

## Are Humans Naturally Monogamous?

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### Abstract

Whether humans are naturally monogamous or not has been a subject of great debate. While monogamy is widely expected in society, there is a growing movement for consensual non-monogamy (CNM) where individuals love and form relationships with multiple partners. This paper explores the prevalence of monogamy and various forms of CNM across cultures and history. Evidence suggests that while monogamous relationships are common, exceptions like polygyny and polyamory exist. Evolutionary theories propose that monogamy may have arisen due to economic and social factors. Religious teachings and societal norms have also influenced attitudes towards monogamy. Infidelity remains a challenge in many monogamous relationships, highlighting the complexity of human mating patterns. Research indicates that consensual non-monogamous relationships can foster collaboration, cooperation, and satisfaction among partners. Ultimately, this paper argues that lifelong monogamy may not be natural for humans, and individuals should have the freedom to choose relationship models that best suit their needs and preferences.

*Keywords:* monogamy; relationships; consensual non-monogamy; CNM

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## **Are Humans Naturally Monogamous?**

Directly out of the womb humans begin learning about the world and the expectations they must adhere to, or subsequently face the consequences. They are taught to behave, speak, and love in a certain way. However, if left to their own choices free of expectations, would they choose the same mould thrust upon us all? We are taught to love everyone, yet we are expected to contain this abundant love and, once we reach maturity, give it all to one single person. Monogamy is an expectation in our society. Whether this is through cohabitation or marriage, the human ideal is lifelong sexual and emotional exclusivity with only one other person (Ludden, 2020). Yet, no matter what we are taught, there is a growing movement for consensual non-monogamy, where people love whoever they want in whatever way is right for them. Is this ideal monogamy truly the way humans are naturally, or is this a social construct imposed on us for other reasons?

In many human societies monogamous relationships and marriage are abundantly common, yet there are many exceptions; in modern society and cross culturally, sex and love can be found outside of the confines of marriage (Schacht & Kramer, 2019). There are many types of sexual and/or emotional non-monogamy, which include: serial monogamy (having another monogamous relationship after one ends), polyamory (multiple relationships), polyandry (one woman with multiple men), polygyny (one man with multiple women), polygynandry (group relationship), open relationships (seeing others outside of your relationship), swinging (couple having sex with another couple or partner), and a wide variety of other relationship models such as primary/secondary or triad/quad (Mogilski et al., 2015). Regardless of the label, these are all facets of consensual non-monogamy (CNM). Non-consensual monogamy (such as infidelity) is generally disapproved of cross-culturally, with most considering it unjustifiable and morally wrong, yet it remains abundantly common (Ludden, 2020; Mogilski et al., 2015; Schacht & Kramer, 2019). Individuals in extra-dyadic relationships generally have explicitly negotiated agreements for what is permitted to do outside of their partnership (kissing, sexual acts, love, etc.) based on both individuals needs and the relationship model they use; in this way CNM may provide both short and long-term benefits that minimize infidelity and its negative outcomes (Mogilski et al., 2015).

An estimated 95% of individuals in today's society are in a monogamous relationship, leaving around 5% being in some form of a CNM relationship (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021).

Results of one study showed 10.7% of people have engaged in non-monogamy in their lives, 16.8% have the desire to, and 6.5% know someone who is/was polyamorous (Moors et al., 2021). Although across societies there are multiple mating systems and marriages, evidence suggests places with less economic resources and higher mortality rates lean more heavily into long term monogamy, whereas areas with more economic resources and lower mortality rates show more promiscuous mating systems (Mogilski et al., 2015). In the United States, men, sexual minorities and younger adults have higher levels of desire to engage in CNM comparatively (Moors et al., 2021).

What is believed to be a typical mating pattern in humans is highly debated, as there is such diversity cross-culturally (Schacht & Kramer, 2019). Polygynous mating has been (and is still allowed) in most human societies that we know of (Bauch & McElreath, 2016). For example, 85% of pre-industrial (hunter-gatherer) societies approved of polygynous relationships (Schacht & Kramer, 2019). The transition to agricultural societies (from hunter-gatherer societies) brought on socially imposed monogamy, which is a unique social norm only found in humans (Bauch & McElreath, 2016). Species that are closely related to humans (such as chimpanzees and bonobos) mate for recreation and reproduction in a “free love” society; thus, it’s theorised that our common ancestor began the tradition of having sex for pleasure (Ludden, 2020). Around 10,000 years ago, we evolved from our common ancestor into *Homo erectus*, then into *Homo sapiens*, gradually moving away from the hunter-gatherer lifestyle and into an agricultural society (Ludden, 2020).

The invention of farming during the rise of agriculture allowed individuals to own land which accrued lasting wealth that could then be passed down to heirs (Ludden, 2020). This is a major cornerstone of human evolution, as it initiated the institution of monogamous marriage as an economic arrangement for maintaining this new wealth through generations (Ludden, 2020). However, increasing wealth could increase reproductive success in polygynous males with multiple wives, so it remains unclear from an evolutionary standpoint as to why patriarchal societies limited themselves to monogamy (Bauch & McElreath, 2016). Past claims argued that evolution created a higher need for paternal investment in offspring, creating gendered divisions of labor and long-term pair bonds (Schacht & Bell, 2016). However, evidence suggesting paternal care evolves after a population implements monogamy is increasing (Schacht & Bell, 2016). It’s suggested that with evolution came more complicated childcare; the norm of mothers caring for offspring alone changed as children were more likely to survive with the addition of

male resources, so females incentivized paternal parenting by offering frequent sex, consequently increasing reproduction and the need for further paternal investment (Ludden, 2020). However, there is no indication of paternal care in more than 40% of socially monogamous species, and additionally only one third of studies showed the fathers presence to be beneficial to child survival (Schacht & Bell, 2016; Schacht & Kramer, 2019). Paternal investment is common; however, it may not be the reason monogamy evolved (Schacht & Bell, 2016; Schacht & Kramer, 2019).

Another potentially key factor in the puzzle of monogamy is partner availability (Schacht & Bell, 2016). If there was an over-abundance of males, or if females were widely dispersed, lacked reproductive capacity, or were otherwise unavailable across a landscape, this may have altered the former mate monopolization strategy to one of monogamy and pair-bonding (Schacht & Bell, 2016). A male heavy mating pool decreases paternity certainty and creates more difficulty finding a viable partner which makes mates an extremely valued resource; this consequently increases mate guarding and promotes monogamy (Schacht & Bell, 2016). It follows that when there is an abundance of partners, the need for monogamy declines and multiple mating strategies (non-monogamy) provides the highest fitness returns (Schacht & Bell, 2016). Although evolution provides some evidence for monogamy, it doesn't explain how we humans arrived at the predominantly monogamous world in which we live today, when reproduction is simplified, partner availability is not a challenge for most.

There are multiple religions that promote polygyny in modern society, for example fundamental Mormonism (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021), and Islam (Ludden, 2020). Historically, Abrahamic religions such as Judaism and Christianity practiced polygyny until the Roman Empire took Christianity as its official religion and altered the focus to monogamy (Ludden, 2020). Religious teachings, beliefs, and institutions imposed constraints on polygyny (and other forms of non-monogamy), constraining sexual behaviours, reinforcing moral values, and discouraging unfaithful behaviors such as infidelity (Bauch & McElreath, 2016; Jackman, 2014). Although Christian religions have been the norm in many societies for thousands of years, CNM religious based groups and communities are also exemplified throughout history. An example of this is the Oneida community which was founded in 1848 in New York (Hudson, 2016). Here, everyone in the community was married to one another; sexual openness was maintained by breaking up intimate relationships, as they believe the "love of many" brought them closer to

God (Hurson, 2016). However, the most common thread within most religious communities is social control (Hurson, 2016). Religious guidelines impose beliefs around monogamy that were (are) expected to be upheld, no matter the true nature of the individual.

Throughout history, in many patriarchal societies (i.e., ancient Romans, Western societies) monogamous marriage was the norm (Bauch & McElreath, 2016). However, for men, monogamy was more a formality and extra marital sex (e.g., mistresses, brothels) were generally accepted (Bauch & McElreath, 2016). In contrast, women were expected to remain exclusive to their husbands (Bauch & McElreath, 2016; Ludden, 2020). There are many examples of “polyam-ish” (non-monogamous) historical subjects who opposed societal standards, for example: Virginia Woolf, Max Weber, Edna Thomas, Frida Kahlo, Victor Hugo, Amelia Earnhardt, and Erwin Schrodinger (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021). Individuals in these non-monogamous relationships had patterns of early conflict stemming from shame, internalised cultural norms, secrecy, jealousy, and figuring out relationship guidelines; however, those who made it through this “storming” phase usually settled into stability and harmony with their partners (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021). Many male partners in these CNM relationships were often possessive of female partners, employing “one penis policies” while bringing in other female partners and accepting lesbianism (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021). This suggests that jealousy (and patriarchal thinking) often dictated relationship guidelines even in CNM, but permitted additional relationships that provided things the primary partner could not.

Infidelity is prevalent in many monogamous relationships, often occurring when one partner feels their needs are not being met (Jackman, 2014). One meta-analysis suggests 24% of women and 34% of men have had extramarital sex, and this number is estimated to be even higher in non-marital relationships (Jackman, 2014). Prevalence numbers increase when other forms of infidelity are considered, such as emotional and online infidelity (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2020). Infidelity elicits strong emotional responses (e.g., anger, jealousy, grief), decreases psychological health, increases transmission of STI’s, and can cause negative responses (e.g., abuse, suicide, murder) (Jackman, 2014). This is one of the main reasons couples seek counselling, or divorce (subsequently increasing rates of serial monogamy) (Ludden, 2020). Mate retention behaviors (e.g., acts of service, resource provisioning, manipulation, mate guarding) increase when there is a perceived threat of infidelity or defection in monogamous relationships (Mogilski et al., 2015). Alternatively, mate retention behaviours are lower in CNM

relationships, perhaps because there are lower levels of jealousy and a much lower likelihood of defection/infidelity given the inherent openness and strong communication in the relationship (Mogilski et al., 2015). One study found the main motivations for infidelity are neglect, (dis)satisfaction, anger, and sex (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2020). Infidelity is a complicated phenomenon, with many potential reasons for its occurrence. Yet, it provides some additional insight into whether humans are naturally monogamous, as even in pair-bonded relationships, extra-dyadic sexual and/or emotional infidelity is abundantly common (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2020; Jackman, 2014).

Although there are many variations to CNM models, research on relationships with primary and secondary partners (when compared with monogamous partnerships) report higher levels of intimacy, relationship satisfaction, and need fulfillment with both partners (Mogilski et al., 2015). Additionally, there is greater satisfaction for openness, communication, affection, closeness and caring in primary partners compared to secondary (Mogilski et al., 2015). There are less mate retention behaviors and confidence in conflict resolution abilities in secondaries; suggesting primary partners are treated more similarly to monogamous partners (Mogilski et al., 2015). This is not to say that individuals in this model of CNM value their secondary partnerships less, or that their relationship do not last as long (Mogilski et al., 2015). It is more likely they fulfill different sexual, emotional or romantic needs and desires; for example, many secondary partnerships are same-sex, which fulfills needs that cannot be met by an opposite-sex partner (Mogilski et al., 2015).

Collaboration is important in all social groups; conflicts are natural and assist in learning that leads to better relationships. As there are no socially imposed guidelines for CNM relationships, members often go through longer “forming”, “storming, and “norming” stages where they learn roles, rules, expectations, and how to work together through conflict and challenges (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021). Although these phases are arguably part of every relationship, the additional challenges associated with CNM can be a strength. Because there is no imposed structure, members can mould their relationships to fit their own needs and preferences (not societies capitalist or patriarchal norms), and this encourages collaboration between members, higher levels of cooperation, helping each other, and mutually beneficial exchanges, among other benefits (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021). These findings challenge the idea that extra-dyadic relationships breed competition between partners, as research has shown

it actually promotes engagement in collaborative sexual, social, and reproductive behaviors (Watson & Stein Lubrano, 2021). CNM members report they are just as happy as monogamous couples in their relationship, they also report higher levels of sexual satisfaction; additionally, when a couple can acknowledge they are unable to meet one another's needs (sexual or otherwise) and can grant permission to fulfill those needs outside of the relationship, it increases communication skills and trust, and decreases jealousy (Ludden, 2020). This does not mean that CNM would benefit all couples, however those who already have these traits should be able to navigate potential challenges in these arrangements, and strengthen them through these trials (Ludden, 2020). Ironically, the same traits that encourage successful CNM are the same in successful monogamous relationships (Ludden, 2020).

Humans are an abundantly social species who bond to each other for support, joy, success, survival, love, friendship, romance, and sex. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors evolved from a pluralistic mating model into that of pair-bonding monogamy because of complex interwoven factors we may never fully understand. Yet, although society continually imposes that monogamy was the natural way for humankind, examples throughout history show that humans have the over-abundant capacity to love many. I propose that lifelong monogamy is unnatural. Although there are additional challenges in consensual non-monogamy, people have complex needs that are often unrealistic to place onto one single individual. Humans are a part of multiple groups (families, friends, work, etc.) full of socially acceptable, mutually beneficial relationships which help one another meet needs we could not on our own. In short, people need people. The implementation of monogamy has removed a major resource of fulfillment, as humans naturally support one another in every other (socially acceptable) way. When they release the rules forced upon them, individuals and their relationships thrive. This is not to say non-monogamy is right for all people. Rather, society needs to accept that non-monogamy is a natural part of life, and individuals deserve the right to choose what is best for themselves.

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