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**They “went in two by two” – the challenge of those in open and
polyamorous relationships for couple psychotherapists**

Damian McCann*

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Summary

In this presentation, I reflect on and explore the nature of relating in open and polyamorous relationships, as an antidote to or extension of the more familiar couple relationship at the heart of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy practice. And, although the development and application of psychoanalytic theory to couple relationships have proved invaluable, unfortunately its primary focus on dyadic functioning has inevitably limited its interest in and understanding of the relevance of its theory to those in open and polyamorous relationships. Moreover, the inherent belief at the heart of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy in the importance of monogamy, signifying mature and healthy functioning, has resulted in those who do not adhere to this standard being ignored, seen in a bad light, or believed to be blighted by the challenges of intimacy. Furthermore, traditional psychoanalytic accounts of development, attachment and relatedness, linked to heterosexual perspectives (D’Ercole & Drescher, 2004) have served to tighten the grip on normative thinking and sealed the outsider status afforded those in more open and polyamorous relationships.

Keywords: couple psychotherapy, open relationships, polyamory, creative couple.

* D. Sys. Psych. psychoanalytic couple psychotherapist, consultant systemic psychotherapist and head of learning & development, Tavistock Relationships, London and Adjunct Faculty International Psychotherapy Institute, Washington, DC. dmccann@tavistockrelationships.org



Résumé. *Ils sont « entrés deux par deux ». Le défi de ceux qui vivent des relations ouvertes et poly-amoureuses pour les psychothérapeutes de couple*

Dans cette présentation, je réfléchis et explore la nature du lien dans les relations poly-amoureuses et ouvertes comme un antidote ou une extension de la relation de couple rencontrée plus habituellement dans la clinique de psychothérapie psychanalytique de couple. Bien que le développement et l'application de la théorie psychanalytique aux relations de couple se soient révélés inestimables, malheureusement, le fait qu'elle soit principalement axée sur le fonctionnement dyadique, a inévitablement limité son intérêt et sa compréhension de la pertinence de sa théorie pour les personnes vivant dans des relations ouvertes et poly-amoureuses. De plus, la croyance inhérente au cœur de la psychothérapie psychanalytique de couple en l'importance de la monogamie, qui signifie un fonctionnement mature et sain, a eu pour conséquence que ceux qui n'adhèrent pas à cette norme sont ignorés, vus sous un mauvais jour, ou considérés comme blasés par les défis de l'intimité. En outre, les comptes rendus psychanalytiques traditionnels sur le développement, l'attachement et la relation, liés à des perspectives hétérosexuelles (D'Ercole & Drescher, 2004), ont servi à resserrer l'état de la pensée normative et à sceller le statut d'outsider accordé aux personnes vivant des relations plus ouvertes et poly-amoureuses.

Mots-clés: Psychothérapie de couple, relations ouvertes, polyamour, couple créatif.

Resumen. *Entraron de “dos a dos”: el desafío de los que están en relaciones abiertas y poliamorosas*

En esta presentación, reflexiono y exploro la naturaleza de la relación en las relaciones abiertas y poliamorosas, como antídoto o extensión de la relación de pareja más familiar en el corazón de la práctica de la psicoterapia psicoanalítica de pareja. Y, aunque el desarrollo y la aplicación de la teoría psicoanalítica a las relaciones de pareja han demostrado ser inestimables, lamentablemente su enfoque principal en el funcionamiento diádico ha limitado inevitablemente su interés y comprensión de la pertinencia de su teoría a las relaciones abiertas y poliamorosas. Además, la creencia inherente en el corazón de la psicoterapia psicoanalítica de pareja en la importancia de la monogamia, que significa un funcionamiento maduro y saludable, ha dado lugar a que quienes no se adhieren a esta norma sean ignorados, vistos con malos ojos o se crea que están arruinados por los desafíos de la intimidad. Además, los relatos psicoanalíticos tradicionales sobre el desarrollo, el apego y la relación, vinculados a las perspectivas heterosexuales (D'Ercole y Drescher, 2004) han servido para estrechar el control del pensamiento normativo y sellar la condición de forastero que se ofrece a quienes mantienen relaciones más abiertas y poliamorosas.

Palabras clave: Psicoterapia de pareja, relaciones abiertas, poliamor, pareja creativa.



Introduction

In this paper¹, I reflect on and explore the nature of relating in open and polyamorous relationships, as an antidote to or extension of the more familiar couple relationship at the heart of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy practice. And, although the development and application of psychoanalytic theory to couple relationships has proved invaluable, unfortunately its primary focus on dyadic functioning has inevitably limited its interest in and understanding of the relevance of its theory to those in open and polyamorous relationships. Moreover, the inherent belief at the heart of psychoanalytic couple psychotherapy in the importance of monogamy, signifying mature and healthy functioning, has resulted in those who do not adhere to this standard being ignored, seen in a bad light, or believed to be blighted by the challenges of intimacy. Furthermore, traditional psychoanalytic accounts of development, attachment, and relatedness, linked to heterosexual perspectives (D'Ercole & Drescher, 2004) have only served to tighten the grip on normative thinking and sealed the outsider status afforded those in more open and polyamorous relationships.

Theoretical Considerations

When thinking about open and polyamorous relationships, it is noticeable how these particular relationship configurations are often contrasted against the apparent advantages of monogamy and fidelity. Spence (1997), for instance, suggests that monogamy is associated with a deeper sense of intimacy and that both intimacy and sexual desire are found to be positively correlated. Underscoring this point, Jamieson (2004) highlights the belief that sexual fidelity is symbolic of trust and that sexual exclusivity accounts for the 'specialness' in couple relationships. Not surprisingly, these aspects of relating emphasise not just the popular ideals of monogamy, but also touch on the fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory when applied to couple relationships, emphasising the importance of commitment, exclusivity, and psychic development.

In her thinking about what Morgan (2005) refers to as *the creative couple*, we glimpse the necessary developmental tasks that the two separate individuals must accomplish in order for the relationship itself to provide them with what is termed *a third position*; a position that captures a movement towards feeling oneself to be part of a couple and within which lies the essential conditions for further psychic development. To that end, Morgan (*ibid.*) sees the negotiation of the triangular nature of the oedipal

¹ This paper is an abridged version of a chapter from my edited book *Same-Sex Couples and other Identities: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, published by Routledge in 2022.



situation as well as overcoming the challenges of adolescence, as crucial factors in one's development towards a *creative couple* state of mind.

Kernberg (1993) believes that the couple «acquires an identity of its own in addition to the identity of each of the partners» (p.63), capturing something of the tension between the individual needs separate from and in relation to the couple's relationship. Colman (1993) also points to the importance of the couple relationship providing what he refers to as «good enough» containment for the partners and particularly in regard to containing the «tension that arises from the need of the individuals to develop outside the relationship as well as within it» (p.73). In addition, when thinking about dyadic couple relationships, he points to the importance of boundaries that offer protection from the disruption both inside and outside the relationship as another essential ingredient for its continuity and development.

My question at this point is how we might think about and work with these developmental processes in relation to those in open and polyamorous relationships where, for example, the projective system of the multiple partners may be that much harder to understand, or where sex, love and emotion are not directed solely towards one's partner and lived out and contained in one place. Beneoff (2017) helpfully reminds us that «desire and sexuality are unruly, capricious, resistant to conscious control, and always threaten to undermine our ideal view of ourselves and our partners» (p.123), although Clulow (2017) also draws our attention to the fact that «in attachment terms, having confidence in someone who can be relied upon to be both available and responsive, creates room for feelings of sexual desire» (p.198). In other words, falling in love and attaching to a partner who is both predictable and available is believed to heighten desire, although Eagle (2007) notes that «there is a good deal of evidence that predictability, familiarity and availability frequently dampen the intensity of sexual interest and excitement» (p.197), possibly accounting for the demise of so many exclusive couple relationships whilst providing at least part of the explanation for why some individuals and couples choose to open their relationships or opt to have more than one romantic partner at any one time. Bonello (2009) suggests that sexual variety is often a central motivating factor for most couples choosing non-exclusive relationship arrangements.

Towards an understanding of open relationships

In a previously published paper on this topic, I suggested that «the sense of fluidity of relationships in the non-heterosexual world is, to some extent, shaped by the lack of a sanctioned institutional framework for intimate partnering, in turn creating opportunities for creativity and choice largely denied to couples subscribing to a framework of monogamy» (McCann, 2017, p.46). This may explain, why in my practice with lesbian, gay and bisexual couples, there seems to be such openness to thinking about open and polyamorous relationships, in marked contrast to that of my



work with straight couples. This is perhaps not so surprising given the recent findings of a UK poll where only 10% of respondents opted for non-monogamy when asked “what would be your ideal relationship” and barely 5% indicated that they would be tolerant of their partner’s wish to engage in sexual activities with someone else. However, it is suggested that the increased tolerance of open relationships amongst gay men and bisexuals in and of itself is not necessarily problematic, provided the partners are able to openly negotiate the rules governing the framework within which the open relationship operates (Spears & Lowen, 2010).

Open relationships refer to a form of dyadic couple relationship that is open to partners having sex with others. Indeed, within gay male couple relationships this openness takes the form of the men in a primary relationship cruising (either together or separately) for sex with other men. The sexual encounters tend to be brief, although sometimes there may be longer-term sexual friendships. Gay men themselves report varying levels of emotional connection to sexual partners outside their primary relationship, but ultimately, they view their primary relationship as the strongest source of comfort, reliability, and security (Pawlicki & Larson, 2011). That said, the splitting of sex and emotion that often accompanies the decision to open an existing couple relationship, is something that can feel challenging or alien to many, and especially so for those holding strong beliefs about the importance of exclusive relationships. Greenwell (2020) suggests that «queer sexuality that doesn’t fit the heterosexual mould of family is still treated with distain» (p.19).

Drawing on the work of (Constantine & Constanine, 1972; Mackin, 1978) in thinking about open and polyamorous relationships, Weitzman *et al*, (2009) suggest that couples in non-traditional relationships tend to present for therapy with issues that are not dissimilar to those in more traditional couple relationships. Their list of presenting problems includes inadequate communication; differences in the degree of commitment; conflicting expectations; and the search for a balance between autonomy and intimacy. Deri (2011), however, suggests that differences in attitude between partners towards sexual intimacy can be enough to create considerable relationship distress, and from my work with gay male couples in open relationships, I have been struck by the depth of distress and disturbance within the primary relationship of couples presenting for therapy. What seems to be at play in these encounters is a conscious wish for one or both partners to address discrepant sexual needs within the primary relationship by looking outside. Moreover, although the majority of the couples I have seen have agreed a framework and set of expectations for opening their relationship, it is noticeable how, in a number of cases, the experience of opening their relationship appears to have exerted a destabilizing influence on the couple’s primary connection, to the extent that they seek therapy to prevent a separation or divorce. This is because, the newness of passionate encounters may conceal attention to the particular challenges couples face (Weitzman *et al* (2009), which, in my view happens because it fails to take account of the unconscious processes and feelings that such encounters stir-up in the couple itself.



Case Example

Matt and Jason, a gay couple of nine years standing, agreed to open their relationship to introduce some excitement into their sex life which they said had become both dull and routine. The couple had already decided that they would only ever see other men together, a decision that may have been influenced by Jason having cheated on Matt two years earlier. It is of note that Jason's father had also cheated on his mother in the past and Matt's father had left his mother for another woman. However, in the triangular dynamics of the threesomes, Matt quickly found himself the outsider, as Jason and the 'third' partnered up leaving Matt feeling devastated. Matt's unconscious rage relating to being pushed out, led to multiple encounters of his own and before long Jason was feeling abandoned. Jason soon learned that Matt was forming passionate relationships with two of the other guys he was seeing and sex between Matt and Jason had all but stopped. The couple presented in crisis and feelings were running high. The early stages of the therapy were dominated by the need to provide a container in order to help Matt and Jason begin the painful process of trying to understand what was happening to them and their relationship. During my work with the couple, I suggested that perhaps Jason was being made to feel some of Matt's unacknowledged pain and outrage, as Jason was now the outsider with very little power to control Matt's attempts to deal with psychic pain through the excitement of sex, Nathans (2005). Unfortunately for the couple, Matt's unconscious retaliation was setting up a rivalrous dynamic in Jason, as he was now becoming secretive and punitive towards Matt by having his own affairs. Whilst drawing particular attention to the need for the couple to use the containment which the therapy offered, I did manage to think with them about the shared pain and disappointment that they were both feeling as a result of opening their relationship, especially since it referenced some deep-rooted unconscious associations with their respective internal parental couples. Whilst accepting that this composite case illustration could be read as a damning indictment of open relationships, my purpose in presenting it is more to highlight both the unruly nature of desire and sex (Benoff, 2017), as well as the importance of couples establishing a secure enough base for their existing relationship as a necessary prerequisite for opening that relationship.

Polyamory and its vicissitudes

Polyamory (or poly) is commonly defined as a form of consensual or ethical non-monogamy, where individuals and partners maintain multiple, simultaneous relationships of varying degrees of emotional and/or sexual intimacy. According to Deri (2011) «the term polyamory was coined in 1990 by Morning-Glory Zell, a self-



proclaimed polyamorist, and the terms *polyamory*, *polyamorist* and *polyamorous* officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006». The increased exposure of polyamory within society may be viewed as a response to the limitations of monogamy, where exclusive relationships are frequently seen as an unrealistic ideal. Weitzman *et al*, (2009), highlight the importance of clinicians and counselling professions being prepared to help clients navigate this new relationship terrain, and Anapol (2010) suggests that it is essential that we loosen our attachment to conditioned beliefs about love, sex, intimacy and commitment, especially since polyamory blurs the boundaries of sex, friendship and intimacy.

Koyanagi (2018) helpfully identifies four types of polyamorous relationships: *the primary partner and others approach*, *the group approach*, *the egalitarian network approach* and *the solo approach*, which speak to multiple relationships between individuals and couples of varying degrees of intimacy and commitment.

Case Example

It was one year into my work with Elinor that she revealed that she was in a polyamorous relationship with a married couple named Andrew and Lisa. Elinor, aged thirty years of age, had presented with anxiety following the sudden and unexpected death of her mother six months earlier. The beginning stages of the work were dominated by Elinor's feelings of anxiety and depression, which seemed to be related to her sense of isolation and her lack of success in finding an intimate partnership. Elinor identifies as bisexual and works as an assistant director for a charitable organization specialising in conservation. Professionally she is confident and highly competent, but privately she is both timid and anxious. Growing up in a large family with conflicted parents seems to have taken its toll on her and she longs for a loving and caring partner. Before Elinor told me that she was in a poly relationship, I heard that she had met a woman called Lisa at a conference and it seemed that they had a genuine affection for one another. Lisa was keen for Elinor to meet Andrew and the three of them began hanging out together. Elinor seemed different in the sessions with me, more alive and more hopeful. However, it took her a while to actually let me know what was happening, "you see I fear the judgment of others". However, we also thought about the stress of keeping her new and exciting relationship a secret, something that she could not really integrate into her life as a whole; a situation that intensified following Elinor's decision to live with Lisa and Andrew. In addition, although things were going really well, Elinor was fraught with insecurities feeling, as she did, the outsider in the "throuple". This seemed to be related to Lisa and Andrew being a couple and Elinor's own confusion about her position within the relationship. Furthermore, as the relationship deepened, the partners became more exposed to their differences which began to create conflicts around their individual needs and those of the group. That said, I have been impressed



with the openness of the partners in thinking together about the conflicts that began to surface and it is noticeable how Elinor is slowly beginning to find her voice and position within the relationship as they continue to negotiate their living arrangements.

Deri (2011) believes that since polyamorists oppose mono-normativity and the dominance of the nuclear family, they are more aligned with queerness. Given its radical nature, it is possible that couple psychotherapists trained mainly in dyadic couple therapy will simply not get their poly clients. This is especially concerning given that many poly clients, because of the fears of disclosure, as with Elinor, may choose not to reveal their multiple relationships to others. Yet, those in poly relationships may be struggling with a host of concerns, ranging from an absence of mirroring, anxiety about others knowing and judging their lifestyle, and others may be struggling with a state of incongruence between internalized values and the values they express externally. Equally, helping those in poly relationships manage fears and insecurities relating to letting go of the romantic ideal about being the ‘one and only’ is something that may also be hard for therapists to countenance. Furthermore, attempts to overcome jealousy in poly relationships with *compersion*, i.e., taking delight in a partner’s love for another, may be felt by therapists as an extreme act of denial. Yet, the capacity of those embracing polyamory in managing the demands of multiple relationships, is something that warrants serious consideration by analytically trained couple psychotherapists, if only to recognise the importance of creating a setting that encourages disclosure and which allows for a broadening of the lens to include multiple partnerships in the work.

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