

Monogamy and Nonmonogamy: Evolutionary Considerations and Treatment Challenges



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Few topics generate such controversy and emotional reactivity as the nature of human mating behavior. Unfortunately, and potentially to the detriment of good patient care, sexual medicine practitioners have largely avoided this matter. An understanding of the scientific literature can empower practitioners to more effectively confront the inevitable monogamy and nonmonogamy challenges present in research and clinical practice.

Aim: To review and summarize relevant scientific literature as a context to evaluate the more common myths and misunderstanding relating to the practice of monogamy and nonmonogamy in humans. This review also is intended to promote a discussion of the ways human mating strategies may impact sexual function and dysfunction for the individual and couple.

Methods: A review of English written peer-reviewed evolutionary, anthropological, neuropsychiatric, zoological research, and other scholarly texts was conducted. Work published between 2000 and 2016 concentrating on evolutionary theory, long- and short-term mating strategies in primates and most specifically in humans, and consensual nonmonogamy was highlighted.

Main Outcome Measures: Main outcomes included a brief explanation of evolutionary theory and a review of relevant literature regarding long- and short-term mating behaviors and consensual nonmonogamy.

Results: Serial sexual and social monogamy is the norm for humans. Across time and cultures, humans have adapted both long- and short-term mating strategies that are used flexibly, and sometimes simultaneously, based on unique personal, social, and environmental circumstances.

Conclusion: Human mating behavior is individualistic, the result of numerous biopsychosocial influences. The clinician cannot assume that an individual presenting as a patient maintains a monogamy-valued view of his or her intimate relationship. Patients may experience conflict between the cultural monogamous ideal and their actual sexual behaviors. This conflict may be critical in understanding a patient's sexual concerns and in treatment planning. Awareness of these issues will aid the practitioner in sexual medicine.

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INTRODUCTION

Few topics generate such controversy and emotional reactivity as the nature of human mating behavior. Unfortunately, and potentially to the detriment of comprehensive patient care, sexual medicine practitioners have largely avoided this matter. This silence is understandable, as the “monogamy dilemma” presents multiple and complex personal, moral, ethical, religious,

scientific, and treatment challenges. Furthermore, concerns with mating behavior don't lend themselves neatly to standardized medical intervention.

Infidelity as defined as sexual interactions with someone other than a primary partner is common among married and cohabiting couples, with estimates ranging from 13.3% to 37.5% of men and women in their current relationship.¹ The impact of infidelity on patients' sexual experience is readily recognized. However, adultery is merely one consequence of mating choice. In practice, patients' perceptions of their ideal and actual mating behavior are nuanced and pertinent to their sexual experience. As sexual freedoms and opportunities broaden in Western cultures, practitioners are increasingly challenged to incorporate the

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impact of mating behavior on the conceptualization and treatment of sexual concerns and dysfunctions.² The aim of this article is to review the relevant scientific literature regarding the practice of monogamy and nonmonogamy in primates generally and humans in particular, to clarify the more common myths and misunderstandings relating to the practice of consensual nonmonogamy, to recognize that a patient's practice of monogamy or nonmonogamy likely impacts his or her sexual concerns and function, and to offer clinical guidance for sensitively addressing these issues in clinical practice.

The research literature regarding the practices of monogamy and nonmonogamy is fraught with challenges.¹ For example, research participants may be reluctant to acknowledge behavior that is socially marginalized; individuals who are willing to self-disclose personal information via specific formats such as online questionnaires may not be normative of the population being studied. It is challenging for researchers to obtain a random sample when surveying particularly sensitive and personal information. Furthermore, researchers' and participants' definitions of monogamy and infidelity vary from study to study, making broad conclusions problematic.

The concept of monogamy is best conceptualized by distinguishing between sexual monogamy and social monogamy. Sexual monogamy denotes an exclusive sexual relationship between two individuals, while social monogamy represents socially recognized pair bonding. Social monogamy and sexual monogamy can exist in conjunction or independently. Social monogamy without sexual monogamy is common, as reflected in the rates of affairs and consensual non-monogamous committed relationships.³ Sexual monogamy without social monogamy is less common, an example being a single female having an exclusive sexual relationship with a married man. Serial sexual and social monogamy is the norm in industrialized societies today. This fact is consistent across time and cultures.⁴ Even in preindustrialized cultures that largely promoted polygamy, most males remained socially monogamous because of limited access to females.

Evolutionary Theory

Conceptualizing human mating behavior from a scientific perspective is indeed a challenge, requiring the separation of scientific knowledge from moral, ethical, and religious concerns, as well as personal experience and opinion. Placing mating behavior in the context of evolutionary theory facilitates this process. What follows is a rudimentary and simplified explanation of evolutionary theory. The reader is referred elsewhere for a more comprehensive and detailed review.^{5,6}

Contemporary humans are direct descendants of the great apes, sharing an astounding 99% of our genetic code with these ancestors. The evolutionary understanding of human mating behavior was proposed by Charles Darwin in 1859.⁷ Unlike his original explanation—that the goal of mating behavior was species survival—modern evolutionary theory more precisely

proposes that reproduction ensures DNA transmission, or more accurately, DNA survival.⁸ This process ultimately serves genes, as opposed to the organism itself. Because biological and environmental forces are constantly in flux, species transform in response to the environment to achieve this goal. These modifications, or “adaptations” offer important clues to understanding the origins of modern human mating behavior. Biological and behavioral modifications that facilitate DNA transfer tend to be perpetuated genetically, whereas biological and behavioral modifications that impede DNA transmission are largely selected out of a population over time. No species can adapt genetically to the present. Species can only adapt to the past, a process accomplished as offspring become increasingly suited to the reproductive conditions of their ancestors.⁶ Thus, the mating strategies of modern humans typify successful mating strategies of early hominids.

Types of Human Mating Strategies

Primate populations consistently favor 3 primary mating strategies: short-term, long-term, and polygamy. Long-term social and sexual monogamy, as promoted in Western cultures today, is rare in the animal kingdom. Approximately 3% of mammals are considered socially and sexually monogamous.⁹ Even species once thought to mate for life are now known to engage in at least occasional covert extra-pair mating. For example, birds were largely considered sexually and socially monogamous, but genetic testing reveals that only about 10% of socially monogamous birds are sexually monogamous.¹⁰ Because long-term mating strategies require more intensive parental investment, and thus ultimately a decrease in fecundity, species tend to favor such strategies only when offspring require the efforts of 2 parents to survive into relative maturity.¹¹ In contrast, short-term mating strategies are typically favored when offspring achieve maturity comparatively soon after birth, thus negating the need for coparenting. A single, “fundamental” mating strategy for humans remains elusive because we are direct descendants of several differing species of great apes, each demonstrating distinct mating strategies.¹² Specifically, chimps evidence a polygamous strategy, with a single alpha male impregnating his female harem. Male and female bonobos, in contrast, are sexually and socially non-monogamous. Humans have biological similarities with both these primate species, and it is thus suggested that both strategies are evolutionarily adaptive for humans.^{13,14}

Review of the Literature

A variety of disciplines contribute to the research literature on primate pair bonding and monogamy, including anthropologists, zoologists, biologists, and mental health professionals. Issues explored here include the evolutionary origins of human social and sexual relationships, whether the paradigm of monogamy is solely a cultural construct, a comparison and contrast of modern monogamous and nonmonogamous sexual

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