

# **SERIAL MONOGAMY**

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## **DEFINITION OF MONOGAMY**

"Is the state or custom of being married to only one person at a particular time"(P934), Collins (1990).

## **INTRODUCTION ONE - THE POLITICS OF MONOGAMY**

It is presented here that the marriage type relationship is a misnomer in the sense that it has been given a particular status that is not normal in human functioning. This is highlighted by demonstrating that there are two main stages of relationships not the four or five as has been outlined previously by various writers. However, because of various political, religious, moral and economic reasons psychological theories of relationships as discussed below have evolved to maintain the status quo for the survival of society as we know it.

This article is culturally biased. It is accepted that there are many ways by which humans form families, or social groups by which to maintain a workable economic system and to protect and raise the offspring. This article relates mainly to a western style of 'family' which is primarily the nuclear family structure. That is, an adult male and female form a married union of some kind. They have children, and then those adults and children live together in some form of discrete group. The children eventually grow up and form another marriage union and the same process is repeated.

It is acknowledged that there are many other ways to raise children, such as outlined by Bronfenbrenner(1974) who discusses bringing up children in collective settings. This article is not directly relevant to those forms of relating but is more applicable to the nuclear family type structure.

Also demonstrated is how psychological theory can be used to mould people into a particular type of relating for political, economic and moral reasons. This is in contradiction to their overt stated reason of helping people develop a natural, healthy state of being. In Transactional Analysis terms assisting people to become autonomous. Instead these theories encourage compliance and adaption to an unnatural state of being for political and economic reasons, not a freeing up of natural humanness. This is an example of a collision between needs of the group and the needs of the individual.

## **INTRODUCTION TWO - THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MONOGAMY**

It is proposed that the desire to make the marriage type relationship a monogamous one is an endeavor to reestablish the primacy of one relationship that we had in childhood. Children have a monogamous relationship with mother in childhood. A psychological goal (wish) in childhood is to be the special child who

gets lots and lots of attention from mother. This relationship as far as the child is concerned is the most important, special and the core of one's psychological life and existence.

So the child has a monogamous relationship with the parent in that it is the most important relationship in the child's life. It is the pinnacle of all its relationships. It is not until adolescence that this really changes and the child starts to have "affairs" with its peers. That is the relationship with the parent stops being the 'one and only'. Whilst pre-adolescent children have friends they do not challenge the primacy, importance or involvement of the parent - child relationship.

The monogamous marriage relationship is an attempt to recreate this and in this sense monogamy is a passive behavior looking for that original symbiosis. One special person for many years. This usually works for about 12 to 18 months. This is known as the honeymoon period in a relationship, (more will be said about this later). Then the monogamous marriage relationship becomes polygamous in the same way that a child's does when it becomes an adolescent.

## TWO MODELS OF THE STAGES OF RELATIONSHIPS

In the Transactional Analysis literature in recent times there are two theories which look at the stages that relationships go through over time.

### Model one

Bader and Pearson(1988), present a five stage model based on the work of Margaret Mahler. [This original idea was presented by Bader and Pearson(1983)]. It follows in summary:

**Symbiosis** - This is the first stage of couple hood where the parties are "madly in love". They state, "Here there is a merging of lives, personalities, and an intense bonding, between the two lovers. The purpose of this stage is attachment. To allow for the merger, similarities are magnified and differences are overlooked"(P9).

**Differentiation** - "Here differences emerge, and each lover is taken 'down from the pedestal' and viewed more objectively.... As time passes, one person may start thinking about wanting more space from the other"(P10).

**Practicing** - This is where both parties practice the differentiation by participating in activities and relationships away from the other.

**Rapprochement** - "After each has developed a well-defined, competent identity, it becomes safe to look once again toward the relationship for intimacy and emotional sustenance. Now rapprochement arrives as each partner becomes more assured of his or her own individuality"(P11).

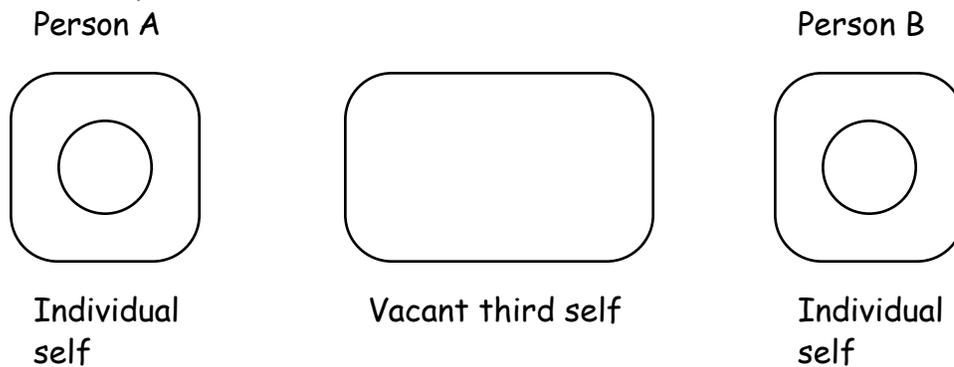
**Mutual interdependence** - "Encouraged to grow through external contacts in the world and strengthened by the knowledge that they are loved by each other, the couple may enter a later phase of constancy, in which the perfect is reconciled with the real and the stage of mutual interdependence is

attained"(P11).

### Model two

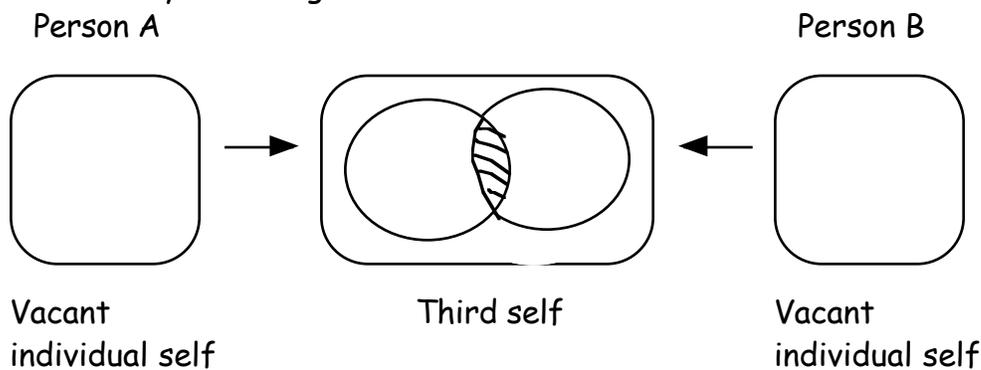
White(1997) states a similar four stage model in a more diagrammatic form, [originally presented by White(1986)]. It follows in summary,

#### Stage one - Acquaintances



In this first stage of relationships there is no Third self or bond or attachment. The relationship is just two separate individuals who have little practical or emotional involvement. This relationship is very unstable in that it could end easily at any time. Both parties can terminate it with no feelings of loss or grief. This stage gives the two parties time to view each other and see if there is a 'fit' for a more involved relationship.

#### Stage two - Honeymoon stage

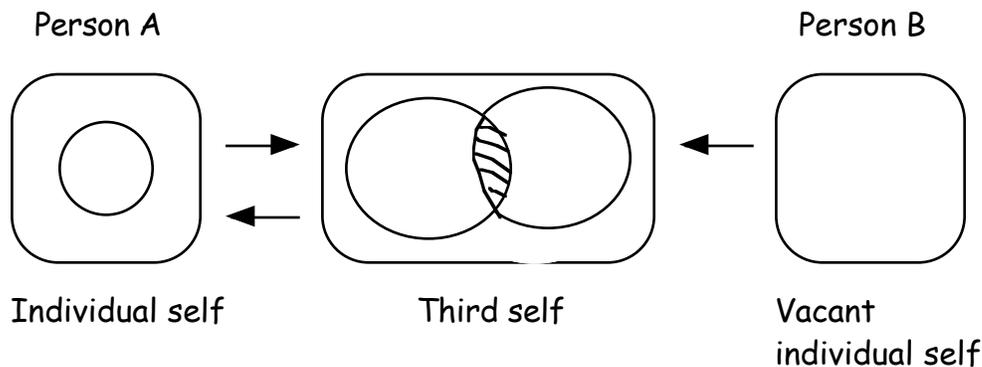


Should the acquaintances pursue the relationship further then it can move onto the honeymoon stage. Similar to what Bader and Pearson (1988) call 'symbiosis'. This is sometimes called the super-glue stage, as the parties almost become stuck together. They spend a lot of time together, talk about each other and feelings towards each other, lots of affection is shown, similarities are maximized and differences are minimized, lots of physical contact from hand holding, to kissing, to sex and so forth. This is the falling in love stage and that is how the bond or third self develops where the two identities lose clarity about where one starts and the other stops.

This is a stable stage of the relationship as there is little conflict and

the parties focus is on each other and wanting to be together. In normal development this usually last from 6 to 18 months.

### Stage three - smothering/abandonment stage



Finally the honeymoon stage loses its appeal as it is stifling and smothering. There is more to life than just one other person and one relationship. People have other goals in life. This need for more from life rarely happens simultaneously for both parties, usually one person feels it before the other and then we enter the next stage.

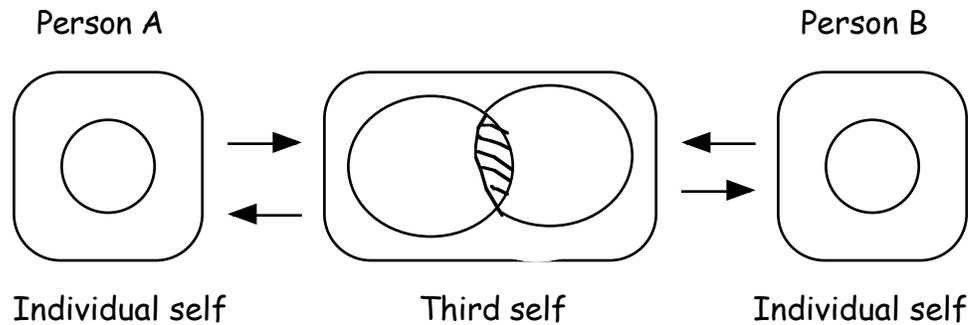
This is another unstable stage as person B will feel abandoned and person A will feel smothered. So there can be conflict especially if there are early childhood problems about abandonment or smothering. For instance if person B was abandoned as a child then for the other person to begin to want to move away, (which is normal), then this feels like a replay of the early abandonment which can be terrifying and produce strong emotions such as anger, fear, depression, and so on.

On the other hand if person A was smothered or restrained from being allowed to grow and develop as a child in her early years then this can also feel like a replay where person B is doing the same type of restrictions on A.

If there are archaic issues and both parties do not have good conflict resolution skills then the relationship can end at this stage. If there is a sense of basic trust, a monogamy contract and empathy for the other: then A reassures B that she is not leaving or abandoning, does not flirt in front of them and so forth then B usually adjusts. Also if B allows A to go out and do new things and associate with other people then A feels like she can grow and not be unduly restricted. Eventually B also tires of the honeymoon period and wants to do things with his life as well and thus the relationship moves onto the final stage.

### Stage four - Complete relationship

Here both parties have a sense of who they are in the relationship and yet can feel and be individuals in their own right. They can feel attached to the other and yet have a life of their own that does not include the other to any great degree. The intensity of affection of the honeymoon stage is less apparent.



In the honeymoon stage we had a romantic love and here there is a more 'mature' love where friends and companions becomes more important, whilst at the same time not excluding the romantic love.

### SERIAL MONOGAMY MODEL

It is suggested here that the later part of both of these theories are not the normal state of affairs and are unnatural social conditions placed on people for economic and political reasons. What is being suggested as the natural state for human relationship development is as follows:

Symbiosis to differentiation, onto  
 new symbiosis and differentiation with a new person, onto  
 new symbiosis and differentiation with a new person, and so on.  
 or

Honeymoon stage to smothering/abandonment stage, onto  
 new honeymoon stage to smothering/abandonment stage with a new person, onto  
 new honeymoon stage to smothering/abandonment stage with a new person, and so on.

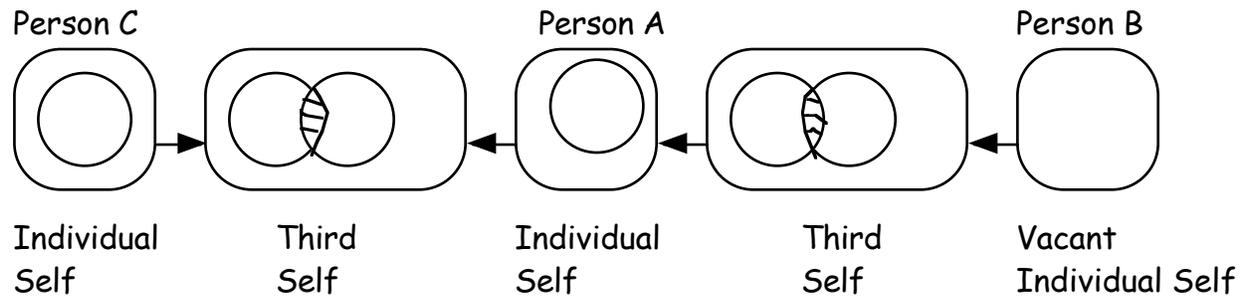
With the Bader and Pearson(1988) theory, the stages of symbiosis, differentiation and practicing are natural, Free Child driven ways of human relating. Rapprochement and mutual interdependence are not Free Child but adaptations which individuals are erroneously told are the natural state of affairs.

With the theory by White(1997) the stages of honeymoon and smothering/abandonment are natural human development and the move onto the complete relationship is not. People are told that this is a natural state because social conditions have required it.

This should be qualified somewhat. Mutual interdependence and the complete relationship are aspects of natural human functioning. The problem is that they have been viewed in a way - as the pinnacle relationship - and this is the inaccuracy. This has lead people to pursue them in a way that is not natural for human functioning and relating.

A central problem with the theories of Bader and Pearson(1988) and White(1997) is that they forgot to look at what happens when the individual begins to differentiate or move out of the third self. These theorists agree that there is a move away from the partner, but a move to where? Consider this

expansion of the relationship diagram.



In this diagram person A and B are in the smothering/abandonment stage, or B is still in symbiosis and A has moved to differentiating or practicing. A is withdrawing involvement or psychological energy from the third self with B. One key way of doing this is by moving into new relationships with others. As Bader and Pearson(1988) note: in practicing this is where both parties practice the differentiation by participating in activities and relationships away from the other. That is he/she is creating a new third self with a new person, in this instance, Person C. For A the new honeymoon period has already started with C.

If A and B are a male/female couple then it could be said that A is having an affair with C. At times this can even become a "true" affair in the sense that it has all the features of the honeymoon stage plus physical sex. More often however there is an 'affair' going on without the physical sex. That is there are all the features of the honeymoon or symbiosis stage in terms of wanting to be with or looking forward to seeing each other, a feeling of growing together, maximizing similarities and minimizing differences, gift giving of special items, a closeness or intimacy and there may even be psychological sex, daydreaming or fantasizing, there is a sense of falling in love. This type of 'affair' is far less uncommon in everyday life.

However psychologists and psychotherapists have convinced themselves that A and B must maintain a third self in a marriage that is some how final and unique. In the normal state of events it is not either of these. Other similar types of attachments will occur a number of times in each of the participant's lives. This is normal human behavior.

This view has implications for the political, economic and moral structure of a society. Thus it is contended that because of the need for these structures to be maintained theoreticians and practitioners of couples therapy like Bader and Pearson, and White have created a theory and practice that supports those structures. The problem is that it is not the natural state of affairs for human relationships. Yet we tell our clients that the 'complete relationship' or 'mutual interdependence' is the natural state, even a state of nirvana. So clients end up striving for this thing which is unattainable as the Free Child is constantly battling against it. Yet we tell them that the Free Child wants and seeks it. This leads to feelings of disappointment, confusion at thinking "This is what I want",

when in fact it is not. In this way we are doing our clients a great disservice if not outright damage.

## EVIDENCE FOR SERIAL MONOGAMY

From a historical perspective when one considers the economic survival of the group and the ability of the group to reproduce and raise their young then it seems that the relationship style that has evolved in some societies has been a single life long monogamous relationship between the two coupling adults. However if the political, moral, economic and legal conditions of a society should change so that serial monogamy (of say a decade) can occur, then there is much less life long monogamy coupling between people. In this society and I assume other westernized societies the conditions are such that serial monogamy can occur and this would be one explanation for the ever increasing divorce rate. It is now almost 50% for first marriages in this society, and higher for subsequent marriages.

So the first piece of evidence for this theory is the fact that this is what is happening when people are given a bit more free rein. When there are no over-riding economic, legal or moral reasons for a couple to stay together in a single life long monogamous relationship then it appears that an ever increasing number of people choose not to do so. Indeed if the general public are told of the fallacy of the 'complete relationship' then those numbers may even increase more.

From a purely biological point of view serial monogamy is much better than a life long monogamous relationship. From a survival of the species point of view there is a strong argument that humans are biologically programmed for serial monogamy. As the human birthrate declines in the more affluent countries, and we start to have one child policies and extensive sterilization policies in some of the more populous countries, then the world's population starts to age and we are slowly but surely putting ourselves in a more vulnerable position as compared to our competitors like insects and viruses. The more we breed and in as many different combinations the stronger as a species we are. The insects and viruses are not slowing down in their rates of breeding, or aging in their populations and thus their mutations will continue at the same rate whilst ours slows.

It is very easy and common for people to discount the relevance of such arguments like this. They think that we have so much control over our environment that insects and viruses can easily be controlled by us with biological and chemical means. All I can respond is that the desire to breed is so basic and at our very core. Indeed most psychological theories highlight this point by placing courtship and sexual behavior as primary factors in our psyche. The libido is seen as a, if not THE, paramount factor in human development. If somehow the libido lost this position I contend that as a species we would not last very long, even though we think we are so far removed from the rest of the animal and plant life on this planet.

## THE LUCK FACTOR IN LIFE LONG MONOGAMY

However we evolved a brain and with that came a sense of morals and a political structure for our human groupings that is unparalleled in the rest of the animal kingdom. In some societies that included having a life long monogamous union between a mating couple. However in recent times (last 40 years) things have changed such that the politics, economics and morality of some societies do not require couples to 'have' to stay together for life. One could argue that the couple that does remain in a single monogamous union is seen as good or better than those that do not. However the couple that does stay together for 30, 40 or 50 years has been a lucky to some degree. Why is this so?

It is suggested that there are in fact five adulthoods:

25 years to 35 years of age: adulthood 1

35 to 45: adulthood 2

45 to 55: adulthood 3

55 to 65: adulthood 4

65 to 75: adulthood 5.

In each of these ten year groupings it is contended that the person is capable (usually) of being quite different to how they were in the previous groupings. That is most people will be 'different' in each of the ten year periods.

They can be different economically: in a ten year period one can make a lot of money or lose a lot of money. The mortgage can be altered significantly. In the work setting at age 25 one is at the bottom of the pile organizationally and at 35 or 45 this can be quite different. Careers can change totally in a ten year period.

Familial differences. A marriage or separation and divorce can easily happen in a ten year period. The practicalities of ones life with a new born child and then with a ten year old child is vastly different. Step children also can occur in a ten year period. Relationships with family members such as siblings and parents can differ considerably.

Physical differences. In any ten year period between 25 and 75 ones physical capabilities can alter significantly. Gravity and breast feeding make sure plastic surgeons stay employed with their breast augmentations. Many illnesses, accidents or aging processes occur in a ten year period. The way we dress and wear our hair, etc can also alter significantly

Life goal differences. In ones 20s one wants to travel and create world peace, 30s have children, 40s more emphasis may go on career, 50s get a holiday home and in retirement one gets back to recreation and travel.

Geographical changes. This can include moving countries, cities, suburbs to upgrade or downgrade ones living circumstances depending on life events.

Psychological outlook on life. Being aged 44 I have seen two adulthoods and have had the time on this planet to meet adults who I have known over a ten to twenty year period. When there is a long break before a remeeting one can find a very different person in their emotional or psychological outlook. Some have

become bitter and twisted, some have just got old and boring, some have maintained their youthfulness elegantly, some have matured like a fine chardonnay and so forth.

Lust factor changes. We are all chronophiliacs to some degree, Money(1988). That is we find one particular chronological age group sexually appealing and not others. We all have our preferences for a particular size and shape of a member of the opposite sex, with particular personality characteristics so why not also a particular age?. The most often acknowledged example of this is the adult individual who is either an: infantophile (infants), pedophile (children) and the ephebophile (adolescents). Whilst these three chronophilias have major legal and moral implications there is nothing unusual about the actual process of being sexually attracted (fixated) on a particular age group. Between the ephebophile and the gerontophile (old age) there are the twentiophiles, thirtiophiles and so forth. When a woman is in her twenties there is nothing wrong with being a twentiophile in her choice of partner. When she is 40 however, difficulties occur in her attraction to her partner who is also 40 by then.

It has been suggested that this particular group of paraphilias (the chronophilias) play much more of a role in marital breakdown than is recognized by most psychotherapists. Any couples counselor would have heard comments like: "Our sex life is non-existent", "He has no libido now", "I just don't find her attractive anymore" and "There is none of the fizz we once used to have". Perhaps such observations are the result of as much a particular chronophilia than of anything else in the relationship.

Above I have listed ways in which the five adulthoods can and do differ from one another. In childhood and adolescence significant changes occur in one or two years and thus psychologists have focused mercilessly on examining and describing these early age groups. The changes are so easily noticed that comparisons can be readily drawn between the same individual at different ages. Sometimes it is only a matter of months for changes to become recognizable. In adulthood the changes keep occurring but it just slows down. Changes that take two years in childhood take ten years in adulthood. So in this sense psychologists have been negligent in forgetting to examine human development in adulthood. Although one must acknowledge the contributions of those like Erikson(1965) and his work on the Eight Ages of Man where adulthood is addressed to some degree.

The point at hand however is that if one gets married at age 25 then the person that they married is different to the person that they are living with at age 35, 45, 55 and so on. (And of course they are different in themselves as well). In essence both parties have to again re-fall in love every ten years because after ten years they are again living with a new person in a new adulthood. In some instances the person you fell in love within adulthood number 1 will not be attractive to you in adulthood 2 or 3 and thus one can not fall in love with that person. Thus the relationship quality declines and possibly breaks down

altogether. You need to be lucky if you choose to be with one partner your entire adult life. Lucky that the way you and they change is compatible in each of the five adulthoods. The choice of a single life long monogamy union requires that the luck factor falls in your favor.

## COUPLES COUNSELING

Context and the person you fall in love with.

The above criteria is saying that when we fall in love with another we are falling in love with a person who is in a particular context. It is impossible to see the individual independent of that context. That person is of a particular age, has a particular place in a family and peer group, a particular job, particular attitudes, lives in a particular area, has a particular body shape, a particular intelligence and so on endlessly. They come as a package deal with all the contextual cues, when we fall in love.

Consider the case of Tom who approached me recently for some counseling. He was 35, married with a child. His problem was that he was very attracted to a close female friend of both himself and his wife. The friend was equally attracted to him. There had in fact been some physical sexual contact between them. Tom did not want this as he did not want his marriage to end. He did not feel the same attraction to his wife.

When he and his wife met it was in another city in another state on the other side of the country. All his family and friends were in that place. He had formed new friends in this new city where he had been for 5 or 6 years. He said however that it was not the same that his roots were in the previous city. He had fallen in love with his wife in the context of the other city, family and friends. The context had changed. A new adulthood had arrived and he had fallen out of love and established a new third self or symbiosis with another woman.

What approach does the counseling take. One could suggest that the original context be recreated. That is they (he and his family), move back to the other city and then he may again fall in love with his wife. That is make the new adulthood the same as the previous adulthood. One hears couples say things like: "I want it to be how it was before". Obviously this cannot happen. They want to make a current adulthood the same as a previous one. An impossibility.

One could suggest that the current wife accept that the husband will have a relationship with this woman. In this view married couples may have relationships (including sexual) with a number of parties. In the past this has been called an open marriage. This was experimented with particularly in the 1960s and 1970s and was not particularly successful. Although one must recognize that polygamy has been used as a family structure for many years in various cultures. I suspect there are a number of reasons why it does not work in a culture where the monogamous nuclear family structure is dominant.

To my knowledge it has always been a male with a number of wives and not the other way around. I would assume that this requires a quite patriarchal

structure in the society. In a society where men and women are at least relatively equal in power (legally and emotionally) one man with a number of wives probably would not work. Second since the advent or availability of easily usable contraception (ie the pill), sex has changed to an activity that is primarily recreation rather than procreation. This changes the meaning of sex in a relationship. It can become connected with love and intimacy much more. So in this culture the suggestion of an open marriage is unlikely to work in the long term even if both parties accepted it in the first place.

Third the couples counselor could suggest the approach where one de-establishes what you had. That is the past adulthood and the contexts involved in that. This involves a move away from suggesting that a man and a woman are married that is final and unique. Every time there is a differentiation there is a new person *C*, it is a natural state of affairs. To differentiate, people can use the development of new attachments with others. This is not inventing anything new, I am just describing what happens as a normal course of events.

However if couples are told that their marriage is final, unique and the pinnacle then they are soon to be disappointed and will be being asked to battle against what is normal. Psychotherapy has been used as a means of social control in this sense. The theory and practice is to keep a couple together in a nuclear family type situation and portray the complete relationship as the goal. The serial monogamy approach says that marriage is not the pinnacle relationship and throughout our various adulthoods there are going to be others that we and our partners have relationships with that may be just as emotionally as important.

As an example of this consider the case of Bill. He had been married for 32 years. Over the past 10 years his wife had formed a very strong friendship with a woman whom she had worked with over the last 15 years. These two women used to and still do travel quite a lot in their job running workshops. There is nothing sexual in the two women's relationship. Bill was jealous of his wife's relationship with this other woman. This approach involves Bill coming to accept that his wife does have this strong emotional attachment to this other woman and that marriage at times is not the pinnacle relationship in her and his life. The serial monogamy approach to couples counseling.

Finally, the situation can occur where the married couple separate. If they then after a period of time develop a friendship and have some form of non-sexual relationship, whilst also pursuing other couple type relationships with others then this would also be seen as being consistent with the serial monogamy model being presented here. That mating, marriage type union becomes one in a series.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed serial monogamy model is in some ways in direct contradiction with what current psychological theory and practice suggest. The government of this society and I assume others spends considerable time, effort

and money on perpetuating the life long monogamous nuclear family structure. In this society one of the largest government departments we have is called "Family and Children's Services" who certainly have a focus of keeping nuclear families together. Other organizations like Relationships Australia , the marriage guidance council, pre-marriage counseling, and even pre-divorce counseling (to talk people out of divorcing) exist in varying degrees. A divorce is seen as a failed marriage even if it was 30 years in duration. Couples counseling usually carries these assumptions and follows the models presented by Bader, Pearson and White.

As noted previously as a society we have evolved a marriage or family structure which emphasizes the centrality of the single life long marriage type relationship. Psychological theory and practice of marriage counseling has perpetuated and continued this evolution.

There is a belief that once one has found a mate, then a marriage type union occurs and the matter is final. This is not the case. Instead this relationship is just one in a series. After such a union there will be the development of many types of attachments some will be similar in nature to the marriage one and that can even involve physical sex at times.

Couples counseling using the serial monogamy model involves accepting that a marriage is just one of many and that after time we have other (unofficial & sometimes official) marriage type relationships. In this model couples counseling needs to divorce itself from agreeing with this fallacious model - the monogamy model. After 12 to 18 months we need to accept that the marriage is not the pinnacle relationship and there will be others that become very important, maybe even somewhat sexualized or love/affection based. The amount and type of these will wax and wane over a relationship of many years. We need to counsel people to come to terms with this and stop trying to retain the single pinnacle relationship idea. It involves coming to terms with having a marriage to one person and at times both parties will have strong relationships with others that at times may match the primacy of the marriage.

To ask couples to do other wise is like pushing wet cement up a hill. Not very successful and going against the natural flow of things. Two generations or even one generation ago the social/moral, legal, political and economic structures of this society made serial monogamy a very difficult life style. These have now changed so it is much easier. It seems that ever increasing numbers in this society are choosing that life style. What does one conclude?

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