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The Role Non-Monogamy Will Play in the Future of Marriage

By Rachel R. White

Contrary to its "sanctity," marriage has changed over time in both perception and practice. Even the Bible was once suspicious of marriage -- it was seen as more holy to be celibate, and, in many cultures throughout time, polygamy is the preferred relationship model. Women have also been sold from father to husband. But perhaps most shockingly, monogamy hasn't always been central to American marriages as Pamela Haag, author of the book *Marriage Confidential*, explains in this interview about the institution's future -- and the role non-monogamy is already playing.



What are the "secretly transgressive" marriages you describe in your book?

If you're at a cocktail party with 20 married couples, chances are, one or two are in openly non-monogamous marriages. They're the marriage next door. They pay the bills, go to Little League games, recycle -- and maybe on the weekend go on swinging holidays.

Have the rules of monogamy in marriage always been so strict?

The 1950s -- a so-called golden era of "family values" -- was more tolerant of covert affairs than the 1980s. This was more true for husbands than for wives, but not entirely. Kinsey found in his research that a fair percentage of wives had affairs too.

In the 1950s there was a fair amount of "wink, wink" tolerance for a gap between the monogamy ideal and reality. The conservative 1980s were more about regulating behavior; religious social conservatives not only wanted us to act as if we were monogamous, they wanted us to be monogamous. Monogamy became a stricter social ethic.

But the reality is that a fair number of spouses cheat, and we forbid cheating. So, we end up with what I call the "shocking banality" of infidelity: It happens all the time and we're shocked by it all the time.

When did we begin to see an opening up of non-monogamy in marriage?

My argument is that in the 1970s free love and non-monogamy had a certain chic to them, but they didn't have solid foundations in demography, economy, or technology.

Today, the idea of openly non-monogamous marriages has no political chic to it, but it does have a more solid foundation in demography (we live longer and are healthier than ever), economy (women earn their own paycheck, and don't rely on the sexual contract in marriage for their meal ticket), and technology (we're connected to people more than ever).

So marital monogamy is under greater stress today. And I think it's being deliberately rethought and re-evaluated by a post-romantic generation that sees the main function of marriage as friendship, an establishment of a home base -- not sexual passion and fidelity, per se.

In the past, people married for money, order, family, and having babies. Today we seem more apt to say we marry for love. Yet statistics show we marry in our own social class and race. What are we really marrying for?

Today we are more inclined to marry partners than lovers. The majority of unmarried Americans say they want to marry a soul mate, according to Gallup research. It's an interesting goal, because it's not specifically a romantic love that we're envisioning. "Soul mate" can apply to any number of relationships, from friend to colleague to spouse. Maybe we want marriages that are intimate, but not romantic.

From what I understand, more people are marrying their best friend, but this does not bode well for marriages. That best friend/spouse is expected to be all things for us.

Men and women have the same opportunities and life experiences more than ever before; we're more similar and comradely toward each other. All of those things are victories, and upsides of feminism. The bad news is that a marriage today can slide too much into a partnership or a co-parenting arrangement, and lose the intimacy that comes from a sense of mystery or difference.

How does non-monogamy fit into the future of marriage?

More marriages will have a conversation about monogamy, rather than just assuming it is the default. It seems to me that non-monogamy might become a more accepted option, much as premarital sex has shifted from largely scorned to widely tolerated today.

In my book, I look at the entire gamut of extramarital sex -- from conventional cheating to "affair tolerators" who look the other way to monogamy "agnostics" who don't care as much about marital monogamy as they thought they would to deliberately open, ethically non-monogamous marriages and even "asexual" marriages, where one or both spouses really doesn't have an interest in sex.

It's funny that historically, there were more models for non-monogamy -- even if it was the mistress model.

I wonder how our views would be different if we had a social recognition for those historically honored roles of mistress and lover. If these roles were more integrated socially, we'd be less inclined to mistake lust or romantic attachment with "true love" -- and bolt for divorce court when an affair happens. I like to entertain the idea of a revival of the mistress and lover roles in society.

The *Wall Street Journal* recently published a trend story claiming that fewer people are divorcing because divorce would mean a failure. I got the sense this was among the kids who grew up with the family values of the 1980s.

More affluent, better-educated Americans are getting and staying married than less affluent Americans. I think this is happening in part because we have a Type A desire to succeed, and this applies to marriage as to everything else. Whereas in the 1970s there was a certain admiration attached to getting divorced and fulfilling your dreams and "personal growth," we grew up in the 1980s, when the family values retrenchment was going strong.

Also, some of these spouses grew up in divorced families themselves. I encountered more than one husband or wife who had vowed never, ever to do that to their own children. In my own survey for my book, I found that 33 percent of respondents agreed that "even if you're unhappy, you should stick it out for the children." That's up from 20 percent in a 1970 survey.

How are things different for younger generations, such as my own, who largely grew up in the '90s early '00s?

The younger generation that grew up in the 1990s is vastly more connected. It's my guess that your generation won't have the same expectation that a marriage should be the world to them. I think there will be more tolerance for having a range of intimate relationships and friendships, and a greater understanding that it's not a marital failure if you seek different things from different relationships. I also sensed that the younger generation has more pragmatic views of marriage, even more than my generation.

Is marriage on the way out?

Forty percent of Americans think that marriage is "becoming obsolete," and 50 percent of younger Americans believe this, according to 2010 Pew research. I think that marriage is in a brainstorming phase. It's trying to find its footing in the new realities of the 21st century. It seems to me that we still believe in marriage -- we still want to give it a try -- but the reality is, we don't always do it according to spec. We're improvising.

The bottom line is that I think both arrangements are challenging. It's challenging to have a non-monogamous, committed relationship; it's challenging to have a monogamous, committed relationship. Forever is a long time. It pays to be flexible.

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