

Why Do Some People Feel Threatened by Other People's Sexual Orientations?

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The short answer is fear. Fear of difference, fear of their own desires, fear of the unknown. In many important ways, humans are “hardwired” psychologically and socially to prefer people who are like themselves over people who are different from them. People who are heterosexual, monogamous and vanilla (the word kinky people use for people with conventional sexual proclivities) may feel fear and discomfort with gay, non-monogamous or kinky people simply because they are different. Others who may have inklings of those desires but have not admitted it to themselves will often fear that sexual “other” because of how they stir those uncomfortable desires.

With regard to polyamorous people (my area of expertise), this comes out most clearly in what I call “the polyamorous possibility”, or becoming aware of the potential to openly love multiple people at the same time. Realizing polyamory as an ethical relationship option can be a significant shift for some people: Once it has occurred to someone that honest, openly conducted multiple-partner relationships are possible and can be managed in an ethical manner, they can never unthink that idea. They have become aware of the polyamorous possibility and, regardless of whether they consider polyamory themselves or simply reject it out of hand, they can never again be unaware of consensual non-monogamy as an option.

The polyamorous possibility can seem even more threatening than simple gayness. While not everyone experiences same-sex desire, most people who have been in a sexually exclusive relationship have had the experience of being attracted to someone else besides their partner. That means that almost anyone has the capacity to be polyamorous in a way that not almost everyone could be gay, simply because not everyone experiences same-sex desire. Polyamory and its slutty sister, swinging, can be especially threatening precisely because so many people can easily relate to the desire for new sexual partners.