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## Transcending Monosexism: Breaking Cycles and a Call for Nonmonosexual Liberation

Christine V. Dolan

*Students who are attracted to more than one gender, referred to as nonmonosexual students, face many barriers in synthesizing their sexual orientation identities (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Monosexism, a form of oppression that promotes exclusive heterosexual, lesbian, or gay behaviors as the only legitimate concepts of sexual orientation, inhibits the thriving of nonmonosexual students and fogs true understanding of nonmonosexuality (Rust, 2000a). Through the intentional study, discussion, understanding, and inclusion of nonmonosexual experiences, student affairs professionals can better support these students' development and growth in college and as they develop throughout their lifetimes.*

Sexual orientation identity development research and student development literature both discuss humans' need to feel that they fit in, belong, and have space (Cass, 1979, 1990; Rust, 2000a; Chickering & Associates, 1981). It is imperative for college students to have access to support and to feel included in order to validate their experiences by influencing their self-assurance and confidence (Erikson, 1980).

Not only is it important for students to feel a sense of belonging, recognition and validation of their identities is crucial. In order to best support students, educators and administrators must honor and dignify students as they understand themselves to be, while students explore and celebrate their identities (Taylor, 1992/1996). This idea can be applied to supporting nonmonosexual students, defined as students who are attracted to more than one gender, who often feel silenced and erased by monosexist ideals enforcing exclusive heterosexuality or homosexuality (Rust, 2000a).

Information about myths, stereotypes, and falsifications of nonmonosexual identities are typically more widely discussed than central truths, attempts at definitions, or positive experiences of nonmonosexual people. While this is a deficiency model, the illumination of the oppressive cycle of *monosexism* builds a

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framework for elucidating nonmonosexual truths in order to liberate nonmonosexual communities. Therefore, a comprehensive explanation of monosexism forms a critical introduction to an affirmative understanding of nonmonosexual student experiences. This positive insight creates an access point for student affairs scholars and professionals to understand the unique barriers and obstacles nonmonosexual students face in order to support them on their paths to positive identity development and self-empowerment.

### Breaking the Cycle through Noticing and Understanding Monosexism

In order to best understand authentic nonmonosexual identity, it is important to highlight the framework of oppression in which it exists. Hegemonic society, by definition, enforces binaries limiting individualism and true expression and understanding of identity (Paul, 2000). While heterosexism and homophobia are clearly pervasive in the United States, an often less-known oppressive influence, known as monosexism, limits the growth and development of nonmonosexual students (Rust, 2000a). Often referred to as *biphobia*, monosexism is a form of oppression that promotes exclusive heterosexual, lesbian, or gay male behaviors as the only legitimate concepts of sexual orientation (Rust, 2000a).

Perhaps the ultimate form of monosexism is *binegativity*, the outright denial of the existence of nonmonosexual people (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999; Rust, 2000a). This stems from the idea of a gender binary, placing woman and man on either end, falsely implying that these two genders solely exist and since they are “essentially opposite,” members of one gender must be attracted to the other and never to members of their own (Rust, 2000a, p. 207).

Another way in which nonmonosexual identities are made invisible is through making assumptions about people’s sexual orientations based on the perceived genders of their partners (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999). Often, this is fueled by the concept of “compulsory heterosexuality”, which assumes people universally identify as heterosexual in the absence of any public actions implying otherwise (Rich, 1980, p. 632). This assumption erases all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) people until they are driven to disclose their true identities or remain closeted, yet it uniquely affects nonmonosexual people by creating a false assumption that even people with different-gender partners are always heterosexual.

Additionally, Zinik (2000) discovered a “one-drop” rule for monosexuality where a person is perceived as lesbian or gay when any “homosexual” action or behavior is presented “regardless of the amount of heterosexual experience” (p. 56). Rust (2000b) explained that any “homosexual” act renders any “heterosexual” behavior thereafter as counterfeit. Furthermore, monosexual people too often believe non-

monosexual people are denying their authentic identities and are truly lesbian or gay, using perceived heterosexual behaviors as a cover (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999; Rust, 2000a), which enforces horizontal oppression within LGBTQ communities.

Nonmonosexual people are stereotyped as wanting the “best of both worlds” without having to commit to or “choose” a monosexual orientation (Rust, 2000a, p. 207). Many people misunderstand nonmonosexual communities as emotionally or psychologically immature, internally conflicted, or unstable because of their orientation’s multiplicity (Rust, 2000a). Often, these stereotypes form the foundation for the belief that nonmonosexual people do not want to commit to one partner (Esterberg, 1997; Rust, 1993, 2000a), and studies have shown that many people believe that nonmonosexual people are “inherently unfaithful” (Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011, p. 23). This myth represents nonmonosexual people as “needing” partners of more than one gender or as generally promiscuous due to this need (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999; Rust, 2000a, p. 207). Similarly, nonmonosexual people are viewed as extra- or hyper-sexual, due to their multiple attractions (Paul, 2000; Rust, 2000a), and many people falsely believe nonmonosexual people to be more likely to spread Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or other sexually transmitted infections (Herek, 2002).

Sexual orientation identity models (Cass, 1979, 1990; Fassinger, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1988, 1990; Troiden, 1979, 1988) outline steps and stages of development toward a healthy lesbian or gay identity, focusing on an ideal monosexual identity outcome. Not only do these models not include or represent nonmonosexual identities, they often include a halfway mark that commonly describes a nonmonosexual identity. This stage describes feelings of “experimentation,” “exploration,” and “questioning,” minimizing nonmonosexual experiences as simply part of the linear process toward an exclusive same-sex attraction (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Rust, 2000a, p. 207). Feelings of “confusion” and “conflict,” often characterized by internalized homophobia, are integral parts of this stage (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Rust, 2000a, p. 207).

Lesbian and gay sexual orientation identity models often give permission to those students and their advocates to understand all LGBTQ identities through the limited lens of monosexual experiences. This authorizes a commonly held idea that nonmonosexual people are “fence-sitting” (Ochs, 2001, p. 45) or “fence-straddling” (Herek, 2002, p. 273). Therefore, nonmonosexual students search for affinity and realize they live within two closets (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999), conditioning them to bracket and closet parts of themselves within monosexual contexts, preventing healthy identity synthesis.

### Nonmonosexual Identity, Clarified

Broadly conceived, [nonmonosexual] means of or pertaining to one's experience of erotic, emotional, and sexual attraction to persons of more than one gender. Such individuals may identify as bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual, [transgender], or transsexual or may choose not to label at all... [Nonmonosexuality] here is defined as the capacity, regardless of the sexual identity label one chooses, to love and sexually desire both same- and other-gendered individuals. (Firestein, 1996, pp. xix-xx)

Firestein's (1996) definition emphasizes that nonmonosexual identity is determined by the capacity for attraction to more than one gender. Similarly, Hoang et al. (2011) broadly declared attraction as the indicator for sexual orientation, not behavior or self-labeling. Often asked to prove their sexual orientation's multiplicity, nonmonosexual people often experience identity confusion or isolation. Recognizing nonmonosexuality as a capacity not only validates nonmonosexual identities, but it affirms and wholly accepts all nonmonosexual people as they are (Hemmings, 2002; Rust, 2000a).

#### *Exploring a Nonmonosexual Identity Development Model*

Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) developed the first widely recognized model of nonmonosexual identity formation by studying the existing monosexual lesbian and gay identity models. While sexual orientation identity models vary, they typically begin with a period of identity confusion, followed by a state of considering a gay or lesbian potential, which leads to an attempt to synchronize one's sexual orientation with one's self-concept (Cass, 1979, 1990; D'Augelli, 1994). Synthesizing this information with what they discovered through interviews with nonmonosexual people, they developed four stages: (1) initial confusion, (2) finding and applying the label, (3) settling into the identity, and (4) continued uncertainty.

**1. Initial confusion.** Experiences of considerable confusion, doubt, and struggle regarding sexual orientation identities characterize the first stage: initial confusion (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). For some, unsettling, disorienting, and sometimes frightening feelings stem from strong sexual attractions for more than one gender. For some, denial was born from a state of internalized homophobia. For others, the idea of dismantling their longstanding heterosexuality caused confusion. Thwarted attempts to categorize or label their sexual orientations or experiences, due to assumed monosexuality, were another source of turmoil. These feelings often lead to a discovery of nonmonosexual labels and a stage of experimenting with categories.

**2. Finding and applying the label.** Many people approach this stage without previous access to terminology for nonmonosexual orientations, and this discovery provides an opportunity for them to make sense of their feelings and validate their realities. Some land in this stage through sexual behaviors and acts with more than one gender, which they believe finally deem them worthy of nonmonosexual labels. While others arrive by finally surrendering from the imposed monosexual duality, refusing to choose one attraction, valuing all of themselves as wholes. Encouragement and support of peers, partners, or organizations also facilitates the realization of this stage (Weinberg et al., 1994).

*Labels: A mechanism to unite or to separate?* A commonly contentious thread among nonmonosexual communities is confusion and inconsistency surrounding labels and categories. There are many labels used to classify nonmonosexual people, including but not limited to bisexual, pansexual, fluid, ambisexual, omnisexual, nonmonosexual, and queer. Often the definitions of these terms are not universal within each of the specific self-proclaimed communities (Brown, 2002; Diamond, 2008). While this offers the liberty for individual interpretation and an opportunity to personally claim or reclaim a term, it has the potential to create rifts. These disparities prevent access for those who are seeking but do not know how to locate nonmonosexual communities, fracturing the support and role models that nonmonosexual people crave in order to develop healthy identities.

Additionally, many people who would otherwise be interpreted as nonmonosexual refuse to identify with their sexual orientation altogether or hold their sexual orientation identities without naming them with widely-recognized labels (Hoang et al., 2011; Rust, 2000a). This may be due to dissonance and stigma associated with the terms (Brown, 2002; Diamond, 2008; Hoang et al., 2011). For others, this refusal aligns with a political agenda, reflecting their views about gender politics, challenging rigid definitions or even significance of gender (Rust, 2000a). Though refusing labels can be an empowering stance for some, this phenomenon makes it difficult to know the prevalence of nonmonosexual identities and experiences, and it creates challenges for people with these identities to find or form affirming communities (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999).

**3. Settling into the identity.** The next stage describes a process of settling into a nonmonosexual identity generally leading to a complete transition in self-labeling. Growth throughout this stage is typically the consequence of fuller feelings of self-acceptance and less concern with negative attitudes of others about nonmonosexual sexual orientations. These feelings of self-affirmation are typically attributed to the continual support from peers, counselors, organizations, and resources that validate and affirm the existence of their sexual orientations (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999; Weinberg et al., 1994). This finding serves as a forceful call to action to student affairs professionals to recognize the potential

for meaningful impact in supporting nonmonosexual students through validating and affirming nonmonosexual identities, facilitating affinity spaces, and providing outreach and resources to nonmonosexual communities (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Hoang et al., 2011; Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999; Matteson, 1995).

**4. Continued uncertainty.** Continued uncertainty characterizes the final stage of Weinberg et al., (1994) nonmonosexual identity development model. This stage is unusual in nature, as most sexual orientation identity models end with a stage that typically synthesizes and celebrates their newfound identities as an important and valuable part of a larger whole, leading to deeper feelings and beliefs of inclusion, affirmation, and belonging (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994). However, the nonmonosexual identity development model ominously closes with little space for hope for a happy ending.

This terminal uncertainty and searching is most likely the result of a self-fulfilled prophecy that stems from the falsehood that nonmonosexuality is simply a “stage” of questioning and transitioning (Rust, 2000a; Weinberg et al., 1994, pp. 34-38). The lack of valid representation of nonmonosexual identities compounds with the unfortunate reality of internalized monosexism. Those who begin to self-assign as nonmonosexual ingest monosexist clues and indicators of what being nonmonosexual is. This often leads people to a vulnerable place of doubting the validity of their feelings of attraction toward people of different genders and questioning if they are not simply gay or lesbian, while experiencing pressures from LGBTQ communities to relabel themselves as gay or lesbian in order to conform to assumed monosexuality (Weinberg et al., 1994). As the final stage of this model, continued uncertainty ends the journey toward a healthy identity with an ellipsis, open for continued growth, yet leaves the person without the stability of a crystallized identity (Weinberg et al., 1994).

#### A Call to Allyship, Advocacy, and Action

Students are typically exploring, rather than solidifying, their sexual orientation identities during college (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999). Nonmonosexual students lack validation and affirmation of their identities (Matteson, 1995), which typically leads to identity confusion (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Weinberg et al., 1994). Additionally, research shows the need for visibility for nonmonosexual people in general and within the context of LGBTQ communities (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999). Nonmonosexual people do not experience the same type of visible, organized communities or support systems that monosexual people who hold lesbian or gay identities do. Nonmonosexual people may even be excluded from lesbian and gay organizations (Baslam & Mohr, 2007). Therefore, the benefits of being in a nonheterosexual environment may be outweighed by the horizontal marginalization or rejection from lesbian and gay people (Balsam & Mohr, 2007).

It has been proven that nonmonosexual people find nonmonosexual affinity time to be a very “normalizing” experience (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999, p. 160).

Through a comprehensive and critical understanding of monosexism, student affairs professionals can eradicate the oppressive system and recognize that self-fulfilling prophecies are products of real barriers and not inherent parts of nonmonosexual identities (Horowitz & Newcomb, 1999). By studying and seeking deeper understanding of the barriers that nonmonosexual people face due to monosexism, the meanings and truths of genuine nonmonosexual identities, and what nonmonosexual communities need in order to feel understood and supported, student affairs scholars and professionals can begin to understand the unique barriers and obstacles that these students face (Rust, 2000a).



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