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Exploring Personal and Professional Understanding of Nonmonogamous Relationships: Reflections on a Group Work-Informed Workshop

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In contemporary Western society, monogamous marriage is considered the ideal, with any relationships deviating from this standard viewed as non-normative and taboo. Yet the prevalence of nonmonogamous relationships is increasingly irrefutable. *Nonmonogamy* is defined as relationships or actions that deviate from the norm of a traditional two-person exclusive partnership, often designating concurrent involvement or pursuit of multiple romantic or sexual relationships. Given today's political climate of espoused "family values," marital legal rights, and the sanctity of the normative marriage structure, addressing nonmonogamy is risky, fraught with value-laden judgments and personal assumptions. To address this topic in a public form is in itself a risky endeavor; however that is exactly what we, three graduate students and a faculty advisor, undertook.

Although sexual identity and marital status are both protected by the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008), we knew that many practitioners have yet to examine their understanding or question their biases around relationship identities. The simple mention of the non-monogamous relationships to social work colleagues frequently elicited awkward pauses and a sense of discomfort, as well as narratives of personal pain from nonconsensual infidelity (cheating) and fear of domestic abuse or power imbalances under polygamy. It was the need to confront this discomfort and lack of awareness that propelled us forward to create a group-centered workshop on this topic. Our commitment to serve vulnerable populations proved more powerful than our fears. The International Association of Social Work with Groups (IASWG) Symposium provided a space to begin this conversation.

Asking social work professionals to explore their understandings and biases about topics like nonmonogamy can be challenging. We knew we needed to create a safe, nonjudgmental space, with a nondidactic, participatory environment. We began the workshop with a brief definition of *non-monogamy*; invited participants to share their motivations for attending; facilitated an icebreaker exploring the concept of attraction; distributed a

handout with terms, visuals, and resources; divided into small discussion groups; and closed with a large open-ended group discussion.

During the first few minutes of the workshop we could feel the awkwardness and tension—nervous laughter and hushed whispers. This was especially evident as we shared examples of nonmonogamy, including “open relationships” in which a couple sanctions sexual and/or romantic relationships outside of the partnership; polyamory, where individuals or couples are able to love multiple people at the same time; and other arrangements such as “triads” in which groups of three (or more) people are in a relationship with one another. The group members opened up about their reasons for coming to the workshop, and some participants “confessed” a lack of knowledge, volunteering that they had never heard of terms like “polyamory.” Others, however, self-identified as living in polyamorous marriages and families. As the workshop progressed, we felt the group relax, becoming more willing to share and question.

Guided by handouts identifying and defining relevant terms such as “family” and “jealousy” as well as more topic-specific terms such as “compersion”¹ and “metamour,”² participants felt safe enough to ask the group to clarify definitions, discussing concepts like what “cheating,” “commitment,” and “attraction” really meant to each of us.

For one small group, conversation was centered on the notion of “commitment.” Members explored past experiences of what it meant to be in a committed relationship. They examined assumptions garnered from predominant societal traditions and family narratives that they had seldom explicitly labeled or discussed. Members raised questions about flirting or fantasizing, beginning to see that assumed norms were seldom universal. For instance, they grappled with questions such as “Is it acceptable to flirt with others if you have no intention of pursuing a further connection?” “Are fantasies about exes allowed?” Participants were able to acknowledge and hear one another describe their assumptions about commitment; for one person it started with the first kiss, whereas for another it was after a certain amount of time and emotional investment. Some were even able to disclose instances when they felt uncertain whether they had violated the shared commitment within their relationships. One group member shared her ambivalence about having remained in contact with her old boyfriend, whereas another questioned at what point it was no longer appropriate to continue checking his online dating profile after meeting someone new. Each small group discussion focused on different issues, but all explored relationship diversity on a personal as well as intellectual level.

By the closing large-group discussion, we could all feel an almost tangible sense of community and comfort, having safely explored a controversial topic, with many participants addressing concepts not usually verbalized. Participants felt reluctant to end the discussion, and many stayed talking beyond the formal conclusion of the workshop.

Facilitator reflections

I first realized the need for professionals to be better informed about non-monogamy while I was working in reproductive health. I remember the shame women carried whenever there was a question about sexual partners—not because they regretted their actions, but because they expected to be judged or look down upon for having chosen a less societally sanctioned way to experience their sexuality. I noticed a hesitancy when clients disclosed relationships that included bringing close friends into the bedroom, multiple anonymous partners, loving and committed groups of adults, or sex workers who did not let their careers get in the way of a committed partnership, as well as many other variants of romantic and sexual connections. Although socially diverse, all of these clients carried the common expectation that professionals could shame and discriminate against their decisions to physically, romantically, or emotionally connect with more than one person. As I have grown as a social worker, my clients have continued to show me that there are many ways people can express love. And, just as we would not expect there to be one racial, gendered, or sexual identity, to expect the norm of the traditional married couple to fit everyone denies so much of our clients' lived experiences.

In working with and acknowledging nonmonogamous clients, we see that they are seeking therapy and joining groups for a wide variety of reasons that may not be related to their relationships or relationship choices. This is why it pains me to hear professionals inadvertently dismiss or shame this population, because as many individuals who are nonmonogamous are closeted in their social and professional lives, it is likely that these same social workers unknowingly encounter clients who are nonmonogamous regularly in their professional practice.

Group workers have long been advocates for diversity and self-determination. So, as I prepared the workshop on nonmonogamy, I was grateful that it would be a room full of group workers to whom we would be presenting this personal and controversial topic. Yet I was still nervous to push the boundaries of cultural competence beyond the standard acknowledgement of sexual orientation, focusing on a population that is frequently condemned as “perverted,” “promiscuous,” and antithetical to “natural family structure.” I was especially afraid to offend or disappoint the faculty members I looked up to as mentors. What assumptions would they make about my marriage? Would the people I respect write me off as “too radical”? Are there some populations that my profession is just not ready to serve?

Fortunately, these prepresentation jitters did not deter me or my copresenters. As group workers, I feel we share a responsibility to continue a tradition of advocacy for social justice. Once the group began to engage with the topic, I soon saw that the participants were eager to learn about this

population, and the majority of judgments or negative assumptions came from a lack of knowledge that gave way to curiosity rather than moral rigidity. Individuals could have easily dismissed our message as “taboo,” irrelevant to their work, or not worthy of the time and emotional investment needed to foster understanding, but entering this exploration with other likeminded peers promoted a sense of safety and understanding that facilitated engagement. My cofacilitators and I came to appreciate how the same principles of mutual aid, universalization, and social justice that allow group workers to support vulnerable populations can also be used to create a foundation to explore culturally sensitive topics. Just as I hope to support and empower my nonmonogamous clients, I found it similarly important to support and empower the professionals engaging in such a value-laden exploration. As participants began to grapple with more difficult questions, owning their own vulnerabilities, biases and lack of knowledge, it was evident that our focus on empowerment and mutual aid supported members in becoming more open.

I was thrilled with how well participants responded to the workshop. I felt that they were leaving with a foundation to further explore their understanding of nonmonogamy, having taken the first steps in building this cultural competence. If anything, I had underestimated the need for this workshop and the kindness and open mindedness that my fellow group workers would bring to exploring this controversial topic. Confidence and compassion can be contagious. Although participants left expressing how empowered they felt to begin to speak with clients about alternative relationships, I left feeling empowered to continue speaking with other professionals about this population that is underacknowledged and marginalized. Given this experience, I feel even more committed to increasing opportunities to foster discussions on nonmonogamy with the larger professional community.

Faculty advisor reflections

When several of my students proposed submitting an abstract to present a workshop based on group work principles to explore social workers’ understanding of clients in nonmonogamous, polyamorous, or romantically and/or sexually open relationships, I had a multitude of responses. I was enthusiastic because I knew that this is an underexplored topic that merits attention, and because I knew that IASWG is a supportive, encouraging professional community that would be open to such a presentation. I also trusted in the maturity and professional abilities of these particular MSW students to carry it off well. I knew that the students had taken a group work course and were cognizant of the importance of group work principles.

On the other hand, as a relatively traditional professional who has been in a monogamous relationship for more than 40 years, I also experienced some

trepidation about my comfort level and role in encouraging and participating in this workshop. How did I feel about my name being affiliated with this topic? What would my colleagues and administrators at a religiously based academic institution think about this? As I interacted with the students, listened to their plans for the workshop, and reflected on my own personal and professional values, I was reassured and excited about the potential impact of the presentation. I dialogued with the facilitators about the importance of utilizing group work principles to create a group experience that would encourage open discussion and exploration.

I experienced pride in observing the group work skill that the student facilitators employed in leading the session. They began the workshop with a clear statement of purpose and a confident, inviting demeanor. They established a group contract incorporating issues of confidentiality, mutual respect, and nonjudgmental interaction and encouraged trust with their calm, nonauthoritarian personas. The leaders successfully created a safe participatory environment that facilitated engagement and interaction while also managing time and being cognizant of the likely limitations on the depth of vulnerability prevalent in this one-time group. They responded to questions and challenges nondefensively, relinquishing power and control to the group members whenever possible. For instance, when a participant asked whether “polyamory (romantic consensual non-monogamy) is socially irresponsible in the age of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and HIV,” the facilitators shared their knowledge of the literature as well as their professional experiences but also encouraged responses and feedback from the participants. They created an esprit of mutual aid within the small groups, asking for participants’ personal and professional perspectives on issues of nonmonogamy.

As the session unfolded, I observed other “traditional” long-term colleagues ask questions about terminology, safety precautions, feelings of jealousy, possessiveness, clinical responsibilities, and social taboos. Participants, including myself, began to look at long-held values from a more open position. Although this was certainly only a beginning, attendees did seem to leave the session more informed and willing to look at issues of nonmonogamy through a more open, nonjudgmental lens. On a personal level, I took away a greater willingness to explore nontraditional attitudes and practices that differed from my own choices. I gained language and understanding to be able to better discuss nonmonogamy. I left the session with many new thoughts and perspectives that will inform my personal and professional interactions.

Follow-up note: My experience of being able to explore this topic within a safe, well-led group convinced me that this workshop should be replicated at our home institution. Feedback from the written evaluations and follow-up conversations with participants supported this decision. I was able to arrange

for the facilitators to lead a similar session as an extracurricular offering the following fall. The presentation was very well attended despite the lack of academic incentives and seemed to address a topic of interest to many. Again, the participants' responses were consistently positive with many requests for follow-up sessions and discussions. The attendance and the effectiveness of both workshop offerings affirmed the need for more group interactions on this important topic. Being affiliated with this presentation was a meaningful personal and professional undertaking that increased my awareness of the need for further dialogue and discussion.

Conclusion

For us, this has been a meaningful journey of personal and professional exploration and growth. Our experience reinforces the need for social workers and other professionals to explore their own personal and professional understanding of non-monogamy. We hope for and encourage the replication of this workshop across multiple settings.

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Notes

1. A feeling of pleasure from witnessing one's partner's pleasure, often viewed as the opposite of jealousy.
2. One's partner's partner, for example, my husband's boyfriend is my metamour.