not a real polyamorist. Anyone who doesn’t actually have undying love for two of their partners isn’t a real polyamorist. If you aren’t bi/pan/omi-sexual, you aren’t a real polyamorist.

On and on and on. And so why do we, as a community that simply wishes to break away from the number 1 for the number of partners we have, demonize monogamy so much? Is it not just as much of an orientation? Is it not just as much of a lifestyle choice?

Let us therefore put this part of the debate to rest. It is as much an orientation and a lifestyle choice as monogamy, period. And deciding which ultimately won’t matter. If it is an orientation, then so is monogamy, and both should be treated equally. If it is a lifestyle choice, then so is monogamy, and both should be treated equally.

I chose to see it as both. For both our uncontrollable attraction is an orientation and the extent to which we participate in our natural inclinations is a lifestyle choice. And in the end, if we are to judge, then let us we all be inferior to the asexual, who has no attraction, and can fully live out their inclination with no regard for limits or restrictions.

The rest of us must make compromises.