

Steppin' Out: A Qualitative Analysis of Nonmonogamy among Unmarried Parents

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT –PLEASE DO NOT CITE

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Like it or not, romantic relationships have become a public policy issue. Concern for declining marriage rates and increasing numbers of children born out-of-wedlock has placed a particularly strong spotlight on the nature and quality of relationships among unmarried parents. Researchers, policy makers, and program administrators are working to gauge the potential for those relationships to be lasting, healthy features of the lives of adults and children.

Committed relationships—whether married, cohabiting, or dating—are defined largely by the expectation of sexual monogamy (Scott and Sprecher 2000; Treas and Giesen 2000) and are seriously threatened by violations of that expectation. Extra-marital sex has been consistently and strongly linked to divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997; South and Lloyd 1995), and conflict about sexual jealousy and infidelity are highly predictive of intimate-partner violence (Paik, Laumann, and Haitzma 2004). As Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) grimly noted, nonmonogamy is fundamentally an indication that the couple is not committed to a future together.

Despite sharing the normative expectation of monogamy, unmarried couples express lower levels of commitment to their relationships than do married couples and are, not surprisingly, more likely to conflict about sexual jealousy and to be sexually unfaithful (Forste and Tanfer 1996; Paik, Laumann, and Haitzma 2004; Treas and Giesen 2000; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Studies of poor, African-American communities—sites of the highest rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing—reveal wide variation of commitment in non-marital romantic relationships (Edin and Kefalas Forthcoming; Youm and Paik 2004). In some cases, couples are in long-term monogamous cohabiting or dating relationships; in others, the relationships are relatively new and undefined or explicitly casual. Recent findings from the Chicago Health and

Social Life Survey (CHSLS) corroborate ethnographic evidence (Anderson 1990) that it is common for inner city residents, particularly African-American boys and men, to carry on sexual relationships with multiple partners simultaneously (Youm and Paik 2004).

There has been considerable empirical exploration of the prevalence and predictors of extra-marital sex (for review see: Scott and Sprecher 2000) and a few notable studies of infidelity among unmarried couples (Forste and Tanfer 1996; Treas and Giesen 2000), but scant attention to how unmarried adult couples define, negotiate, and enforce monogamy (a notable exception is Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). What commitments do couples make regarding sexual exclusivity? How common is infidelity? When an expectation of monogamy is violated, what are the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions of both the “cheater” and the “cheated,” and what is the future trajectory of the relationship? How does the presence of a child in the relationship moderate the couple’s expectations about monogamy and reaction to nonmonogamy?

This paper explores these questions qualitatively using data from the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples with Children (TLC3) study, a longitudinal study that has followed couples in three cities for four years following the birth of a child. This analysis uses a sample of 39 mostly Black and Hispanic couples who were all unmarried at the time the study focal child was born. Our analysis uncovers a high incidence of nonmonogamy and sexual jealousy in the sample. We identify and describe six dimensions of nonmonogamy: timing, frequency, relationship status, the other (wo)man, discovery, and outcome. These dimensions are explored using three case studies of TLC3 couples who have experienced nonmonogamy at some point in their relationship.

Relevant Literature

Nonmonogamy

Early research on infidelity and sexual jealousy was limited to non-probability samples of married couples (often college students). In addition, many studies relied on hypothetical survey questions (e.g. “How would you feel *if*”) and/or were vulnerable to measurement error due to the sensitivity of questions about sexual behavior. In recent years, our understanding of sexual behavior has been greatly improved with studies of infidelity and polygamous sexual relationships among the unmarried (Forste and Tanfer 1996; Treas and Giesen 2000; Youm and Paik 2004), and analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) (e.g. Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson 2001), the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs) (Laumann, Gagnon, Ned, and Michaels 1994), and other large nationally-representative datasets designed to specifically illicit sensitive information about sex.

From these studies, we know that sexual exclusivity is a normative expectation in committed romantic relationships, married or otherwise (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Scott and Sprecher 2000).¹ In this respect, cohabiting and married couples look quite similar: 99 percent of married couples and 94 percent of cohabiting couples expect monogamy in their relationships (Treas and Giesen 2000). No study that we know of measures the expectations (as opposed to actual behavior) of monogamy among dating couples, but we would expect more variation in the commitment level of these relationships. In addition, more permissive attitudes about extra-marital sex have been associated with premarital sexual permissiveness, high education, low religiosity, and being male (Glass and Wright 1992).

¹ This is less true for relationships between gay men, in which nonmonogamy is often expected and deemed acceptable (Blumstein & Schwartz 1983; Laumann et al. 1994).

Studies using national probability samples estimate that approximately 25 percent of men and 15 percent of women have ever had extra-marital sex (Laumann, Gagnon, Ned, and Michaels 1994; Scott and Sprecher 2000; Wiederman 1997).² The incidence of nonmonogamy is higher in less stable or committed forms of relationships. Using NHSLS data, Waite and Gallagher (2000) find that four percent of married men, 16 percent of cohabiting men, and 37 percent of men in dating relationships report being unfaithful in the year prior to the interview. The comparable rates for women are one, eight, and 17 percent. In addition, studies of sexual behavior among residents of the inner city has uncovered the commonality of short and long-term polygamous sexual relationships, particularly among heterosexual African-American men (Anderson 1990; Youm and Paik 2004). Finding a high rate of multiple sex partners among Black youth living in an inner-city community, Anderson (1990) argued that boys treated sexual relationships as a game of duping girls into casual sex with talk of romance and long-term commitment as a means of competing for stature amongst their male peers.

The higher rate of infidelity is one of many established differences in the characteristics of married and cohabiting relationships, which generally predispose cohabiters to less positive relationships outcomes (Booth and Booth 1996; Thomson and Colella 1992; Wilson and Daly 2001). These outcomes are partially the result of pre-existing characteristics of people who cohabit (Axinn and Thornton 1992). Even after controlling for many of these differences, however, relationship type is still strongly predictive of nonmonogamy (Forste and Tanfer 1996). Forste & Tanfer (1996) found that married women were five times less likely than cohabiting women to report nonmonogamy ($p < .001$) and that there was no significant difference between the rates of infidelity among dating and cohabiting women.

² Because studies of married individuals select out the divorced, who we suspect would report higher rates of infidelity, these estimates are probably biased downward.

Largely without theoretical direction, studies have tested the relationship between nonmonogamy and an abundance of individual and relationship characteristics. Gender is the most consistently identified predictor of extra-marital sex; men are more likely to have permissive attitudes toward extra-marital sex and to be sexually unfaithful than are women (Glass and Wright 1992; Greeley 1994; Oliver and Hyde 1993; Treas and Giesen 2000; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Wiederman 1997). There is evidence, however, that this gap is narrowing (Oliver and Hyde 1993; Wiederman 1997) and that women are more likely than men to engage in purely emotional infidelity, or sexual infidelity with an emotional component (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Glass and Wright 1992; Thompson 1984). Lifetime incidence of extra-marital sex is also higher among blacks, remarried individuals, those in the lowest and highest educational categories, urbanites, and less religious individuals (Scott and Sprecher 2000; Treas and Giesen 2000). In one study, being male increased the odds of ever having had extra-marital sex by 79 percent, being African-American by 106 percent (Treas and Giesen 2000).

One of the most investigated, but least understood, aspects of nonmonogamy is the relationship between it and relationship quality or satisfaction. Some studies find a statistically significant correlation between relationship quality and nonmonogamy (add citations), while other do not (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983), or find it only for women (add citations). It is also difficult to predict the directionality of such a relationship: dissatisfaction or unhappiness might lead to nonmonogamy, result from it, or relate to it only through some other variable, such as conflict. Previti & Amato (2004) used structural equation modeling to address this issue and found a statistically significant and *bi-directional* relationship between marital quality and extra-marital sex; divorce proneness (measured using a 27-item scale of relationship stability)

increased the odds of nonmonogamy and nonmonogamy increased divorce proneness and the odds of divorce.

In addition to individual and relationship qualities, the incidence of nonmonogamy may be related to an individual's opportunity to meet potential sexual partners and to engage in a sexual relationship surreptitiously. It has been argued that the gendered division of labor at home and in the labor force may offer women fewer opportunities to cheat and partially explain the gender differences in rates of infidelity. However, there is only limited evidence that proxies for opportunity—including income, employment, prior sexual experience and social interactions—predict a greater likelihood of infidelity (Atkins, Baucom, and Jacobson 2001; Treas and Giesen 2000).

Because monogamy is the cornerstone of most successful, long-term relationships, infidelity has serious and detrimental consequences for couples. Extra-marital sex is consistently and strongly predictive of divorce in both retrospective surveys of divorcees and longitudinal studies (Amato and Rogers 1997; Previti and Amato 2004; South and Lloyd 1995). South and Lloyd (1995) estimate that approximately 30 percent of divorces are preceded by infidelity. A wife reporting marital problems related to her husband having sex with someone else increased the odds of divorce in a twelve year period by nearly 300 percent (Previti and Amato 2004).

Even if a relationship survives an instance of infidelity, it is likely to increase sexual jealousy and conflict about monogamy. Conflict of this type not only threatens the stability of relationships but increases the likelihood of intimate-partner violence (Paik, Laumann, and Haitzma 2004). Jealousy can be viewed as a response to actual, perceived, or feared nonmonogamy. The most studied aspect of jealousy is how it differs qualitatively by gender. Numerous studies of small non-random samples have found that in heterosexual relationships,

men are more likely to be jealous about sexual infidelity, while women are more likely to attach their jealousy to what scholars have called “emotional infidelity” (Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth 1992; Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, and Buss 1996; Harris and Christenfeld 1996; Wiederman and LaMar 1998). These are descriptive findings, however, based primarily on hypothetical questions posed to small samples of convenience. These considerable methodological limitations, however, have not dampened a lively debate between evolutionary (e.g. Buss, Larsen, Westen, and Semmelroth 1992; Buunk, Angleitner, Oubaid, and Buss 1996) and social constructivist (e.g. Harris and Christenfeld 1996) explanations for the apparent difference.

The limited number of studies on other aspects of jealousy find that jealousy increases over the course of short-term relationships (6-37 months) (Aune and Comstock 1997), and is associated with gender-role traditionalism, and low self-esteem of women, and fewer perceived marital alternatives (Hansen 1985). Paik et al.(2004) are the first to study sexual jealousy among married, cohabiting, and dating individuals in a large random sample, and to link jealousy theoretically to commitment. They find that conflict about sexual jealousy is common: 28 percent of men and 36 percent of women report conflicting about sexual jealousy at some point in their relationship. Of most concern is their finding that conflict about jealousy is more predictive of intimate-partner violence than any other topic, including sex, money, and drinking/drugs. Demographic factors that predict higher levels of jealousy include being Black or Hispanic, younger, and unmarried.

Data and Methods

Data

The data used in this analysis come from the Time, Love, and Cash in Couples (TLC3) study, a longitudinal qualitative study of low- to middle-income, ethnically-diverse new parents in New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee. The TLC3 data has been collected through joint and individual interviews with 75 couples shortly after the birth of a child and when the child was approximately one, two, and four years old. TLC3 is nested in, and draws its sample from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, a longitudinal survey of 3600 unmarried and 1200 married new parents (couples) in 20 cities. When weighted, the Fragile Families data is representative of all new parents in cities with populations of 200,000 or more.³ The TLC3 sample was selected randomly from all births in three of the Fragile Families study sites, and then stratified and oversampled to produce a more balanced distribution by race and marital status. The sample design for TLC3 excluded couples who were not romantically involved at the time of the birth. At the time of the baseline couple interview, the TLC3 parents were all married to, cohabiting with, or dating the focal child's other parent.

The TLC3 study is particularly well suited to examining nonmonogamy because one of its primary goals is to better understand couple dynamics and the factors that affect relationship stability and break-up. To this end, the TLC3 interviews elicit rich detail on the current nature and quality of the couple's, their relationship history, and the substance and process of couple conflicts. TLC3 interviewers use a guide of topics and suggested questions, but the 2-3 hour interviews are conversational and guided as much by the respondent as the interviewer. This

³ (For more information on the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, visit the study website at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies/index.asp>.)

approach allows the discussion to cover a broad range of topics while focusing on those that the respondent, rather than the researcher, deems significant.

The findings presented in this paper are based on analysis of the individual interviews conducted separately with mothers and fathers approximately four years after the birth of the study focal child. The Wave Four interview guide included direct questions about the occurrence and nature of infidelity and sexual jealousy in the couples' relationships. These questions are as follows:

- 1) A lot of people have told us that their partner has cheated on them. Has s/he ever cheated on you anytime since you started seeing each other (worded “anytime before you broke up” for couples who are broken-up)?
- 2) Have you ever gotten involved with someone else since you two started your relationship?

Interviewer probes for questions 1 and 2:

Get the full story of the instance(s) of infidelity.

How many incidents? Does cheating mean sex? What counts as cheating?

When did cheating occur? With who?

Was the couple living together at the time?

Was the broken up at the time?

Did cheating led to break-up?

How did “cheated” feel? Wronged, angry, hurt?

- 3) Tell me about any problem that you have in your relationships with trust or honesty.

Before we began analysis of the TLC3 data, they were coded by project staff into fields that roughly match the topics of the interview protocol. This coding process identifies not only direct

answers to these questions, but any information that the respondent provided throughout the interview related to infidelity and sexual jealousy. In addition to the Wave Four data, we also use interview data from the three previous interviews conducted with TLC3 respondents for background and clarification of the relationship history. Overall, we analyzed over 400 pages of interview transcriptions. All sample members have been given pseudonyms for the purposes of this paper.

Analytic Approach

This paper presents two related, but distinct, analyses. In the first, we quantified the prevalence of nonmonogamy and problematic sexual jealousy in the study sample. To do this we created four quantitative, binary variables based on the qualitative interview data. The variables were: mother's report of father cheating, mother's report of mother cheating, father's report of mother cheating, and father's report of father cheating. These codes were then collapsed into three variables for any report of infidelity, any report of father's infidelity, and any report of mother's infidelity.

For the creation of these variables, infidelity was defined as some sexual relationship with another a person outside the focal couple. This included relationships in which sexual intercourse did not occur, but the respondent described some sexual contact (e.g. "fooling around"), and infidelity that occurred during short break-ups or separations. In other analyses presented in this paper, we explored how the TLC3 couples themselves define "cheating." It is clear from their responses that our definition of infidelity is a conservative one; all respondents agreed that sexual relationships constituted cheating, but many of them would have also included non-physical relationships with members of the opposite sex.

Not surprisingly, there were several cases in which mothers' reports and fathers' reports of infidelity in relationships differed. For instance, one father reported that the focal mother had a sexual relationship with another man, while the focal mother claimed it was only a friendship. In another case, the couple disagreed about whether they were romantically-involved or broken-up when one of them started a sexual relationship with someone else. For the purposes of measuring the prevalence of infidelity, I did not attempt to reconcile these stories, but instead counted any report of infidelity as valid. This approach may lead to overestimation of the occurrence of infidelity in this sample, although it also could be argued that it is an improvement on relying on self-report alone, which is likely to produce underestimates.

In the second analysis, we narrowed the sample to those couples that reported some history of nonmonogamy in their relationships. We analyzed these couples' "narratives of nonmonogamy" using methods of analytic induction, a standard approach to leveraging the commonalities and distinctions between individual cases to develop more universal concepts (Ragin 1994). We used an iterative process of coding these narratives for increasing levels of specificity and for specific dimensions of infidelity. This was done by reading the interview responses related to infidelity, developing codes for certain common dimensions of those stories, identifying contrary or disconfirming cases, returning to read for more specificity, and so on. Each couple's story was dissected into common dimensions, including timing & frequency, relationship status, the other wo(man), discovery, and outcome. We used a similar coding process to analyze sample member views on the definition of cheating (all couples, including those who had not experienced nonmonogamy, were included in this analysis).

For each dimension, we identified the full range of possibilities represented in the data—for instance, the outcome of an instance of infidelity might be the relationship ending, the couple

recommitting and moving on, or increased suspicion and jealousy. We also coded for commonalities and differences between the couples' cheating narratives and looked for a modal story, if one existed. Finally, we selected three cases of specific couples to illustrate "types" of nonmonogamy. That is, their stories represent both common features and important distinctions of the nonmonogamy narratives in the sample as a whole. For these cases, we also drew on previous waves of data in order to place the couple's experience with nonmonogamy in the larger context of their relationship trajectory.

Results

The Couples

The original TLC3 sample included 75 couples (150 parents). For the purposes of this analysis, we narrowed that sample to the 39 couples who were unmarried at the time of the focal child's birth, and for whom at least one parent completed a Wave Four individual interview. With the exception of five couples in which the fathers were incarcerated or untraceable at the time of the Wave Four interview, we have data from both parents.

Table 1 presents descriptive information about these couples. The vast majority were cohabiting at the time of the baseline interview (within three months of the focal child's birth), but relationship status was far more heterogeneous four years later. At that time, approximately one-third of the couples were cohabiting and another third had ended their romantic relationships (broken-up, divorced, or separated). Twenty percent of the couples had married between the baseline and Wave Four interviews and the remaining 10 percent were romantically-involved but not living together. The majority of mothers and fathers in this sample are Black or Hispanic. On average, mothers and fathers were 28 and 29 years old respectively and shared 1.6 children at the time of the Wave Four interview.

Prevalence of Nonmonogamy and Sexual Jealousy

Nonmonogamy is the rule, not the exception, among the couples in this study (Table 2). Nearly sixty percent of all couples reported at least one instance of infidelity by either parent during the course of their relationship.⁴ It was most common for the “cheater” to be the father, but in more than one-third of cases both the mother and the father had been unfaithful, and in another 13 percent of cases only the mother was nonmonogamous. Those couples who had married each other by the Wave Four interview were least likely to report nonmonogamy ever in their relationships, couples who had ended their relationship were the most likely, with cohabiting and dating couples close behind. These differences are not statistically significant, however, and may be the result of response bias rather than real differences between sub-groups. For instance, married individuals may be less likely to admit to nonmonogamy because they have a lot to lose if their partners were to discover their indiscretions, while individuals in relationships that have ended have nothing to lose from full disclosure.

Sexual jealousy was even more prevalent than infidelity among the TLC3 couples (Table 3). Approximately three-fourths of the couples reported sexual distrust or jealousy as a problem in their relationship. Not surprisingly, couples with a history of nonmonogamy were more likely to report problematic sexual jealousy than those who did not. However, it is striking that the majority (63 percent) of couples with no history of nonmonogamy still reported problematic sexual jealousy. The breakdown of who is jealous in the relationship type mirrors the statistics on who commits infidelity. That is, men are more likely to cheat and women are more likely to be jealous. Interestingly, there is not a parallel pattern of sexual jealousy by relationships status: problematic sexual jealousy was common regardless of relationship, although it was more than

⁴ These statistics are based on both mother and father reports. A couple was classified as having experienced nonmonogamy if either parent reported that they or their partner had a sexual relationship with someone else.

20 percentage points higher for cohabiting or dating couples than it was for either married or broken-up couples. Again, we should be cautious about these differences given that they could be driven by response or other types of bias.

What Constitutes Nonmonogamy?

Often, research studies take for granted that we all know and agree on the definition of infidelity. In the previous section, we used a conservative definition of nonmonogamy as a sexual interaction outside the focal relationship. However, this is only one of many possible ways to draw the boundaries of monogamy and nonmonogamy. What if the involvement is not sexual but emotional? And, when does a close friendship pass into the realm of infidelity? In fact, there are many ways in which individuals in committed heterosexual relationships interact with members of the opposite sex every day that may be considered appropriate or prohibited depending on the individual and the relationship.

The TLC3 interviews included a direct question about what “counted as cheating.” In some cases, respondents were not asked this question directly but provided an answer in the course of describing experiences with infidelity. Unfortunately, there were also a substantial number of respondents who did not provide their thoughts on this topic, particularly among those who did not report cheating in their relationships. This may bias the data; for instance, perhaps those who have been nonmonogamous have more permissive attitudes about what constitutes infidelity. Despite this limitation, these data offer insight into the meaning of monogamy among this sample of parents.

The TLC3 couples unanimously agree that sexual intercourse constitutes infidelity. In fact, most extend that definition to include any physical contact of a sexual nature—including kissing, hand-holding, and even hugging. Slightly fewer, but still a majority of people in this

sample describe a host of behaviors that are not themselves physical but suggest some intent to develop a physical relationship with someone. These might include getting someone's phone number, calling someone on the phone, and spending significant time together. One woman said that to her, "when you are talking to someone and you got their (phone) number, that means you're planning it" (C-01ma; 23). Another questioned why a man would want to spend significant time with another woman: "Why go out there and take some girl to the movies when you could take your own girl to the movies, you know what I'm saying? That's cheating. When you're having another relationship with somebody else" (M-17ma, 57). A father wholeheartedly agreed with her, saying "if I'm attached and I go out on a date with another girl, I mean, no physical contact whatsoever, but it's just the principle of me going with another woman...that's cheating" (C-05fa; 39).

This definition begs the question of whether male-female friendships are possible, and if so, how they differ from inappropriate interactions with the opposite sex. On this topic, the opinions of the sample couples diverge. Some respondents have friends of the opposite sex and are comfortable with their partners doing the same. It is not always clear, however, where the line between friendship and something more is drawn. One father defined friendships as not including any physical contact, "I guess cheating to me will be any physical action. Just seeing a person as a friend, I can't see that as cheating. Any contact, then that's cheating" (C-16fa; 43). In fact, several respondents drew that line in one place for themselves and in another for their partner.

Perhaps due to the ambiguity of male-female friendships, a substantial number of respondents simply believe they are not possible. One man said he didn't "believe in female friends." He and others expressed the view that all friendships with someone of the opposite sex

have the potential to lead to sex or a deeper emotional involvement that would be a betrayal of their dyadic relationship. Even when respondents did not specifically rule out male-female friendships, their definitions of nonmonogamy were often so restrictive as to effectively prohibit them. As one father who dated three women simultaneously described it,

“Actually, I would say what counts as cheating is another female, period. If you converse, basically, the phone number, talking to them, sexual intercourse, all that. In my book, that counts as cheating because for the simple fact, if you have a female already, that female should be able to provide whatever needs that you have...” (M-18fa, p.36)

While infidelity is more often perpetrated by men than women, there were no discernable gender differences in the *definition of infidelity*. Neither gender was consistently more permissive or strict in its definition. Research on gender differences in reactions to infidelity suggests that women may be more likely to define purely emotional relationships as infidelity than men. These data provide no evidence of that. We found cases of both mothers and fathers who viewed an emotional relationship with no sexual interaction as cheating. One father said that cheating “is (an) in you heart type of thing.” He goes on to explain, “I don’t see how people can say ‘oh, that’s not really cheating because they didn’t have sex.’ You know what, sometimes what they do, not having sex, is worse. You know what I mean?” (M-14fa; p.48). A mother from another couple said she defined cheating “as more than physical.” In her words, “I believe that you can cheat emotionally when you share with other people...or you create intimacy with someone else” (M-22ma; p.43).

Narratives of Nonmonogamy

Each couple in this sample that reported some nonmonogamy in the history of their relationship has a unique story to tell. Taken together, these stories offer insight into how and when infidelity occurs and is discovered, and its effects on the long-term outcomes of

relationships. In this section, we use three TLC3 couples to illustrate typical characteristics of nonmonogamy (these characteristics are summarized in Table 4).

“I was a steady cheat”

Kevin says he had a crush on Mary from the first day he saw her at the law school they were both attending in Wisconsin. Once he “got up enough nerves to call her” they began dating, despite the fact that Mary was involved with another man at the time. Just when Kevin thought their relationship was becoming serious, Mary decided to break it off and go back to her boyfriend. While she would return to Kevin soon enough, this inauspicious beginning foreshadowed the volatility that would characterize their now-ended 10-year relationship, which resulted in two children.

Kevin admits to being a “steady cheat” throughout the course of his relationship with Mary, and indeed his exploits read like pulp fiction. He had sexual relationships with at least 10 women, some of which he knew from high school and college, others that he met at church, at his law office, or in court. At times Kevin sounds vaguely contrite about his chronic cheating, but ultimately he does not seem interested in or capable of maintaining a monogamous relationship:

“I don’t think it’s ever (ok) to cheat, but I justify my cheating when she’s being difficult to get along with. When I feel as though she’s unappreciative or she nags a lot, complains a lot. I feel justified in cheating, but clearly it’s never good to cheat...I’m always greedy to the point of I want to keep her, but I still want to keep doing whatever I want...I needed something from different women to feel happy. And I would take this from her, this from her, this from her. And all combined, it was cool. But I can’t find one woman that can complete what I need” (38).

While Kevin never committed himself to monogamy with Mary, he realizes that her expectations for the relationship were different than his own. He says, “Me and Mary, no (we

were) not really serious. Well, let me say this, yeah. She thought we were in a monogamous relationship which she thought was going somewhere. So it was pretty serious. To me it wasn't super serious...I just sowed my wild oats and I wasn't ready for a serious, committed relationship" (38).

While Mary was not chronically unfaithful with multiple partners in the way that Kevin was, she did return to her ex-boyfriend (who she was dating when she met Kevin) several times in the course of her relationship with Kevin. After discovering that Kevin was cheating with multiple women and rejecting his suggestion that they have an "open" relationship, Mary broke-up with Kevin and moved to another state for a short period. During this time, both Mary and Kevin reunited with ex-lovers. When Mary returned to Wisconsin six months later, she was engaged to her ex-boyfriend and Kevin was engaged to another woman with whom he had had a longstanding on-again-off-again relationship. For some time, Kevin and Mary dated each other and their "fiancées" simultaneously. Eventually, Kevin says the couple "made the decision to see each other exclusively" and shortly thereafter became pregnant with their first child and moved in together. Despite this renewed and expanded commitment to each other as partners and parents, Kevin continued to pursue sexual relationships with other women.

Four years after the birth of their first child, Kevin and Mary have broken-up, a turn of events they both attribute primarily to Kevin's dishonesty and infidelity. Kevin still holds out the possibility that he and Mary will not only reunite but marry, but almost in the same breath he questions the benefit of monogamy or marriage: "I don't know anybody who is happily married...Even people who are engaged or live together just complain about it...If you can have 10 women, why pick one?" (38). Considering Kevin and Mary's history, it is easy to see why

Mary once told an interviewer it was better to leave out the details of their relationship so that it could be “a love story, not a horror flick.”

Kevin and Mary had a chronic problem with nonmonogamy; both of them sporadically pursued relationships with former partners while still involved with one another. In addition, Kevin became sexually involved for short periods of time, often just one night, with a series of women he met in nearly every context of his life. The timing and frequency of Kevin and Mary’s nonmonogamy may seem extreme, but it is actually the most common form of nonmonogamy in this sample. More than half the couples that reported some infidelity described repeated incidents by one or both the partners, occurring steadily, or at least repeatedly, during the life of the relationship.

Monisha, a young Black mother, says that she and her partner Denton, who is currently incarcerated, have “about five thousand” problems with trust because he has “been caught up” (caught cheating) so many times. She estimates she has actually discovered his infidelities five or six times, including multiple times while she was pregnant with their three children. Paradoxically, his persistent cheating makes him less trusting of *her*. She says “He’s always giving me a hard time. He thinks I’m cheating on him. ‘Cause he knows he done f’d up so many times” (C-16ma; 26). Between his cheating, distrust, and physical abuse, Monisha is not sure she wants to stay with Denton when he returns from prison.

Another mother reported that the father of her children has cheated on her with at least 10 women. She has also been unfaithful, “a couple of times” when she was “in the mood” or wanting to get back at her partner for his infidelities (C-18ma; 28). A father said he had “lost count” of his partner’s cheating and had trouble recounting his own, which may contribute to his

self-proclaimed reputation for being a “male whore” (this is a reference to the number of women he has had sex with, not to prostitution; M-24fa, 27).

Sometimes chronic nonmonogamy does not take the form of casual sexual relationships with numerous partners, but rather ongoing semi-committed relationships with one or two partners (in addition to the focal partner). Mary’s involvement with the man she was dating before Kevin was this way. Another couple, Uri and Catherine, broke up shortly after the birth of their first baby when she discovered he had been steadily seeing two other women at the same time. Catherine learned of Uri’s other relationships when one of the other women arrived at her doorstep one morning and confronted her. When Uri realized what was happening, he jumped in his car and sped off, leaving the two women to become acquainted. Catherine challenged the other woman, “Who are you?” “I’m Uri’s girlfriend,” the woman responded matter-of-factly. “Well, welcome to the club, sweetie” (35).

Relationships with chronic nonmonogamy are often characterized by extreme volatility and seemingly continuous cycles of dissolution and reconciliation. Kevin and Mary’s history points to the grey area that many couple’s find themselves in when the status of their relationship is uncertain. There are several other cases in which the level or type of commitment was in question during turbulent periods of the relationship, in which the couple spent some time broken-up before reconciling. In these situations, the relationships had been defined as monogamous, but the couple did not agree on whether they were truly broken-up when the infidelity happened.

In Mary and Kevin’s case, chronic nonmonogamy was at least partially responsible for the demise of their relationship. This was true for most, but not all, the couples with similar histories of repeated infidelity by one or both partners. Eight of the 13 couples that were

categorized as chronically nonmonogamous had broken-up by the Wave Four interview, and all of eight of those couples described cheating or distrust as the biggest problem in their relationship and/or the reason for their break-up. Given the turbulent nature of many of these chronically nonmonogamous couples, however, it is difficult to know whether relationship status at one point in time is an “outcome” of the relationship or simply a one stage in a longer relationship trajectory.

In contrast to the “chronic cheaters”, a substantial number of couples reported one or two isolated incidents of nonmonogamy early in their relationships. “Isolated” and “chronic” cheating has in common that it often occurred during a time when the couple was negotiating the status of their relationship. In some cases, couples experienced some nonmonogamy at the beginning of a relationship while they were still casually dating, or they began dating each other while in serious relationships with other people and it took some time to extricate themselves from those relationships and make a commitment to each other. A couple’s level of commitment to each other was also brought into question in cases in which one of the parents was serving time in jail or prison.

At the time her partner Ned cheated on her, right before the birth of their first child, Tammy says they “were having issues.” When Ned went to live with a female friend from work for about a month, he thought that he and Tammy were not “technically” together but Tammy said, “I thought we were taking a break from each other and taking time, but I never thought we broke up” (25). Another father’s description of his relationship status when he became involved with someone else epitomizes “wishy-washy”: “It’s sort of...you know...it wasn’t like we were together around the time when, you know, I wasn’t really dealing with her so...it was, you know,

trials and tribulations through that time, so it wasn't, you know we were (just) dating in that period of time" (22).

It is not the case that nonmonogamy was restricted to relationships that were on uncertain ground or going through turbulence, however. Many couples described their experiences with infidelity in the context of committed relationships with clear expectations for faithfulness. As one father who cheated said, "[w]e agreed at the time that we were going to be together, yeah. We didn't have one of those relationships where you can see anybody you want to and I see anybody I want to" (C-05fa; 39). Another said "no, it wasn't no open thing" (C-07fa; 15) of his relationship with his child's mother, which involved nonmonogamy on the part of both partners. Many of the incidents of nonmonogamy described in these narratives occurred while the couples were not only together, in committed relationships, but living together. Just one couple reported nonmonogamy that occurred during marriage.

"Is the baby yours?"

Kendra and Bodie were 18 years old when mutual friends insisted on setting them up. Kendra says what "was mostly a friendly thing...suddenly got serious." Six years later, the couple shared a marriage, two children, and a history of violent arguments when Kendra learned of Bodie's affair with another woman, who is now pregnant with his child. Kendra and Bodie are separated and Kendra has filed for divorce, but Bodie has not agreed that the relationship is over.

Right around the five-year anniversary of the beginning of Kendra and Bodie's relationship, Kendra confronted Bodie about the late hours he had been keeping in recent weeks, "coming home at two, sometimes three, sometimes four (in the morning)." When pressed, Bodie

claimed he had never loved Kendra and was leaving her for another woman. She vividly recalls the confrontation:

“I’m like, ‘so who’s the girl?’ And he was like ‘nobody.’ I said, ‘who’s the girl, because you’re not going to leave me for nobody. You have to have somebody lined up...’and he was like ‘I’ve been talking to somebody on the south side...’ I left him there. I just started driving around...I was like, Oh my God...So, I came back and told him to leave” (11).” (“Talking to’ is used here as it is by other sample members as slang for having a sexual relationship.)

Kendra later learned from acquaintances that the “other woman” was not much more than a girl, 18 years old to Bodie’s 24, and still in high school. Kendra and her friends went to the girl’s house and confronted her, but she just laughed in Kendra’s face. When Bodie found out about the confrontation between the two women, he got into a violent argument with Kendra in which both of them were hitting each other in the face. She tried to press charges, but the police said they could not arrest Bodie because the violence had been mutual.

Kendra believes that Bodie’s nonmonogamy was precipitated by his desire for more sexual experiences and by her own limits on sexual behavior. She views certain sexual acts, including oral sex, as inappropriate in the context of monogamous married relationships. Based on her experience with Bodie, she now believes what an older female friend once told her, that “if you don’t want your man to go to a ho, you got to act like a ho in the bed” (“Ho” is slang for a woman who has sex with many men.)

Just a few weeks before the Wave Four TLC3 interview, Kendra’s hurt and sense of betrayal was magnified many times when she learned that Bodie’s lover was pregnant and that the baby was very likely Bodie’s. Despite this predicament, Bodie has refused Kendra a divorce and has been so obsessively tracking her and their children that Kendra was successful in getting a restraining order against him. His efforts to see them are clearly directed not just at spending

time with his children but at wooing back Kendra in some way. As hurtful as his nonmonogamy was, Kendra intimates that she might have been able to forgive him and to consider reconciliation but for the other woman's pregnancy. Now that "there's a baby involved," however, she sees no future with her husband.

Unlike Kevin and Mary, Kendra and Bodie spent six years in what was, by all accounts, a committed monogamous relationship, culminating in marriage after the birth of their second child (check timing). Kendra and Bodie experienced an isolated incident of nonmonogamy, but one that precipitated Bodie leaving Kendra and resulted in a pregnancy with another woman. This case exemplifies a troubling dimension of nonmonogamy in this sample: in six cases, infidelity led to a pregnancy or the questionable paternity of a child, which substantially increases the consequences of infidelity for the future of the couple's relationship. In two cases, men impregnated multiple women with months of each other. In several others, the paternity of a child was uncertain because of the mother's nonmonogamy around the time of the child's conception. One mother, exclaiming that "(her daughter's) little brother is two weeks younger than her!", seemed shocked just to say the words aloud, even four years after the fact (C-07ma; 18).

Seemingly defying the odds, Uri, who, as we mentioned earlier, was sexually involved with Catherine and two other women simultaneously, became a father to three children by three different women within several months time. Here is Uri's recollection of his admission of this fact to Catherine:

“Actually, she found out because I told her. I took it upon myself to...(tell) her about, you know, Lisa being pregnant and Barbara being pregnant. She was okay with it because it wasn’t nothing that she could do about it.”

Upon further questioning, Uri admitted that Catherine was not really “okay” with his transgressions. He modified his story to: “She was angry, of course...Because she figured that ‘Well, you’ve been with me all this time and you got two females pregnant...you had to be spending time with them, too” (36). In this way, children represent inescapable evidence of promiscuity or infidelity that makes it more difficult for a couple to recover and moving on.

Children also “up the ante” on infidelity; suddenly, the “other wo(man)” becomes the “other family” in some sense. Even if a relationship survives nonmonogamy that results in pregnancy, it cannot help but be substantially altered by the responsibilities (however seriously they are taken) of a parent to his/her children. Sexual jealousy of “other babies’ mamas” or “other babies’ daddies”, as they are referred to, is quite common, and is only increased when infidelity is involved. Although it is very common in this sample for parents to have children outside the focal relationship, multiple partner fertility still seems to cast a shadow of doubt on a person’s virtue. Explaining why his relationships had not progressed to marriage, one father said “I just knew she was still sleeping around...I mean I was happy being with her but I just couldn’t marry a woman who got basically three kids by three other dudes. You know what I’m saying. I just couldn’t marry a woman like that” (M-24fa; 28).

Sexual infidelity is discovered in a variety of ways. Kendra became suspicious when Bodie was coming home late and her suspicions were confirmed when in the process of leaving her, Bodie admitted he was involved with another woman. Often friends, family members, or acquaintances play a role in revealing the infidelity. Some cheaters were caught in the act by

their significant others, while others gave themselves away by staying out too late or making phone calls the people they were cheating with. Three different sample members confronted their partners' with no concrete evidence of their infidelity because they "just knew."

Kendra's belief that Bodie cheated because she was not fulfilling his sexual desires at home is common to a number of couples as well. One mother was particularly suspicious of the father of her children when he was not interested in sex. She figured his lack of interest meant he was sexually involved with someone else. Another reported that her partner accused her of cheating because she did not want to have sex every day.

"It took a while, but we worked through it"

Tammy and Ned met young as well—they were just out of high school when they began hanging out in a mutual group of friends. Just three and half months into dating, Ned began having troubles with his parents and decided to move in with Tammy and her mother. "[H]e slept out on the sofa," says Tammy, who "kinda made a little dresser area for him" in her bedroom. Nearly ten years later, the couple is still together with a four year-old son and a one year-old daughter. They describe their relationship in positive terms and have hopes of marrying in the future. Like all couples, however, Tammy and Ned have had there ups and downs, including a period right before their son was born during which the future of their relationship was uncertain and Ned pursued a relationship with a coworker. While they differ on the details of the events during this time, the two parents agree that this was an isolated episode in the past that they have successfully resolved.

Ned's relationship with his friend and coworker was an isolated event that occurred during a time when Ned and Tammy were still negotiating the status of their relationship. In addition, by both accounts, his relationship with the other woman was primarily emotional and

involved little if any sexual interactions. Despite living with the woman for a month, Ned claims the relationship was not physical at all, but Tammy says that she thinks Ned and the other woman did not have sexual intercourse but “fooled around.” They both seem unsure of whether to label Ned’s behavior as cheating, but they agree that the relationship he had with the other woman was more than just a friendship and that his lying to Tammy made his behavior more egregious. Ned describes himself as a recovering “compulsive liar” and Tammy confirms that while he used to lie to her about many things, big and small, he seems to have stopped lying as he has matured.

Tammy says she was able to forgive Ned for three reasons, because 1) he believed they were broken-up at the time, 2) “it wasn’t like he was looking for someone to cheat with,” and 3) the relationship he had with the other woman was not sexual. She says, “I, of course, was hurt and it took me a while to trust him and every once in a while I would get upset about it or something, but we worked through it” (25). From Ned’s report, jealousy is not even a problem in their relationship. He says that Tammy “worries” some because he gets “flirted with a lot” at his job, but that she knows he “wouldn’t be able to get away with (cheating) even if (he) tried” (22). Tammy and Ned seem to have not only recovered and moved on from Ned’s brief episode of nonmonogamy, but to have come out stronger for the experience.

Several couples’ narratives of nonmonogamy end in recovery and re-commitment, particularly with isolated episodes of nonmonogamy early in the relationship. William and Willa, a mixed-race, cohabiting couple, were able to forge a committed relationship after a turbulent beginning to their relationship. In William’s words,

“...like when we were still just dating she was dating some other guys and I actually went back and did something with my ex wife...but...it was kinda like a

few months apart from each other. And it was sorta kind of an issue but we were both able to just talk about it and put it behind us and move forward. Because it was like a new beginning stage was us getting, really serious about each other” (44).

In fact, these issues are so far in the past for Willa, that she does not even mention them when asked about relationship problems in the Wave Four interview.

Several parents attributed improvements in their relationships around the issue of monogamy to maturity and the birth of children. One father said that recently he had “been going straight and faithfully;” he says he does not want to cheat on the mother of his children because he loves his family and would rather keep them together than cheat (C-16fa; 44). A Puerto Rican mother who shares two children with the focal father reflects on this change in her relationship:

“...I trust him. Just like, you know, he trusts me...I guess..we’ve grown up. He KNOWS if he cheats on me, if I find out, this relationship is not going to last. And he doesn’t want that for his kids. He grew up without a father. He doesn’t want that to happen for his kids. To him that’s very important. So I know he won’t screw up” (37).

Not all couples are so lucky or capable to survive nonmonogamy with their faith in each other intact. Sexual jealousy and distrust was common in this sample, and quite extreme in some cases. Marina and Darnell, for example, rarely participate in social activities together because, according to Darnell, Marina is extremely jealous of nearly any woman he comes in contact with. He says, “If we went to the mall together and a woman was to walk by [me], she’ll hit me in the back of the head, like ‘what you looking at?’ And I’m like, I didn’t do nothing” (16). He says he would be scared to take Marina out to dinner because, “If we get a lady waitress, I’m in trouble” (17). He even suggested that she would be uncomfortable with him spending time with the woman who conducted his Wave Four TLC3 interview.

Marina does not deny that she is rabidly jealous. She admits, for instance, getting up in the middle of the night to rummage through his dirty clothes checking for pieces of paper with phone numbers on them. She points out that her jealousy is at least partially based in life experience and that Darnell is extremely distrustful in certain circumstances:

“He say he don’t (having trouble trusting me) and I think that the reason is I haven’t gave him no reason for him to feel like he need to be like not...you know...trusting me. Because he know I be here all day...I haven’t given him no doubts or nothing...But when I do break up with him, all he does is talk all night...He probably think like she broke up with me...(and) went out today and met somebody and somebody gave her the number. She might be talking to him on the phone...So he just call and call and I just looking at the caller ID like mmhmm you’d better keep on calling...I ain’t answering no phone. It’s done, it’s over” (34).

Some studies have suggested that conflict about sexual jealousy is particularly likely to be violent. Indeed, without ever being asked a question about this directly, five of the couples described an incident of sexual jealousy leading to a violent argument. In one case, a woman refers to the “strangling incident” when she broke-up with her child’s father because of his chronic cheating. Sometimes the violence was taken out on someone outside the relationship:

“When we first got together...(we) walked in a bar, some guy grabbed her ass. I dislocated his arm, broke his jaw, and spent three nights in jail...What’s mine is mine, and it better stay mine. If it’s mine, don’t touch it. Don’t, it’s mine” (M-06fa; 19).

Interestingly, all of the violently jealous men in this sample admitted to not being monogamous themselves. These men’s own transgressions seemed only to increase their distrust of their partners.

Discussion

Nationally, 25 percent of men and 15 percent of women report ever having been unfaithful during the course of a marriage. All evidence suggests that these numbers would be

substantially higher for unmarried couples, but we have no comparable statistic based on a national probability sample. The non-representative sample used in this analysis given us further reason to believe that couples in less formally committed relationships are more likely to experience nonmonogamy. Fully sixty percent of the couples in this sample reported sexual infidelity by at least one of the partners. Consistent with other research on infidelity, fathers were far more likely than mothers to have been unfaithful. However, in one-third of the cases both parents had cheated at some point in the relationship.

An important finding of this analysis is that many of the couples in this sample are defining infidelity in such a way that precludes friendships between men and women, and in fact makes any interaction—at work, on the street, or in a store—suspect. These pessimistic and arguably untenable expectations lead to severe issues with sexual jealousy and distrust, even among couples who have not experienced infidelity, which threatens and in some cases contributes to the failure of relationships.

We have tried to both identify and exemplify the multi-dimensionality of nonmonogamy using case studies of TLC3 couples. In rough terms, we see two categories of nonmonogamy narratives—those that involve isolated incidents of infidelity early in the relationship or during time of uncertainty about the future of the relationship, and those that describe chronic infidelity occurring over the course of an entire relationship. There is no clear evidence that one type leads to break-up more than the other, but the majority of couples who reported chronic cheating had ended their relationships four years after the focal child was born. The negative consequences of infidelity for the couple relationship seem greatly increased when it results in pregnancy. Finally, while some couples are able to reconcile after the discovery of cheating, others have substantial, sometimes violent, conflict over sexual jealousy.

We are still in the early stages of this analysis and have plans to both enhance and expand it in the future. In particular, we plan to examine sexual jealousy more closely as an issue that clearly has salience for the majority of couples in this sample, including those who have never experienced nonmonogamy. We would also like to draw on the complete data from all four waves of TLC3 interviews – both individual and couple—to provide richer, more complete narratives of nonmonogamy. Finally, we would like to consider these descriptive findings in the context of the limited theoretical work that has been done in the area of sexuality and infidelity.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the TLC3 Couples Included in this Analysis

	Analytic Sample N=39
Baseline relationship status	
Cohabiting	34 (87%)
Dating	3 (8%)
Broken-up	2 (5%)
Wave 4 relationship status	
Married	8 (21%)
Cohabiting	13 (33%)
Dating	4 (10%)
Broken-up (never married)	12 (31%)
Married but separated	1 (3%)
Divorced	1 (3%)
Mother's race	
Black	20 (51%)
Hispanic	13 (33%)
White	6 (15%)
Other	0 (0%)
Father's race	
Black	17 (43%)
Hispanic	18 (46%)
White	3 (8%)
Other	1 (3%)
Mean age of mother	27.56
Mean age of father	29.29
Mean number of common children	1.64

Note: Based on Wave Four TLC3 individual interviews

Table 2. Prevalence of Non-Monogamy among TLC3 Couples

	Total	Non-Monogamy
All Couples	39	23 (59%)
Relationship Status at Wave 4		
Married	8	2 (25%)
Cohabiting or Dating	17	10 (59%)
Broken-up, Divorced, or Separated	14	10 (64%)
The “Cheater”		
Mother	23	3 (13%)
Father	23	12 (52%)
Both	23	8 (35%)

Note: Based on combined report of mothers and fathers in TLC3 Wave Four individual interviews.

Table 3. Prevalence of Problematic Sexual Jealousy among TLC3 Couples

	Total	Problematic Sexual Jealousy
All Couples	39	29 (74%)
History of Nonmonogamy		
Yes	23	19 (83%)
No	16	10 (63%)
Relationship Status at Wave 4		
Married	8	5 (63%)
Cohabiting or Dating	17	15 (88%)
Broken-up, Divorced, or Separated	14	9 (64%)
The “Jealous One”		
Mother	29	16 (55%)
Father	29	3 (10%)
Both	29	10 (34%)

Note: Based on combined report of mothers and fathers in TLC3 Wave Four individual interviews.

Table 4. Six Dimensions of Nonmonogamy

Dimension	Typical forms
1. Timing	Early in relationship During tumultuous times in the relationship
2. Frequency	Ongoing Chronic Isolated
3. Relationship status	Uncertain Committed
4. Other (wo)man	Ex-girl/boyfriends Other baby’s mama/daddy Co-workers
5. Discovery	Acquaintances Told by friends, family, acquaintances Confronted by other (wo)man Admitted by “cheater” “Just knew”
6. Outcomes	Break-up Pregnancy Reconciliation & Recommitment Violence