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Gender, Sex, and Sexuality

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Precis: Wolkomir, M. 2020 'Swingers and Polyamorist: A comparative analysis of gendered power dynamics' *Sexualities* Vol. 23(7) pp. 1060-1079.

Michelle Wolkomir, in her 2020 piece on Swingers and Polyamorists, explores the practice of non-monogamy in the United States and uses this to make an interesting claim: that this has the potential to challenge traditional gendered power dynamics in a heterosexual relationship. The evidence put together to support her claim is thorough, though limited in its variability, and is provided in a way that makes it easy for the reader to understand and follow along with her findings. The journal is structured similarly to a report, dividing her research into sections with subheadings when applicable and providing copious amounts of data in the form of charts, direct quotes, and paraphrased stories from the interviews she conducted. It should be noted, however, that while her findings are clear, the research approach is extremely limited by only gathering evidence from middle aged, white, heterosexual couples in the United States – this issue being addressed by Wolkomir at the end of her journal as well.

The journal begins with three separate quotes from some of the people Wolkomir interviewed, all of which present a very different outlook onto the idea and practice of swinging and polyamory. This stylistic choice works really well to illustrate some of the basic concepts discussed and explored throughout her piece, and it also works to demonstrate how varied the experiences with this can be. Wolkomir goes on to further explain the basics of swinging and polyamory, particularly in relation to the couples she interviewed, and how these seemingly out of the norm practices actually still play a significant role in perpetuating unequal power dynamics between the masculine and feminine.

The cultural emphasis on the heterosexual monogamous model, as Wolkomir describes it, results in the idealization of the widely unhealthy characteristics that this model promotes; For example, valuing and prioritizing the masculine over the feminine and viewing women as sexual objects for male pleasure, which is clear to see when multiple men Wolkomir interviewed felt threatened if another man was with their female partner but not if another woman was. Not only

does this reinforce inequalities but it essentially demonizes any type of relationship that deviates from this particular norm and its expectations. On the surface, swinging and polyamory fall into this category as well, but although it is not always societally accepted, it can still continue to idealize the same power structures within the relationship.

Something interesting that Wolkomir notes is how people seem to connect love with sex so heavily, which proved delving into non-monogamous relationships difficult for many of those interviewed because it spurred jealousy and insecurity. Some people began to detach their feelings of love from sex, while others broadened their perspective to both love and have sex with more than person at the same time. Wolkomir showed how one person from the interview explained this, and how he learned not to compare love between people and just live happily in love together with other. It seems like a very open and lighthearted way to live, something much more content, healthy, and accepting than the model norm described in her piece.

Wolkomir does a great job addressing the positive as well as the negative aspects in the swinger and polyamorous lifestyles. Swingers, on the surface, seem to be breaking norms but in reality, they can actually reinforce the heterosexual monogamous model I mentioned earlier. Polyamorists, in comparison to swingers, seem to have different ideals that work towards adopting alternative norms in regard to the gender and relationship dynamic. Wolkomir argues that the polyamorous ideals have the potential to transform the norm of the gender power imbalance because they focus on creating more equal footing and boundaries between everyone in the relationship as well as practicing healthy communication strategies. It is with this in mind that Wolkomir sees the polyamorist as more egalitarian, and therefore a good example for imagining what the future could look like in regard to the dynamic between the masculine and feminine.

I think overall Wolkomir has presented a really interesting topic and provided solid evidence to show her train of thought and subsequent analysis of her research. The addition of the direct quotes from non-monogamous practicing individuals and relaying parts of their stories helped a lot to understand more about how people approach this and how it does or does not challenge the societal norm. Because of this, the journal is able to successfully attempt to illustrate, with significant supporting evidence, a critical perspective on the monogamist norm in the United States, how this impacts gender dynamics, and how alternative forms of relationships are challenging this cultural norm for the better. The journal was very well-rounded and held a

lot of room to imagine the possibilities of what this could mean for the future. While she does admit to the limited evidence, I feel that incorporating more variety in perspectives would enhance her argument and provide a more comprehensive and accurate report of gender dynamics in relationships and how different types of relationships outside the norm challenge that. I think this would be the next logical step for her to expand her argument and show if this is applicable at all levels of society. The way Wolkomir presents her argument does make me wonder if she thinks society is moving towards polyamory more than monogamy, and that that is the future for us, or if she is just highlighting the type of things society needs to be aware of in this respect so that they can better improve themselves as they see fit.