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Is monogamy dishonest?

A reflection on recent marriage musings

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Secret infidelity within marriage is dishonest. On that, there is widespread agreement. But the prevailing question in our culture today seems to be whether monogamy itself is dishonest about human desire and personal fulfillment.

To think of monogamy as dishonest is to miss the point. Monogamy is in fact an honest virtue that recognizes the human condition and the capacity to wander. Monogamy commits parents to children and holds the institution of marriage together for the benefit of society.

Recently, numerous articles and books have explored open infidelity within marriage and committed relationships. Tracy Clark-Flory at Salon.com explores the benefits of monogamy looking for a "passionate endorsement of the maligned practice," but ends up citing the lack of empirical evidence and hard facts among monogamy's ideological and religious supporters. She describes monogamy as having "unattractive cultural blemishes." [1]

Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times Magazine* interviewed sex advice columnist Dan Savage who suggests that monogamy may have its benefits, but it can lead to boredom, despair and the feeling of being taken for granted. [2] Author Pamela Haag in her book *Marriage Confidential* wonders why people in comfortable, low-conflict but melancholic marriages shouldn't at least talk about exploring non-monogamous options. [3] New York University sociologist and author Judith Stacey stated in an interview about monogamy with Clark-Flory that "[u]ltimately [monogamy] is an ideal that leads to its own undoing, because what's natural is human variation." [4]

By the sounds of our cultural elite, monogamy is bruised, battered and against the ropes. Or is it?

Choosing to be monogamous may be challenging, but only in the way that many virtues are, such as honesty or generosity. This is why Princeton academic Robert P. George argues that monogamy requires cultural support to succeed as the difficult virtue that it is. Monogamy is not simply a personal lifestyle choice. George argues that monogamy's understood value requires support in law, policy and through the informal support of other monogamous marriages within society. [5]

Writing in support of monogamous marriage, sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox argues in a *Washington Post* blog that monogamy protects against unintended pregnancy outside of marriage and the risk of affecting a spouse with an STD. He states that open marriage places children at greater risk of physical, emotional and sexual abuse when they are exposed to their parent's multiple romantic partners. Wilcox points to research that suggests that monogamy delivers greater satisfaction and emotional security than infidelity and that maintaining relationships outside of marriage takes time, money and emotional effort that would have been devoted to spouse and family. Wilcox argues that open marriage is bad for the institution of marriage and it puts family members at risk. [6]

The current debate around monogamy illuminates a larger issue about the meaning of marriage in the 21st century.

Sex has been severed from marriage and this has undermined the meaning of marriage. George argues that for many couples today "there is no sense in which sex consummates or actualizes marriage as such." [7] As a result, there seems to be no moral merit (for some) on which to condemn open marriage or to expect that sexual fulfillment be the domain of marriage, according to George [8]. It is only the secretiveness of sex outside of marriage that is to be condemned. When a secret infidelity is exposed, the cheating spouse is roundly condemned for being dishonest, but what about the "other man" or "other woman?"

Roland C. Warren, President of the National Fatherhood Initiative, opined in the *Washington Post* that there is no outrage at "the other woman" in recent high profile affairs. He notes that sympathetic treatment, if not minor celebrity status, has been bestowed upon the mistresses of John Edwards, Tiger Woods and Eliot Spitzer. Edward's mistress bore his child and confessed to Oprah she was simply following her heart and had no regrets. [9]

If marriage is merely a personal living arrangement between two affectionate roommates then who should care where two individuals (or more for that fact) find intimacy or even if the union survives? The point is, or rather should be, that when sex was reserved for marriage, marriage remained a uniquely positioned relationship for its procreative side, because raising children was likewise reserved for marriage. It didn't matter that some couples never had children, since most or many did and marriage remains the best environment for children (with added benefits for adults, too).

Just look to the neighborhoods where marriage has been most neglected and where fatherlessness has become common place. Kay Hymowitz, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute argues in *Marriage and Caste in America* that the lost marriage script in low income communities has had deep implications for inequality and poverty. [10]

It may be that some find marriage boring. Or anachronistic. But marriage remains a bulwark of strong societies and the alternatives are less than alluring, when we consider all the benefits that healthy marriage brings for individuals, for children and for society. It may seem avant garde to endorse open marriage, but in fact, it's the oldest trick in the book. Rather than endorsing dalliances outside of marriage, what might be more groundbreaking today is encouraging spouses to reconnect and strengthen their relationships through honest conversation about needs and expectations. It's time for honest conversation about monogamy: How it makes marriage work and how healthy marriage betters society.

Endnotes

1. Clark-Flory, T. (2011, July 16). The argument for sexual exclusivity. Salon. Retrieved July 19, 2011 from http://www.salon.com/life/feature/2011/07/16/monogamy_pro
2. Oppenheimer, M. (2011, June 30). Married, with infidelities. *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved July 5, 2011 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/03/magazine/infidelity-will-keep-us-together.html?pagewanted=all>
3. Haag, P. (2011). *Marriage confidential. The post-romantic age of workhorse wives, royal children, undersexed spouses and rebel couples who are rewriting the rules*. New York: Harper Collins. pp. 282-283.
4. Judith Stacey as quoted by Clark-Flory, T. (2011, July 11). Scouring the globe for sex advice. Salon. Retrieved July 22, 2011 from http://www.salon.com/life/feature/2011/07/09/monogamy_stacey/index.html
5. George, R.P. (2006). *The meaning of marriage: Family, state, market, and morals*. eds. R.P. George and J. Bethke Elshtain. Dallas: Spence Publishing Company. p. 171.
6. Wilcox, W.B. (2011, July 11). Closing the book on open marriage. *Washington Post*. Retrieved July 22, 2011 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/closing-the-book-on-open-marriage/2011/07/11/qIQAdDVg8H_blog.html
7. George, p. 168.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Warren, R.C. (2011, July 8). Why aren't we mad at the mistresses? *Washington Post*. Retrieved July 22, 2011 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-arent-we-mad-at-the-mistresses/2011/07/08/gIQA9DwQ4H_story.html
10. See Hymowitz, K. S. (2006). *Marriage and caste in America. Separate and unequal families in a post-marital age*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.