# **Trust, attachment, and monogamy**

The norm of monogamy is pervasive, having remained widespread, in most Western cultures at least, in spite of increasing tolerance towards more diverse relationship types. It is also puzzling. People willingly, and often with gusto, adhere to it, yet it is also, *prima facie* at least, highly restrictive. Being in a monogamous relationship means agreeing to give up certain sorts of valuable interactions and relationships with other people and to severely restrict one’s opportunities for sex and love. It is this restrictiveness which has led for calls among some philosophers for the justification of the norm, and some have argued that it cannot be justified. John McMurtry for example, writing in 1972, compared monogamy to private property and argued that it serves the capitalist order (McMurtry, 1972, pp. 596–7). More recently, Harry Chalmers (2019), has argued that monogamy is morally impermissible.

In this paper we argue that rather than *justify* the norm, we ought to *explain* and *understand* its pervasiveness. Not everyone who follows the norm is doing so blindly, irrationally, or immorally. Indeed, many people are monogamous because being monogamous supports their needs and best enables them to flourish. We suggest that the human need for trust and attachment could underlie many people’s desires for monogamy and, therefore, explain monogamy’s pervasiveness. Focusing on the human need for trust and attachment security can also help us to understand why sexual infidelity can feel like such a betrayal. It can make sense to mutually agree to exclusivity in relationships, in spite of the apparent restrictions this brings. In a sense, not all restrictions are restrictive, because holding ourselves to limits on our behaviour can in fact help us to invest in and experience the things we value most.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In Section 1, we consider the norm of monogamy and why it could be considered problematic and in need of justification. In Section 2, we explain attachment theory and gesture towards how it might provide an explanation for the rationality of monogamous arrangements. In Section 3 we reject the view that monogamy is always irrational and immoral, arguing instead that it can support our need to trust and be attached to a significant other. Monogamous romantic attachments can provide us with a sense of rootedness, security, and stability. In Section 4, we apply our understanding of monogamy as an expression of the needs for trust and attachment to the phenomenology of infidelity and betrayal.

## **1) The norm of monogamy**

Monogamy literally means ‘one marriage’ and, historically, to say someone was monogamous would have meant that they had only one marriage for their whole life. However, the term is now used more broadly, to refer to dyadic relationships where there is a commitment made by the partners for sex and romantic love to be exclusive to the dyad. A couple could agree to be sexually exclusive but not romantically exclusive, or vice versa, but for the relationship to be fully monogamous, it would need to involve *both* sexual and romantic exclusivity. The vast majority of people living in the Western World will be in a monogamous romantic relationship at some point. In 2020 50.6% of the British over 16 population was married (ONS 2020), and the presumption at least, is that marriage is monogamous. Many of us will spend most of our lives in such a relationship. Indeed, this is something most of us desire and value. However, the desire to be in a monogamous relationship can appear irrational, in the sense of desiring that which goes against one’s own interests. As McMurtry puts it, ‘it is difficult to conceive of a more thoroughgoing mechanism for limiting extended social union and intimacy’ (McMurtry, 1972, p. 589) than monogamy. Therefore, if we have an interest in love, sex, and intimacy, then agreeing to limit our own access to these seems, *prima facie,* to go against our own self-interest.

Monogamy can also seem to be morally problematic because it involves restricting one’s partner’s access to valuable interactions with others. To show this, Chalmers asks us:

‘Imagine that two partners are in a romantic relationship, and that they are also (or perhaps a fortiori) friends. Yet theirs is not a typical relationship, for the partners have agreed on a most unusual restriction: Neither is allowed to have additional friends. Should either partner become friends with someone besides the other, the other partner will refuse to support it—indeed, will go so far as to withdraw her love, affection, and willingness to continue the relationship.’ (Chalmers, 2019, p. 225)

He argues that many of us would find such a relationship morally troubling, because ‘friendships are an important human good, and when we’re in a romantic relationship with someone, we should want our partner to have such goods in her life. Or at least, we should want our partner to be free to pursue such goods as she sees fit’ (Chalmers, 2019, p. 225). Chalmers argues that, by the same logic, monogamous relationships are morally troubling, because sexual and romantic relationships are also important human goods, and so restricting one’s partner from having additional sexual or romantic partners is no less morally problematic than restricting them from having additional friends (Chalmers, 2019, p. 226). One could conceive of monogamy as an attempt to secure a sort of ownership over one’s partner. Chalmers argues that it is a capitulation to jealousy, and serves to perpetuate it by creating a context ‘of a refusal to share, that of competition for something’ (Chalmers, 2019, p. 237). McMurtry argues that the underlying principle behind it is ‘the maintenance by one man or woman of the effective right to exclude indefinitely all others from erotic access to the conjugal partner’ (McMurtry, 1972, p. 594). The desire to own or possess another is obviously morally problematic, since it is to treat people as objects to be owned, rather than as autonomous beings, and so such a desire is not something we ought to socially or morally sanction.

In what follows, we will argue that monogamy promises are neither necessarily irrational or morally problematic. The most that can be said is that they are *prima facie* irrational. But it soon becomes apparent that they needn’t be: promises of monogamy do not necessarily go against our self-interest, but instead can be supportive of our human needs for trust and attachment. Secondly, as long as the partners have made a monogamy promise voluntarily and with each other’s interests in mind, they are not morally problematic. Before we argue for this, though, we want to briefly discuss attachment theory.

## **2) Attachment**

Attachment theory was developed to capture the way that infants form bonds with their primary caregivers, and how the way in which they form or do not form such bonds can affect their relationships throughout their lives. It was developed by psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s and 1970s. In cases where secure attachment bonds are formed, infants treat their primary caregivers as a “secure base” and a “safe haven” (Wonderly, 2016, p. 229), and having this security enables them to go out into the world feeling secure and confident. Drawing on the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth, as well as other psychologists, Monique Wonderly argues that romantic partners also fulfil the function of secure bases and safe havens for us in adult life. If we are securely attached to our romantic partners, we will feel more confident when they are around, and we will turn to them for comfort in times of difficulty.

Wonderly argues that romantic relationships involve not only caring, but also attachment; the lover *needs* the beloved. Therefore, romantic love is, to an extent, self-interested, as well as involving concern for the beloved. Her comments on grief help to clarify how caring and attachment are distinct. A person grieving for someone to whom they were attached might feel ‘off-kilter, as though she was no longer “all of a piece,” unsafe, unconﬁdent, and so on’ (Wonderly, 2016, p. 239). If Jade is attached to Mike and Mike dies, Jade will feel not only saddened for Mike, she might also feel as though the rug has been pulled from beneath her and that the loss of Mike permeates much of the rest of her life. This contrasts with grief for someone about whom one cared, but to whom one was not closely attached, perhaps, for example, a relative whom one had only met a few times in their life. In such cases, Wonderly suggests the grieving person would feel the other-regarding aspects of grief – sadness for the dead person’s loss of life, and a desire to promote their interests, for example. However, the grieving person would not feel the *self-*regarding elements of grief – feeling “off-kilter,” etc. (2016, p. 238-9).

It is thus plausible that we form security-based attachments with romantic partners which help us to feel safe and confident moving through the world, and that losing these attachments can cause us to feel like our world has been turned upside down. On her view, security-based attachment can be defined as follows:

1. ‘The attached party has a relatively enduring desire for engagement with a non-substitutable particular.
2. The attached party suffers a reduced sense of security upon prolonged separation from the object or even at the prospect of such separation.
3. The attached party experiences an increased sense of security upon obtaining the desired engagement with her attachment object’ (Wonderly 2017: 242).

If Wonderly and the psychologists to whom she refers are right, and romantic love does provide us with security-based attachment, this can help us to understand the characteristic gravitational pull of romantic love. If romantic lovers are attached to each other, then they do not only *care* for each other, they also *need* each other. Furthermore, they need each other *in particular* – not as substitutable sources of goods provided by romantic relationships, but *as that* *source*. If one loses the other, they will not only miss them, they will also find that they need to undergo a significant period of readjustment to get used to life without them. They are, therefore, highly vulnerable to each other, as each knows that if the other leaves them, or stops loving them, their life will be, at least for a while, turned upside down. If monogamy, therefore, helps to strengthen the attachment, and/or helps to prevent it from being lost, then this could give romantic partners a good reason to be monogamous.

## **3) Defending monogamy**

Monogamy undeniably involves restrictions of a sort. However, that it is so strongly and widely desired suggests that many people find the restrictions it places on them to be outweighed by its benefits. Yet, an opponent of monogamy could make, among others, one or both of the following arguments:

1) Monogamy is morally impermissible, as it involves restricting the behaviour of one’s partner unjustifiably (even if the partner consents to the restrictions), which can amount to ownership of them.

2) Monogamy is irrational, as it goes against our self-interest, by placing restrictions on our own behaviour which limit our satisfaction in life.

In what follows, we will consider each of these arguments. We will argue that monogamy is not necessarily immoral or irrational, and that, rather, it can support our need for trust and attachment security.

### **3.1) Monogamy and morality**

First, we will argue that monogamy’s restrictions are not enough to bring its moral permissibility into question. Chalmers argues that monogamy is *prima facie* morally troubling in the same way that it would be morally troubling for partners to restrict each other from having further friends. Thus, defenders of monogamy must be able to provide a defence of it which identifies a morally relevant difference between the two types of restriction. He considers five such defences: 1) ‘the specialness defence’, that monogamy makes relationships more special; 2) ‘the sexual health defence’, that monogamous partners will be less likely to get sexually transmitted diseases; 3) ‘the children defence’, that children are best raised in monogamous households; 4) ‘the practicality defence’, that monogamous relationships are more practical than polyamorous relationships; and 5) ‘the jealousy defence’, that monogamy protects us against jealousy (Chalmers, 2019). It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider each of these defences, suffice to say that Chalmers argues that none of them succeeds in showing that monogamy is morally permissible.

What we do want to point out though is that, by viewing the romantic partners as restricting each other from valuable interactions with others, Chalmers has framed monogamy promises in such a way as to make them appear in need of defence. However, if viewed as providing the conditions under which the partners can flourish and feel secure, then monogamy seems less morally troubling, and so less in need of defence and justification. Exclusivity is not always morally problematic: people often agree to restrictions over their behaviour because it is mutually beneficial for them. For there to be a moral concern about mutual restrictions, then the restrictions must involve a form of injustice; a violation of somebody’s moral right of access to goods they are otherwise *entitled* to access. The mere restriction of access to goods tells us nothing about the moral permissibility of that restriction; we need a story about the wider entitlementsof the parties involved to the goods being restricted. After all, we are restricted from all sorts of things; neighbours’ houses, other people’s bank accounts, etc. But these restrictions are only a moral issue if we have entitlement to access those things.

Describing Chalmers’ cases in plain terms: the ‘no further friends’ and ‘no further romantic partners’ cases involve two people who mutually agree on terms of a relationship, such that each agrees to provide the other with some *good* (friendship, love, sex), and to forego seeking that good from others, on pain of the relationship – the continued provision of that good from each party to the other – ending.

Put in these simple terms, whatever aspect of these arrangements seemed morally troubling should recede into the distance. These are voluntary, mutual agreements, not yet containing any morally troubling ingredients such as deception, coercion, exploitation, injustice, incapacity, or any harm to others, that would otherwise contaminate the moral permissibility of an ongoing exchange of goods like these. These are terms each party is free to accept and enter into, or to reject and seek exchange elsewhere, or to re-negotiate. On their starting basis, there is no morally troubling quality to them.

What seems to trouble Chalmers and McMurtry about monogamous arrangements, as per McMurtry’s description of monogamy being ‘the effective right to exclude indefinitely all others from erotic access to the conjugal partner’ (McMurtry, 1972, p. 594), is that we ought to have the right to have sex and loving relationships with more than one person at a time, and others have the right to have sex and loving relationships with us. But this is not true. Nobody is entitled to love and sex with anyone else (Srinivasan 2021). So if the partners voluntarily agree to a monogamous arrangement, then no one, including outsiders, is having any entitlements to any goods undermined.

It is the nature of the ‘no further romantic partners’ arrangement that the partners involved agree to give up their entitlement to further romantic partners, *insofar as they enter the agreement in the first place*. Of course, it is fine for either party to withdraw from the agreement if it does not suit them, but they cannot then claim an immoral restriction has been placed on continued access to *romantic love* with their now ex-partner. It hasn’t, because the terms of the agreement were that you could only have *your partner’s* romantic love if you waive seeking romantic love with *others*. When the individuals involved agree to that arrangement, they agree that they can no longer expect continued provision of goods from the other in case they seek provision of that good from outside the relationship. Any continued ‘entitlement’ to the good in question from the other party is waived, depending on how they act.

Furthermore, to say that monogamy involves ‘ownership’ of one’s partner seems wrong. What has been agreed upon is the exclusivity of an ongoing exchange agreement. Exclusivity of an ongoing exchange with another does not equate to ownership of the other. If this were not the case, then it would be impossible, for example, to have a manufacturer agree to exclusively supply one good it makes to a distributor without thereby being owned by the distributor. We all understand what is entailed by exclusivity of exchange. There is no need to equate it with ownership. The fact that one partner sets a boundary concerning continued access to their love, sex, affection, etc. does not amount to acting as though they *own* the other, as though one is controlling the other’s ability to seek endless opportunities for love, sex, and affection. The other is literally free to do what they like. However, we do not have a right to continued access to our partner’s love, sex, and affection if our partner does not wish to give it. Thisdoes not equate with being owned or controlled by our partner.[[1]](#footnote-0)

Let’s consider an analogy: suppose two musicians – Kenny and Kate – form a musical duo and commit to working exclusively together for as long as it works out for them both. They do this because it is mutually beneficial for them: their musical duo is productive and successful, and they know that if either of them starts working with another musician on the side, they will have less time and energy to devote to the duo. Therefore, to protect their musical duo and the work they do together, they agree that neither of them will work with anyone else. Of course, either is free to break the agreement at any time and go and work with someone else; they are not trapped in the situation. But if Kenny, for example, wants to go and work with another musician for a while, he must accept that it would be reasonable for Kate to say to him that she will no longer continue to work with him. In this case, Kenny and Kate are both restricted – neither is free to reap the benefits of being part of the musical duo *and* work with other musicians, and working with other musicians would potentially be a valuable experience for them both. However, they don’t *own* each other; they agree to these restrictions in order to protect something that they also consider to be of value. On balance, the restrictions on playing with others provide Kenny and Kate with a more successful and enjoyable musical career, so neither loses out overall because of them.

Similarly, if two people agree to be in a monogamous relationship because monogamy helps them to protect their attachment to each other, and if their attachment to each other is valuable to them, then the restrictions imposed by monogamy are in no further need of justification, since, as with Kenny and Kate, although monogamy appears to impose restrictions on the couple, it is not, on balance, taking value away from their lives. Their attachment might give them a feeling of security and rootedness, enabling them to have greater confidence in the rest of their lives, and being monogamous might support this attachment. There is nothing morally troubling about such an arrangement. Each partner agrees to be monogamous because that is what is best for both of them.

This is not to say that no monogamous arrangement is ever morally troubling, only that monogamous arrangements are not in themselves morally troubling. Of course, dynamics involved in monogamous relationships can be unhealthy. This can occur when boundaries are left unclear or involve double standards. Manipulative partners can feel entitled to special treatment, and use weaponised moralizing to get it; e.g., holding their partner guilty of endless never-put-to-bed wrongs, from ever shifting boundaries, meaning their partner must continually work off a debt. Or, one may have a continual sense of victimhood, having being wronged in the past, and so excusing themselves from the sorts of behaviour they would nonetheless blame their partner for. Unhealthy dynamics can also occur when one party feels they have to push boundaries to get what they want, rather than being open and honest about what they want and thereby vulnerable to rejection from the other. When boundaries are left unclear, they can be crossed unknowingly, triggering emotions that could not be anticipated by the other. Such unhealthy dynamics are not inherent to monogamous relationships though; they are a risk of any form of human relationship. This includes polyamorous relationships, though we all have something to learn from ‘the core norms of polyamorous practice, such as extensive honesty, communication, [and] clear boundaries’ (Brunning, 2022, p. 166).

Preserving the health of a relationship is an ongoing process of bringing unspoken expectations and boundaries to light, so that they be mutually acknowledged and thereby given a chance to be respected. A test of the moral health of a romantic relationship, taking a cue from Baier’s (1986, pp. 253–260) ‘moral test’ for trust relationships, is to consider whether the relationship would survive if the partner’s actual boundaries – the terms they *actually* hold one another to, as evidenced in their emotions’ reactive attitudes – were made explicit to one another. If those boundaries wouldn’t be mutually agreed to once exposed, then the relationship ought to end. Relationships involving unspoken expectations or unstated boundaries are breeding grounds for deception, coercion, and manipulation because one or both parties may subconsciously believe that if they were honest about what they wanted, the other would leave.

### **3.2) Monogamy and rationality**

So monogamy is not in itself immoral. Is it irrational? A quick answer as to how monogamous agreements can be rational is that they are the least complex way of *settling* a matter of concern to us; namely, where we go for those valuable goods we want – love, sex and affection – which we need another to provide. If we have a monogamous agreement, there is only one source we need to keep in mind to turn to, and which we can expect to have priority with. That our partner has promised those goods solely to us means we can expect to not be on any waiting list for them. Our partner may have other things to do, of course. But, the more partners to whom *they* have committed to *also* provide love, sex and affection, then the slimmer the amount we can expect. So, if we assume instrumental rationality, an upper bound on exactly how much love, sex, and affection we need (i.e., not an insatiable need), and indifference over the source of goods, then mutual exclusivity can be seen as a win-win for each party. The guarantee of availability of goods that each side seeks is a type of assurance granted to one another.

However, it is not just love, sex, and affection (which can *prima facie* be construed as instrumental goods) that romantic partnerships bring. Committed romantic relationships are also, as described above, a way to nurture attachments, which provide the parties involved with a feeling of security. For many people, monogamy will help to strengthen the attachment they share with their partner. As we have already noted, this is partly for practical reasons: all else being equal, monogamous partners will have more time to spend with each other than non-monogamous partners. This does not necessarily mean that they *will* spend quality time with each other, but there will be more opportunity to do so. Sharing sex exclusively is also potentially a way to strengthen the attachment through providing the partners with an intimate activity that they do with no one else, helping them to demarcate their relationship from others (McKeever, 2017).

That romantic love is grounded in attachment also means we are *partial* to who it is that provides the goods we seek from romantic relationships. Romantic love involves a desire for engagement with a ‘non-substitutableparticular’, as Wonderly puts it. So it is not just that monogamy promises make sense as a mutual guarantee of a provision of goods, but they also make sense because we want to exchange those goods with *that person*.

When feelings are mutual, and partners sense that they are, the symmetrical exchange of promises in monogamy provides a groundwork for trust, which is conducive to wellbeing. This is because it can allay a sense, on both sides, of needing to ‘hedge one’s bets’ and to seek further opportunities for love-based attachments, which could undermine their bond.

Making a promise of performance to another on some matter implies that you recognise their concern about your performance on that matter, and that you take their concern seriously enough to invite them to rely on or be assured of your performance (Scanlon, 1990; Thomson, 1990; Black, 2004; Pink, 2009; Friedrich and Southwood, 2011). If we make an exchange of monogamy promises, then this means (if we are being genuine) that we are bringing to light our mutual recognition that we each want to continue sharing our love with one another, and to not seek opportunities elsewhere, insofar as that might threaten our attachment to one another. As monogamous partners, we can therefore be more assured of continuing our relationship, because we each have a guarantee that our partner is not ‘going anywhere’; not seeking other opportunities for partners to share love with.

This mutual exchange of assurances, on a matter of our mutual attachment security, is what makes monogamous relationships a great engine for trust. One of us has argued elsewhere that trust and distrust are attitudes we take toward others when they can impact our attachment security, on some recognised matter of concern. This is why trust and distrust involve a vulnerability to betrayal, as a stinging sense of rejection, i.e., attachment disruption (Kirton, 2020). Trust and distrust however are ‘opposite’ attitudes we can take to such matters. Trust involves the sense of being at ease with another, which can incline us to treat matters of concern as settled: adopting an ‘unquestioning’ attitude to that matter, putting it out of our minds (Nguyen, 2020). When we are *lacking* in trust toward another, we can feel a sense of unease or anxiety, such that, on matters of concern, we monitor their actions. Distrust, on the other hand, involves being positively suspicious or wary of another, with matters of concern being those where we ought to put safeguards in place to avoid our being vulnerable.

When we make an exchange of monogamy promises, this effectively involves an exchange of invitations to treat a mutually recognised matter of concern as settled. Both partners, through giving such promises, express and affirm a mutual recognition that each takes the other’s loyalty as a matter of concern, and invite one another to expect performance that takes that concern seriously. Each swears off seeking further romantic attachments, which could have the potential to destabilise this one. In other words, each can trust the other on this matter; it can be put out of their minds. This provides a sense of security to both, and so is positive for wellbeing, and preferable to a protracted state of unease, where each mutually feels the need to monitor the other.

If you are genuinely romantically attached to your partner, this entails vulnerability to feelings of rejection or abandonment. If your partner does not make a promise of exclusivity, or explicitly warns against expecting exclusivity, then the potential for such feelings becoming an issue in future is still on the table, not put to rest as a matter of concern. It becomes sensible therefore to seek further romantic options yourself, so that any sting of rejection is mitigated against. Further, when this recognition that hedging is rational on one side is *mutually* recognised by both, it becomes mutually rational to hedge, which can lead to a corrosive (in attachment security terms) downward spiral of hedging behaviour. In other words, it becomes sensible to not get too attached, to the point that the bond is undermined.

Making mutual exclusivity promises also allows partners to be able to blame one another for disloyalty should one of them stray. This puts in place a kind of mechanism for holding one another to account. Katharine Hawley makes the observation that one way of warding against others holding trust-based expectations of you on some matters is to actively disinvite their reliance on you in that matter, so that blame is not appropriate (2014, p. 11). But if partners cannot blame one another for paying attention to other romantic interests, they are foregoing a mechanism to re-focus on their own relationship. Blame is an attitude of appealing to the other, asking for their recognition that an action corrosive to the health of a relationship has been committed, in order to seek restorative action (Scanlon, 2010). The exchange of promises therefore provides a kind of accountability-based guiderail on our actions, as well as a reason to undertake restorative actions if we fall off track.

An exchange of mutual monogamy promises, therefore, has the ability to ward off a vicious downward spiral of hedging, because it offers a form of guarantee that there is no need to hedge, and that any hedging is explicitly agreed to be blameworthy. By warding off unease and suspicion, this enables virtuous upward spirals of mutual reciprocity, and thus increased trust and attachment security. In fact, in the context of such promises being made, distrust and suspicion can be called out as problems for the relationship, because they appear to go against mutually affirmed expectations.

As noted in previous sections, opponents of monogamy argue that the blame-enabling feature of monogamy promises is what makes them in need of justification. It can be argued that insofar as people in monogamous relationships *do* stray, or are likely at some point to be attracted to other people, then the making of such promises just brings the potential for blame, which is not a pleasant attitude to hold onto, or to be held to. Monogamy might be viewed as akin to an unrealistic diet plan, holding ourselves to unrealistic and unpleasant expectations that make us mutually miserable.

This may be true for some, for whom monogamy may be ill-fitting. But it can’t be seen as part of the essence of monogamy promises that this is so. The blame-enabling feature of monogamy promises can stand in their favour, in terms of helping meet our needs for trust and attachment security, which we are vulnerable to in romantic love. Further, the view that accountability mechanisms, or restrictions, are essentially always limiting or unpleasant is short-sighted. For example, deadlines and distraction-limiting apps are appealing because they allow us to focus on activity that we recognise as more valuable, and often more fulfilling, than less valuable activity that provides a quick-hit dopamine release. Restrictions being in place can help us focus on things we want to focus on, and in that sense can be conducive to wellbeing and liberty-enhancing, not liberty-limiting.

It is also not essential that monogamy promises are made in a punitive spirit. They can be expressive of and affirming of love, when we just wish to express that we want no other. The musician and performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti describes how, upon falling in love with fellow bandmate and future husband Chris Carter, her desire for any others fell away as:

Our love was total, a oneness that rendered words superfluous in expressing the feelings that welled inside us. I was only happy when he was around. My world was Chris - all my focus was now on him. I knew my life could only be with him. (Tutti, 2020, p. 228)

On this picture, the blame-enabling spirit of monogamy is akin to an alarm behind glass that will, ideally, never need breaking, and the restrictions a forgotten policy document, never in need of consulting.

In summary, the equal and reciprocal nature of monogamous partnerships provides a groundwork for security and trust. Mutual monogamy promises provide a neat way of aligning our expectations of one another with our mutual attachment security needs. As Christopher Bennett puts it, a relationship can be thought of as a ‘structure of responsibility’, and in a monogamous relationship, ‘both parties to the relationship have a particular person to turn to for support, someone who, by virtue of the sort of relationship that they are having, is charged with their care and does not have anything more important to do’ (Bennett, 2003, pp. 295–6). Thus, in a monogamous relationship, each partners shares ‘complete reciprocal responsibility’ for the other (Bennett, 2003, p. 296). They each know that they have someone to whom they can turn for support, someone who ‘has their back’ and whom they can trust to be there for them.

Polyamorous (consensually non-monogamous) relationships can, of course, provide people with security too. However, the ‘exclusiveness of concern’ (Bennett, 2003, p. 296) that is part of monogamous relationships is not a part of polyamorous relationships. The non-dyadic nature of polyamorous relationships also means that those involved in the relationships are not equally vulnerable to one another. Suppose, for example, that Paul and Jake are in a polyamorous relationship, but Jake is more confident than Paul, and has more time on his hands. Consequently, he has more sexual and romantic relationships with others than Paul does. In this situation, Paul might rely more heavily on Jake, than Jake relies on Paul, to have his emotional needs fulfilled. In such a situation Paul might feel much more vulnerable than Jake does; if their relationship ended, Jake would have many other intimate partners to turn to, whereas Paul would have none. Of course, many monogamous relationships also involve one partner being more vulnerable to the other – one partner might need or love the other more, value the relationship more highly, or simply not have as much else going on in their lives. However, as long as there is ‘exclusiveness of concern’ in the relationship, even the more vulnerable partner knows that they can trust the other to be there for them.

On the other hand, there are ways in which polyamory could foster secure attachment better than monogamy. As Luke Brunning (2018) points out, polyamorous people engage in emotional work, and this can help to mitigate feelings of insecurity. In addition, people in polyamorous relationships do not all adopt an ‘anything goes’ approach to sex and love. They might have ‘core relationships’ which ‘can provide a secure base that enables each partner to confidently explore other relationships without fear of jeopardising their intimacy.’ Having more than one ‘secure base’ could sometimes be better at providing us with security than a monogamous relationship could (Brunning, 2018, p. 525), since, if one partner is unavailable, there is another to turn to. We accept these points. Our aim in this chapter is not to argue that monogamous relationships are *always* going to be the most rational form of romantic relationship, because that question depends on who the individuals involved are, and to what extent they are able to best manage their mutual needs for attachment, trust and love.

It is worth noting that our need for secure attachment to others can also underlie different approaches to caring and to intimate non-romantic relationships. For some people, having one or two close friends, on whom they can always rely, will provide them with a better sense of security than having numerous friends with whom they are less close. For others, the opposite will be true: they will feel more secure if they know that there are a greater number of people to whom they can turn if they need support, even in the knowledge that some of these people will not be able to provide the support they need. Neither approach to friendship is more rational than the other, since both approaches can support the needs of the individual in question.

In the same way, no one can claim that monogamy nor polyamory is, in itself, a more rational approach to love, *for every single individual*. If being in a monogamous relationship makes a person feel trapped, bored, and insecure, then to be monogamous might be, for this person, irrational, in the sense of going against their self-interest. It might be that their needs and interests would be better served by being in a polyamorous relationship, or by not being in a romantic relationship at all. On the other hand, if being in a polyamorous relationship makes someone feel insecure, anxious, and unable to cope, then it would well be irrational to be in such a relationship, unless this person has a strong second-order desire to overcome such feelings through emotional work, so that they can embrace polyamory. Then, the question becomes to what extent that person can be assured they are able to ‘engineer’ their own impulses, from the top-down, and at root, what sort of emotional needs they wish to meet from doing so.

One further argument made against monogamy is that it is a capitulation to jealousy (Chalmers, 2019, p. 236), where the alternative is to undertake emotional work (Brunning, 2018), or in other words, to try and engineer our attachment insecurity impulses from the top-down. There are several points to make in response to this. One is that the argument could be easily reversed: the labour involved in undertaking emotional work is an unnecessary capitulation to possibly fleeting desires. There is also no reason in principle why the burden should be on the jealous partner to quash their jealousy, as opposed to the unsatisfied partner managing their desire for others. Furthermore, the *work* in emotional work should not be understated. It could be more sensible to ‘capitulate’ to jealousy, because doing so is easier. Kyle York notes (2020, pp. 542–543) in a reply to Chalmers that the amount of labour created in polyamorous setups, around navigating and managing partners’ emotional needs appears to deter many from persisting. There is only a finite amount of time in the day, particularly once domestic and logistical pressures of family life take over, to devote to our partner’s emotional needs – let alone multiple ones.

A further point concerns whether the idea that such engineering from the top down with carefully designed normative expectations (of the Hawley ‘dis-invited reliance’ sort, noted above), is even advisable, or sometimes possible. To see this, we can consider the phenomenology of sexual infidelity.

## **4) Monogamy, trust, and the phenomenology of sexual infidelity**

It can be argued that a monogamous promise is not a capitulation to jealousy, but rather a recognition and reckoning with the fact of jealousy, as something we are both vulnerable to in romantic attachment and something partners shouldn’t want each other to experience, as it is deeply unpleasant. Such promises are a way of increasing trust, by warding off the sense of unease that sexual infidelity may be on the cards. This is because sexual infidelity can be, as a betrayal, traumatic.

Being cheated on often feels like a significant betrayal of trust. Indeed, it is common for sexual infidelity to lead to the breaking up of a relationship. In a study on infidelity conducted by Charny and Parnass in 1995, they reported that ‘affairs had a very negative impact on the affair-ees who suffered variously, deep blows to their psychological security, confidence, and equanimity’. Some of the affair-ees studied also suffered ‘damage to their self-image, personal confidence, or sexual confidence’ and ‘feelings of abandonment, attacks on their sense of belonging, and betrayal of trust’ (Charny and Parnass, 1995, p. 107).

Why should being cheated on feel this way? For one thing, cheating often comes along with various other wrongs: it might, for example, also involve deception, and it might have led the cheating partner to not fulfil other obligations they have to their relationship or family (McKeever, 2020, p. 517). However, even when it does not – even when, for example, a person engages in a single act of sex outside of the relationship, and they tell their partner straight away – their partner might feel so betrayed that they cannot continue the relationship. In such a case the cheating partner has still committed a wrong, of course. They have broken a commitment not to have sex outside of the relationship, even if this commitment was made only implicitly. However, we break commitments to each other all the time, and though the breaking of some commitments could lead to feelings of betrayal and potentially to the ending of a relationship, few have quite the same psychological effects as the breaking of the commitment to be monogamous.

Why should cheating be so damaging to one’s self-esteem? One can argue that the norm of monogamy makes cheating seem like a bigger deal than it has to be (McKeever, 2020). The norm of monogamy encourages us to believe that one person can and should be ‘enough’ for us, and so if our partner does not find us ‘enough’ not to cheat, we feel humiliated and fear that our partner does not love us (McKeever, 2020, p. 533). In other words, an opponent of monogamy can say the norm itself creates the conditions that make cheating traumatic. If we choose to avoid making such exclusivity commitments in the first place, we will be freed from the risk of betrayal.

There are two things we can say by way of response. One is that, even if the betrayal risk from infidelity is, in a sense, ‘created’ by an exclusivity promise, pointing this out does not make any effect of its breach vanish, or become less real and viscerally upsetting. That the norm could have been otherwise does not make its breach less impactful, any more than pointing out the conditions for the car crash were only such because we collectively decided to drive on one side of the road. By promising exclusivity, this becomes something our partner trusts us on, thus expects as a matter of their attachment security (Kirton, 2020). Wonderly’s description of the feelings of someone grieving for someone with whom they were attached – ‘off-kilter, as though she was no longer “all of a piece,” unsafe, unconﬁdent, and so on’ (Wonderly, 2016, p. 239) – can be applied to someone who has been cheated on or left by a partner. Being cheated on can feel akin to being left, and to grief. As Jerome Neu puts it, ‘the loss of an affection which we felt to be as reliably at our disposal as the movement of our limbs may make the whole world seem to go out of joint’ (Neu, 1980, p. 452). We can no longer trust our partner to be there for us when we need them, and so our secure base is no longer secure; the attachment is broken.

Second, it is arguable that even if we refuse to make exclusivity promises, or actively dis-invite expectations of exclusivity, this can be an idle wheel when it comes to jealousy and betrayal. That’s because the promises we make, and expectations we disinvite, in order to engineer our emotions from the top down, are not necessarily always in a position to shut the windows of vulnerability that are open, simply from the fact of our being attached. Kirton (2020, pp. 587–588), citing Herman (2001, p. 55), gives an example of a Navy veteran in psychotherapy, after being left in the water after his ship was sunk. Despite knowing that fellow officers would be rescued first as a matter of Navy policy, he was nonetheless traumatised and left feeling betrayed when officers were in fact rescued, while he and the other non-officers were left behind in the water for a further seven hours.

The point here is that sometimes explicitly avowed commitments to not hold reactive attitudes of blame and betrayal on some matters, will find themselves unable to split the bedrock of our attachment needs. This is not to say that the partner who has sex with another *is really* blameworthy even when exclusivity hasn’t been established. If anything, who is to blame is not the relevant issue. It’s rather to point out that feelings of betrayal trauma as a response can come from much ‘lower down’ in our emotional processing – perhaps more akin to *a*liefs (automatic attitudes) rather than *be*liefs (Gendler, 2008) – and just because for the reason they are unpleasant and diminish our functioning, feelings of betrayal are something for romantic partners to take seriously if they care about one another.

It could be suggested that sexual infidelity shouldn’t *rationally* make those on the receiving end feel as traumatised as they do. Having sex outside of a relationship does not necessarily entail that someone no longer loves their partner, or can no longer be relied upon in other ways. This is true, but perhaps because the emotional processing involved comes from lower down, it is also widely held that love and sex and closely connected, and sex has various expressive and symbolic qualities that make such a connection make sense (McKeever, 2016). Therefore, it is not unreasonable for a person to hold the belief that sex and love are connected, such that sex might either be indicative of love, or that it might lead to love. Consequently, they may fear that their partner having sex with another could indicate or lead to them loving another, and thus having less or no love available for them. In such a case, infidelity could feel like the breakdown of a secure attachment.

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the norms of monogamy are not in themselves immoral or irrational. In many cases, monogamy may help serve our needs for trust and associated attachment security that are typically at their most exposed in romantic relationships. Mutually recognising how exposed and vulnerable we are to one another, just from the fact of our romantic attachment, can be a reason to promise to be monogamous that is neither immoral nor irrational.

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1. Indeed, if I have consented to have sex with my partner on the basis that the sex is exclusive but, unbeknownst to me, my partner is having sex with other people, upon finding this out, I might feel violated. If I would not have consented to sex with my partner had I known the truth, then my consent has been undermined in a very significant way (See McKeever 2020 and Dougherty 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)