Consensual Nonmonogamy: When Is It Right for Your Clients?

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You've been seeing the couple sitting across from you for a little more than six months. They've had a sexless marriage for many years, and Joyce, the wife, is at the end of her rope. Her husband, Alex, has little or no sex drive. There's no medical reason for this; he's just never really been interested in sex. After years of feeling neglected, Joyce recently had an aair, with Alex's blessing. This experience convinced her that she could no longer live without sex, so when the aair ended, the marriage was in crisis. "I love Alex," Joyce said, "but now that I know what it's like to be desired by someone, not to mention how good sex is, I'm not willing to give it up for the rest of my life." Divorce would've been the straightforward solution, except that, aside from the issue of sex, they both agree they have a loving, meaningful, and satisfying life together as coparents, best friends, and members of a large community of friends and neighbors. They want to stay together, but after six months of failed therapeutic interventions, including sensate-focus exercises and Gottman-method interventions to break perpetual-problem gridlock, they're at the point of separating. As their therapist, what do you do?

• Help them consciously uncouple
• Refer them to an EFT therapist to help them further explore their attachment issues
• Advise a temporary separation, reasoning that with some space apart they can work on their sexual problems
• Suggest they consider polyamory and help them accept Alex's asexuality.

Joyce and Alex were my clients, and I would've helped them consciously uncouple if there were no alternatives, but they didn't want to separate. Referring them to an EFT therapist would've implied that I thought their sexual issues were rooted in relationship problems, which I did not. As a sex therapist, I know that sexual problems can exist in wonderful relationships, as well as in bad ones, and only sometimes are sexual problems related to the quality of the relationship. Suggesting a temporary separation seemed like a stalling tactic. So instead, I recommended they consider polyamory, a form of consensual nonmonogamy. I pointed out that Alex didn't seem to

have a jealous bone in his body and that Joyce seemed capable of loving more than one person at a time. Neither of them was familiar with polyamory, but they were open, psychologically curious people and promptly began to research it. Eventually, they got involved with a local polyamory group they found online. Nine years later, they're still together and have an even larger community of friends, which include deep nonsexual friendships for Alex and an ongoing lover for Joyce.

Here's another situation. Martin and his wife Tina are caring together for their adult son with autism. After 30 years of marriage, Tina no longer even feigns interest in sex, and it's been over a decade since they've shared sexual contact of any sort. In treatment, Martin condes that he now has a girlfriend on the side. He wants you, his therapist, to understand that divorce is neither desirable nor practical (not enough money to support two households, and a son who requires care from both parents). He wants to be able to talk about issues he has with his girlfriend without your judgment, and he wants your support in eventually suggesting to Tina that he can love her while maintaining a relationship with someone else. Would you do it? I did, and I even helped him mitigate his guilt by validating the impossibility of his current situation. From my perspective, Martin was trapped in an outmoded relationship model. When he and Tina made a commitment to monogamous marriage, he had no idea that someday his wife would become entirely indierent to sex. Like most people who enter into monogamous agreements, he assumed that sex would continue to be a signicant element of the relationship, as it had been in the beginning. When that turned out not to be true, he was left with a few alternatives. He could've behaved as husbands did up until recently and simply demanded sex from a reluctant partner, but he didn't want to do that, nor did he want her to have "pity sex" with him, as he called it. He could've asked Tina for a divorce, but he wanted to continue living with her and help her care for their son. He could've given up having sex with a partner altogether, but that didn't seem plausible for him. So he opted for an age-old solution: a clandestine affair.

Both Joyce and Martin, in their respective relationships, were struggling with the same problem: how to keep a marriage going when one partner doesn't want sex. Until recently, psychotherapists, including sex therapists like me, have considered a very limited set of options, and they almost all involved the partner or partners living a life devoid of truly hot, out-of-body-

experience, intense sex. Now we have alternative interventions, at least for some couples. Although there's surprisingly little research on this topic, sexless marriages are far from rare. In fact, in 2013 psychologist Justin Lehmiller, in his blog, "Sex and Psychology," summarized several studies and estimated that one in seven adults are in sexless marriages or relationships. Most report it as a major problem, but more than half stay in their relationships nonetheless, and approximately 40 percent have aairs or resort to cybersex. But sexless marriages aren't the only kind of relationships with sexual incompatibilities. In our practice at the Institute for Personal Growth (IPG) in New Jersey, we work with couples where one partner is kinky and the other isn't, or one is bisexual and the other isn't, and with couples who just have vastly dierent sexual scripts and preferences, including the need to have sex with more than one partner.

In past decades, the only alternatives to involuntary celibacy in a relationship were affairs or divorce. But increasingly, people, including therapists, are recognizing there's another option: consensual nonmonogamy (CNM). This option can work for couples who have various sexual incompatibilities, and for couples who simply don't believe that fidelity—faithful commitment to a partner—is the same as monogamy, people who believe that having multiple sexual and/or romantic partners at the same time enriches their lives and the quality of their dyadic relationships.

A Brief History of CNM

The idea of CNM isn't new. Christopher Ryan and Cecildá Jetha, authors of Sex at Dawn, hypothesize that primitive humans were by nature nonmonogamous, and that monogamy was instituted around the time of the agricultural revolution as a way for men to establish patrilineality and hand down material wealth to their offspring. Despite the ubiquity of monogamy in contemporary Western culture, it's by no means universal. Throughout history, cultures around the world have supported polygamy and, to a lesser extent, polyandry, in which a woman has more than one husband. Even the United States has a rich history of ideologically driven nonmonogamous experiments, beginning with the transcendentalism movement in the mid-19th century. The most famous of these attempts was the Oneida community (yes, the same Oneida that made your grandmother's silverware). John Humphrey Noyes established Oneida in 1848 as a utopian religious community with a system of "complex marriage," which involved all

males married to all females, and vice versa, and the communal rearing of all children. By 1879, hostility from surrounding communities forced the community to abandon this arrangement and Noyes to ee to Canada.

The next organized experiments in nonmonogamy began in the beatnik world of the 1950's with Kerista, a commune that originated as a spiritual movement in Harlem and continued for 20 years, from 1971 to 1991, in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco. Kerista, considered the most inuential commune of this second wave of intentional nonmonogamy, popularized terms like polyfidelity (sexual delity among members of a polyamorous group) and compersion (the feeling of joy seeing a loved one love another; the opposite of jealousy).

The 1970s saw the development of more forms of CNM in American culture. Free-love communes proliferated among those who called themselves hippies. George and Nena O'Neill's book *Open Marriage* sold 1.5 million copies when it came out (more than 35 million worldwide to date). Swinging emerged as a more conservative alternative to communal forms of sexual freedom. Also, lesbians and gay men used their newfound social freedom to develop their own forms of nonmonogamy. Gay male communities in urban areas formed around the concept of what writer Erica Jong famously called the zipless fuck—sex, often anonymous, without commitment. Lesbian feminists considered monogamy a patriarchal plot and developed nonmonogamous styles similar to the earlier free-love communes. By the end of the 1970s, gay men in particular had made nonmonogamy the norm. In fact, when Dave McWhirter and Andrew Mattison published their landmark book, The Male Couple, a study of long-term gay couples, they found that 100 percent of their sample had nonmonogamous arrangements.
And then the AIDS epidemic hit, forcing the entire culture to take a step back from sexual liberation. Openness about sexual adventurism and nonmonogamous relationships had to wait for the internet era to really expand—and it has. A 2016 study published in the Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy used census data to determine that more than 21 percent of single American adults have engaged in CNM at some point in their lives. Data from the 2015 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior indicate that one percent of respondents over the age of 14 are currently living in a CNM relationship—more than 2.5 million people. A 2016 YouGov survey of adults over 18 showed that 27 percent describe their current relationship as "not completely

monogamous," and 24 percent say they'd be okay with their current partner having a sexual relationship with someone else.

Monogamy is hardly dead, but it's getting some healthy competition. And not just from the queer community. CNM has been sufficiently destigmatized that celebrities like Will Smith, Mo'Nique, Alan Cummings, Emma Thompson, and Dolly Parton have all talked publicly about it. In fact, the recent movie Professor Marston and the Wonder Women received critical acclaim, with most viewers feeling empathy for all three of its main characters, in a story based on the polyamorous household of the creator of the superhero Wonder Woman.

Marriage Counseling, Anyone?

Although it's widely reported that younger people are particularly open to nontraditional relationships, that doesn't seem to be the case for the field of psychotherapy, with the exception of a few notable mavericks. Among them is couples therapist Esther Perel, whose bestselling book *Mating in Captivity* challenges the concept that great sex only occurs within the context of secure, monogamous relationships. Her most recent book, The *State of Affairs*, questions our model of affairs as victim-perpetrator scenarios caused by bad relationships. Also, in *The New Monogamy*, sex therapist Tammy Nelson lays out the advantages of having a more open view of nonmonagomous relationships. But these therapists are the exception. As polyamory expert Elizabeth Sheff wrote in her blog for PsychologyToday.com in March 2016, "Monogamy remains one of the last unquestioned bastions of relational legitimacy—at least in the minds of many couples or marriage therapists. Pro-monogamy bias in therapists is not an accident—in the majority of conventional counseling programs, therapists-in-training are taught that monogamy is important and should be protected. Conversely, non-monogamy is cast as a sign of a problem, something that should be solved instead of celebrated or explored."

Consider the words of Susan Johnson, developer of EFT and arguably the most influential voice in couples therapy today. In a blog post titled "Monogamy: A Myth or a Possibility," she writes, *"Some naturalists say only seven percent of mammals are socially monogamous. My response is, 'Yes and we are one of those seven percent.' . . . [The] most potent argument for monogamy is that we are wired for it! . . . We are bonding animals who live best in the shelter oered by*

another's love. An attachment bond is persistent. Once made, it is specific to another 'irreplaceable' person. . . . Our most natural and longed for state is a strong, nurturing monogamous pair bond and on this bond we base our families."

If this is the mainstream view of monogamy, it's no wonder that people involved in nonmonogamous relationships and those who are considering opening their relationships tend to avoid couples therapists like the plague.

Another Way

In the early '70s, I lived for a time in a free-love commune. It was wonderful, caring, and nurturing—until it wasn't. The half-dozen or so of us experimenting with group love were young, naïve, and dealing with a cauldron of poorly explored issues, including emerging alternative sexual orientations, complex emotional states, and alcohol abuse. When the commune broke up, at about the time I came out as lesbian, I was heartbroken. Although my radical feminist mind subscribed to the rhetoric that monogamy is a tool of patriarchal oppression, as soon as I met my partner, Nancy, we fell into reflexive monogamy. So when in 1986 I came out as bisexual and found myself attracted to a gay male friend, neither Nancy nor I were prepared in the slightest. We attempted to open up the relationship, and I became sexually and romantically involved with my friend, but I wish that I'd had someone back then who could've explained "new relationship energy" (NRE) and its implications to me. Long before psychologists studied limerance, or obsessive love, people experienced in polyamory recognized that there's an infatuation phenomenon we call NRE in poly circles that never lasts and shouldn't be taken that seriously. I took it far too seriously, and ended my relationship with Nancy because of it. Our couples therapist at the time was just as clueless. He was a gay man who understood casual, recreational, and anonymous extradyadic sex, but couldn't fathom my type of nonmonogamy. I always felt he judged me negatively and offered Nancy and me no help in maintaining our relationship in the face of my affair. Although Nancy and I, after many years apart, have ended up once more as life partners, I wonder what would've happened if we'd had a competent therapist to help us navigate the uncharted waters of an open relationship and guide us in the ways of polyamory. I would've preferred to find a way to stay in that relationship, with the

mother of my son, especially while he was growing up. Maybe that's one reason I'm so determined to help my nonmonogamous and polyamorous clients now. Despite what Johnson says, I know in my bones that I'm not "wired for monogamy"—quite the opposite. The number of sex partners and the variety of sexual experiences I've had make me an outlier from most women of my generation, but they've opened up parts of myself that I'm grateful to have accessed. My interests in politics, poetry, psychedelic experiences, history, world travel, opera, theater, and many other things were developed in intense, nonmonogamous relationships. One of my most spiritual—and erotic— moments happened while I was bound and enveloped in a black leather bag in the middle of a scene orchestrated by a gay male bondage top who never touched my skin or genitals. Could these experiences have happened another way? Theoretically, yes, but for me, sexual intimacy has always been the hand that unlocks doors in my mind I didn't even know were there. And sex has always felt like a life-affirming act to me. So when a friend described her long-term, monogamous, loving marriage as a room devoid of oxygen, I understood and supported her foray into polyamory. And when gay men describe sexual experiences with strangers as spiritual, I get that, too. I'm not saying most people view sex in this way, but for those who do, committing to having sex with only one person for decades of your life is like committing to being in prison —a deal breaker. CNM can be a solution for sexually incompatible marriages, but it can also be an avenue for self-actualization and deep exploration of self in relationship.

What Does CNM Look Like?

Mickey and Ethan were married for eight years. Two years before seeking therapy, they'd opened up the relationship, and at rst their forays into extramarital sex were fun and improved their sex life with each other. Both were "bottoms"—meaning they both liked to be on the receiving end of anal sex—and with those urges satised outside the relationship, their sex together was conflict free and better. Then one night, Ethan didn't come home. Mickey was enraged and insisted the two enter couples counseling. In our first session, Mickey announced, "That's it. I'm never going through that again. I was terrified he wasn't okay, and then furious when I found out he'd just passed out after sex. We have to close the relationship." At this point, the average couples therapist would've agreed. But Mickey and Ethan saw a therapist who was well versed in the issues of nonmonogamy. He suggested they close the relationship for a time to

process what had happened. In fact, when they discussed their experiences with him, they realized that they'd never explicitly set boundaries for their outside sexual experiences—boundaries like "don't stay overnight"—and that Ethan's experiences had often involved excessive amounts of alcohol. Over time, Mickey regained trust, and they began exploring nonmonogamy again. They found that what worked for them was sex with a third person or sex with another couple in the room: in other words, experiences that both shared together.

Gay men are likelier to have nonmonogamous arrangements than heterosexual men and women and lesbians, and they do CNM a little differently. Typically, a male couple will bring in a third partner for group sexual experiences—an arrangement Dan Savage has called "monogamish." This type of activity is so common, in fact, that Michael LaSala, who does research on gay male sexuality, has pointed out that some gay couples describe themselves as monogamous even if they engage in the occasional three-way. Inc general, gay male extradyadic sex tends not to involve romantic connection, and this reduces the tendency to be jealous. There are exceptions, however, that look more like what we'd call polyamory relationships with both a sexual and love connection. Besides monogamish relationships, gay men often structure nonmonogamy around rules that prevent emotional attachment. One might be that outside sexual partners are to be seen only for sex; in such an arrangement, going out to dinner with an outside partner would constitute a rule violation. Structure and rules are operative words here: most gay male couples discuss and agree upon the parameters for outside contacts. The reason for this is to preserve the couple's integrity and sense of security, and each couple has different conditions that symbolize integrity and security. For some, it might be nonsexual contact or kissing, which many people of all orientations see as more intimate than sex. Ethan and Mickey had attempted their nonmonogamous lifestyle without exploring what each of them needed to feel safe. With help, they at first took a break, and then restructured their CNM activity.

Among heterosexuals, swinging is probably the closest equivalent to the type of CNM practiced by gay men. Typically, couples "in the lifestyle," as it's called, have sexual relationships with other couples or sometimes single people. But they tend not to have romantic relationships with them, and they certainly don't attempt to live together and form nontraditional family units. That said, swingers often have sex over and over with the same people and form enduring friendships

that can last for decades. Swingers meet each other online, at private parties, at swing clubs, or swing resorts. In recent years, the line between swinging (casual, recreational sex) and polyamory (sex in committed nonmonogamous love relationships) has blurred to the extent there's now a noun for this: swolly. My clients Janice and John were middle-aged doctors who'd been active in the swing community for 10 years when they met Samantha and Bill. Their swinging partnership gradually evolved in time to more of a swolly, but Samantha's feelings about John became particularly intense, and their partners felt threatened. I helped them construct boundaries to contain the relationships and reestablish the primacy of the two couples. But ultimately, Samantha violated the rules: she sent a love letter to John criticizing his relationship with his wife. Janice and John ended the quad relationship and, after a brief period of monogamy, returned to swinging, which they considered a safer alternative.

No matter what type of CNM a couple practices, a critical feature is to maintain a sense of trust and security in the primary couple. Arguably, this is easiest when the extra-relationship activities are purely sexual in nature and harder when it comes to polyamory (literally, "many loves"), which is most favored by women of all sexual orientations, as well as many men. Polyamory has many subtypes: in hierarchal poly, the primary relationship is held more important than other relationships, while in nonhierarchal poly, all the relationships are equal. Some polyamorous arrangements are triads or quads or even more people who live together as well as have romantic and sexual relationships. Other poly configurations may involve people who don't live together but maintain group identities. Fluid-bonded relationships involve practicing polyfidelity as a group. Polycules are complex interrelated groups involving "primary" partners and "secondary" partners. And poly "free agents" may have sexual and romantic partners who don't even know each other. Poly people of all types meet each other at conferences, munches (casual social gatherings at restaurants or pubs for people into BDSM), or on dating apps, including mainstream ones like OkCupid. Unlike swinging, which is more or less restricted to couples, uncoupled people are welcomed in poly circles. Nikayla and Lennie tried swinging before they took the polyamory leap. They met at college in Chicago and now live with their two children in a nearby suburb. Lennie manages a nonprofit, while Nikayla stays home with the kids and has a small crafting business. "A few years into dating, we started going on dates with other couples and occasionally to a swinger club. We found it was a great way to keep our sex interesting, and

it brought us closer together," remarks Lennie. After marriage, they took a break from swinging while they had two children just 18 months apart. When the kids became toddlers, they revisited CNM, this time opening up their relationship so they could be involved with others separately. "We felt that sharing intimacy with others wouldn't take away from our relationship," says Nikayla. "And we needed a chance to get out." The couple read books, talked to others in the poly community, and discussed rules and guidelines. "It wasn't always easy and we experienced challenges." Nikayla says. "There were tears and hurt feelings, jealousy and insecurities, but we were always able to communicate and work through them, often using it as a learning experience. Overall, being in a nonmonogamous relationship has helped us be a strong couple. It's strengthened our ability to communicate and work through disagreements as well as keep things interesting and fun."

What about the Problems?

As Nikayla intimated, CNM, especially polyamory, isn't easy. It necessitates near constant communication and processing. It's common for couples to make adjustments to the initial agreements, form new rules, shift from one form of CNM to another, or take a monogamous break from time to time. As Sherill Cantrell-Brown, a therapist at IPG who's worked with many couples in open and polyamorous relationship, points out, "The issues that crop up with CNM couples are the same as with monogamous couples—differences in sex drives, poor communication skills, and fear of being left out." But there are some additional challenges. Even the best communication skills can be strained when it's necessary to deal with multiple partners and complicated interrelationships. Many people are titillated when they first hear about polyamory, but a common joke in poly circles is that CNM people spend far more time talking to partners and discussing issues than actually having sex. Another challenge is simply finding the time to maintain two or more intimate relationships, amid work schedules and other activities. And having multiple partners complicates some tasks of daily living. How do I make dinner for my paleo-diet lover and my vegan partner? Who used this sex toy last? If Susan has to change our date night from Friday to Saturday, what will I do about Alan, who's available only on weekends, and my kids, who need me to ferry them to soccer and dance? And of course, there's jealousy, which in a monogamous relationship can often just be handled with a simple reassurance that your partner is "the only one," an assertion not possible in an open relationship.

Fortunately, research has shown that people in CNM relationships don't seem to experience jealousy as much as monogamous people. Nevertheless, it's still an issue that often needs to be discussed. For example, a colleague at IPG worked with one couple, a 20-something teacher and her lawyer husband, who'd been married five years and expressed the desire to have other partners. Sara and Carlton initially showed the same enthusiasm for polyamory. They'd read the research and come to treatment with a list of local poly groups. However, their reactions to the first months of their exploration varied dramatically. "Sara described feeling as if she'd finally been let out of a cage and was feeling euphoric," says their therapist. Carlton, on the other hand, found himself struggling with more intense feelings of jealousy than he'd anticipated. This is the point where a more traditional therapist might have pronounced their CNM experiment a failure. Instead, theirs normalized these feelings and helped Carlton deconstruct them. As is sometimes the case, his jealousy turned out to be more of a fear of missing out: Sara had had more initial success in meeting partners, and he was nursing feelings of rejection and fear that he'd always be alone while Sara "had all the fun." Because his feelings were in direct conflict with both his desire to please his wife and his wish to experience other relationships, he persevered, and when he too found an outside partner with whom he connected strongly, the jealousy dissipated. Jealousy can arise when one partner has a relationship with someone who has little or no contact with the primary partner, as the unknown can understandably trigger feelings of insecurity or inadequacy. When they rst opened up their marriage, Marcie discovered that when Ann left to meet her new partner, she was crippled with a sadness and despair she hadn't felt since childhood. Unwilling to give up CNM because of this, however, she worked on understanding her feelings and traced the despair back to feeling abandoned by a depressed mother; knowing that helped. In addition, the two of them brainstormed ways to make Marcie more comfortable, and found that if Ann sent just one short loving text to Marcie while with her outside partner, it did the trick.

What about the Children?

Like the people who worried that having two same-sex parents would negatively impact children, people who are skeptical of CNM often make the "it's bad for the kids" argument. But Elizabeth She, who studied polyamorous families for 15 years and published results in *The Polyamorists Next Doo*r, her first book on the subject, found the children of nonmonogamous

parents to be articulate, thoughtful, and securely attached to parent gures. Younger children weren't really aware of the differentness of their families or the stigma. Older kids were aware of stigma but tended to manage it well, and although losing adults when relationships broke up was an issue, the children didn't see it as a major concern. Gabriella and Lena were active in lesbian poly circles for years, but each practiced different forms of CNM. Lena dated one person at a time and finally settled into one outside relationship that had lasted for five years. Gabriella, in contrast, seemed to be addicted to "new relationship energy" and often chose lovers of questionable mental stability. Lena tolerated the drama of Gabriella's passionate but conflict-ridden partnerships, but started spending more and more time with her outside partner, and the intimacy of the primary relationship deteriorated. During this period, their 10-year-old son Joey started to exhibit angry and oppositional behavior. The women brought Joey to IPG because they knew our therapists were familiar with poly, and they wanted him to be able to talk honestly about their household in treatment without fear that the therapist would react negatively. In treatment, Joey revealed how angry he was about the situation at home—not at the fact that they had a polyamorous household, but at the chaos and the revolving door of Gabriella's partners. In a family session, he yelled, "You expect me to be close to them, but then you two have a terrible fight and they leave. It's easier not to get involved!" Gabriella and Lena were stricken to learn that their CNM activities might have harmed their child. So for the next couple of years they closed their relationship to calm things down. Now they're involved in what seems to be a stable poly quad, and Joey seems to have found his way to feel at home with this arrangement.
Although CNM can create problems for some kids, primarily around issues of stigma and partners leaving, the benefits usually outweigh the costs. Joyce and Alex are part of a big extended family that includes both poly and nonpoly members, and they have four children. The norm in their poly family is for partners to stay close, even when the romantic or sexual part of the relationship ends, especially when children are involved, and to continue to share parenting responsibilities. Joyce and Alex's children have benefited enormously from the attention. It's particularly useful now, Joyce says, because she has a new job, which means a lot of time away from home, and Isak, her long-time partner, is doing extra parental duty when Alex can't.

What Does It Mean?

CNM is threatening to a lot of therapists for the same reason it's threatening to most people: we instinctively want to believe that these unconventional relationships are awed, that they won't/don't/can't last, that they're retreats from intimacy or signs of problems in the relationship. Nonmonogamy speaks to our deepest fears: that we're not enough for our primary partners—that, if let out of the cage of monogamy, they'll y away. Although consensual nonmonogamy is coming out of the shadows, I doubt it'll ever be the choice of the majority of people. After all, as Susan Johnson points out, most humans are wired for dyadic attachment. And for most people, the disadvantages of CNM outweigh the advantages: dealing with jealousy, worrying that your partner will leave for someone new, finding enough time for multiple partners and the energy to work out conflicts within the primary dyad, suffering through the social stigma. But for other people—particularly those who are sexually mismatched with a partner but compatible in other ways, those with high sex drives and high need for novelty and adventure, and those who actualize themselves through intimate relationships—CNM is the breath of life.

In her book *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*, Hanne Blank introduces the concept of the doxa, cultural beliefs that are so baked in that we aren't usually aware of them and don't even recognize them as beliefs. Often the doxa is revealed only by contrast. For example, I was never more aware of my whiteness, and white privilege, than when I felt like an outsider in an auditorium full of people of color. In a similar way, CNM reveals our doxa about relationships, even if we never practice it or suggest it to a client. Most of the time, the couples I work with aren't considering opening their relationship, nor would I suggest it for them. But because of my experiences with CNM, my very idea of what can constitute a successful relationship has changed, and this aects my work. I validate single lifestyles more than I ever did before. I question jealousy and invite my clients to analyze its origins as a way to learn more about themselves. When a couple separates, I see this as an evolution of their relationship to another form, and encourage maintaining ties with past partners. I'm a champion of the idea that we make our own rules for our relationships, rather than accepting the doxa. You can be life partners and not live together, share finances, or even be sexual with each other. You can break up as romantic partners yet still choose to live under the same roof. You can parent with people you aren't in love with. Consensual nonmonogamy isn't just about sex and marriage: it's about

expanding our concepts of relationships so that individuals, couples, and families can set rules of engagement that t their situations and can be adapted as their circumstances change. It challenges us to see a world that's more flexible and understanding of individuals' different needs and how they change over a lifetime, a world that permits many combinations and permutations of sexual and romantic relationships while still prioritizing human connection as our most basic need. ***