

Journalism's Uncomfortable Marriage to Non-Monogamy

If the pace of change over the last few decades to reinvent marriage hasn't left you gasping for air, take a deep breath now. Here comes the next leg in the race to deinstitutionalize the meaning of marriage: consensual non-monogamy (CNM), where two individuals ostensibly consent to open their relationship to other sexual and emotional partners in a wide array of options.

For those of us who've surveyed the [immense body of research](#) on the personal and social benefits associated with [healthy and strong monogamous relationships](#), along with stable [two-parent households](#), it's puzzling to encounter the media's advocacy coverage of consensual non-monogamy.

Along [with a whole host of "think pieces" on the subject](#), there was the 2017 [New York Times' mini-documentary](#) that seemed to celebrate the new math of consensual non-monogamy. Then came the 2018 [Vox/Netflix "explainer"](#) on how primates point us toward polyamory. Now, adding to the genre, is a [CBS-produced documentary](#) titled, "'Not just one big orgy': Fighting the stigma of consensual non-monogamy."

In reaction to the CBS documentary, *The Washington Post's* Elizabeth Bruening tweeted that "the really galling thing is that each time" these consensual non-monogamy treatments are published, they're "done in exactly the same way, with the upshot being: 'much to consider, huh, squares?'"

To put it more bluntly, most media coverage of consensual non-monogamy has been woefully inadequate.

The public simply cannot make an informed decision about the merits (or [demerits](#)) of non-monogamous relationships when objective examinations are jettisoned in the name of

destigmatization. Undoubtedly, efforts to destigmatize certain behaviors or relationships are well-intentioned, but soft peddling on [serious issues](#) that impact the wellbeing of couples, families, and society is negligent at best and journalistic malpractice at worst.

Indeed, coverage on this issue rarely explores the potential [negative impacts of non-monogamy](#) or the attendant [familial instability](#) that can come with it; the coverage rarely delves deeply into how non-monogamous (and sometimes polyamorous) [couplings might affect youth](#); it rarely follows CNM couples over time to observe potential challenges; and, it rarely distinguishes between marital and non-marital CNM, a pretty crucial distinction, in our judgment.

Ironically, this form of [“who am I to judge?” journalism](#) may actually inhibit the information necessary for individuals to truly “consent” to non-traditional couplings. Indeed, genuine informed consent – the kind implied in the name *consensual* non-monogamy – requires a more complete picture of the risks (both personal and social) [associated with multiple sexual partners](#).

And yet, seldom, if ever, do treatments feature experts discussing the benefits of avoiding fragmented intimate affections or sexual promiscuity; nor do the documentaries highlight individuals who have tried polyamory or non-monogamy and have rejected it.

Seldom is there any inquiry into how mutual the consensuality really is in these relationships. The [data reveal](#), for example, that only about half the time is the desire for an open relationship mutual or equal. More than a third (35 percent) of women who had ever been in an open relationship reported that their male partner wanted the open relationship more than they did; more than one-quarter (28 percent) of men said their female partner wanted the relationship more.

Surely power dynamics are not null in these situations. How much power, for instance, does a financially dependent homemaker with young children really have to consent to a non-monogamous relationship? Or how about the non-adventurous, aging homebody? How consensual is consent when door number two is, “I’m out of here with my income and time for the kids if you don’t agree?”

It shouldn’t come as a surprise that not all non-monogamous relationships come up roses. But, based on the coverage, you would be forgiven for not knowing. One scans this genre in vain to discover individuals discussing many of the negative experiences commonly associated with sexual promiscuity or relationship instability. And, yet, digging a little into personal blogs and social media posts does uncover attention to [real-life problems of CNM](#).

Although the circumstances regarding the recent resignation of Rep. Katherine Lauren Hill (D-CA) are complex and merit a separate careful discussion, it’s worth noting that part of the issue resulting in Rep. Hill’s resignation was a “consensual” non-monogamous, extra-marital relationship [that some believe may have violated ethical standards regarding employer-employee dynamics](#).

In other words, although Rep. Hill’s circumstances are unique, there are genuine issues and challenges in non-monogamous relationships that arise but are often left unexplored in media treatments.

Good data indicate that reports of [marital monogamy’s demise](#) are exaggerated, and consensual non-monogamy is not quite the trend trumpeted by some. But still [a recent study](#) conducted for scholars at Brigham Young University found that one percent of married individuals report currently participating in CNM, with four percent saying that they were ever in an open relationship while married. If you include nonmarital relationships, then three percent report

currently being in an open relationship and 1-in-8 (12.5 percent) say they have been in such a relationship at some point. The CBS documentary claims that one in five Americans have been involved in a consensually non-monogamous relationship at some point in their lives, [but, as others at the Institute for Family Studies have pointed out, this figure appears to be greatly exaggerated.](#)

While it's hard to say without more research, it is possible that we are seeing some modest increase in the number of couples engaging in CNM and asking for understanding and acceptance (culturally, religiously, and legally,) particularly because the [younger generations](#) seem more open to it than older generations. In other words, it's not that this phenomenon should be totally ignored. We believe it merits clear-eyed study and examination.

So far, however, not enough journalists have delivered.

Expressing fatigue with recent portraits of polyamory, reporter [Matthew Zeitlin confessed](#) on Twitter that he was "starting to think there's a lot of writing about polyamory not because it's a real trend or growing or anything but because readers have a prurient interest in sex."

We understand the modern need to grab browsing eyeballs. But journalists can still write good copy while also interviewing CNM's disaffected as well as its faithful; the media can still maintain an audience while asking challenging questions or engaging experts who see reason for concern with this practice.

By all means let's shine a light on marital consensual non-monogamy. But if, as a society, we really care about promoting informed consent – if we really are sincere about the idea that people deserve the facts before they make significant life choices; then, on issues that could impact intimacy and familial wellbeing, we need much more than celebratory

journalism from the Fourth Estate.

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