



II BEING A COUPLE

0 Introduction

Everyone creates his/her identity through various group affiliations (family, workplace, philosophy or religion, couple etc.).

Examining the socio-cultural dimensions that induce us to enter into partnership as if this were a given matter of course, the couple can be described as one of the most important group affiliations. First of all, being in couple is an institution. Both together and individually, the members of the couple develop norms and myths as guarantees for the relationship. Norms are all codes imposed on people from outside and to which they are subordinated. Myths are all the codes individuals create and adopt for themselves. They are often used to protect the couple from the outside world (boundaries of intimacy, validation and protection of the couple from outside). They also serve as a valorisation of uniqueness of the couple (« it's not by chance we are born in the same month and our mothers are from the same place! »). Moreover, myths are a way of defining and reinforcing expectations - or lack of expectations - concerning the place of each member, the capacity for individuation and separation, autonomy and dependency as well as the modalities of relationship such as distance and closeness. The norms and myths which finally define a couple create rules and rituals of coherence that are also nurtured by it.

1. Short social and economic history of monogamous couples

The modern term “social monogamy” describes a certain concept of partnership: Social monogamy includes a cohabiting “twosome” (couple), having sex exclusively with one another and sharing economic resources. Hence, today monogamy covers sexual faithfulness as well as emotional and economic reliance and the dependency of one partner. In European societies, this type of partnership is often equalled to marriage. ‘Marriage’ means gaining a legal status in the eyes of the state. In some European countries, the recognition of this type of partnership is linked to specific benefits.

It still is unknown whether our early ancestors were monogamous or not. At least it is known that under the influence of Christian church many countries passed laws promoting heterosexual social monogamy as the only legal form of marriage. In medieval times not everybody was allowed or could afford to marry. We still do not know a lot about how those people shaped their relationships. Since we know there was restricted access to marriage, it can be assumed that even in medieval times there had been various types of partnerships in addition to marriage.

In the 14th century, especially after the plague in Europe, laws were enacted to forbid non-procreative sexuality. Heterosexuality became even more the only accepted form of sexual orientation.

As early as 1884, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) described the two main functions of monogamous marriage as a social institution in his work [“The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State”](#) First, monogamous marriage ensures that property/wealth is passed down to biologically related offspring. Second, monogamous marriage traps women in a life of unpaid domestic and childrearing labour. The monogamous family is based on the supremacy of the man and its main purpose is to produce children of undeniable paternity. (Male) children later inherit their father’s property as his ‘natural’ heirs. Thus, monogamy generally meant that women were sexually faithful while men were still free to have extramarital sex. The idea of love as an aspect of marriage arose in late 18th and early 19th centuries. [Romanticism](#) emphasized intuition, imagination and feeling and dispelled traditional economic and family reasons. Nevertheless, the main reason has remained the idea of passing on property to the male line of offspring. Within paternal societies, women of all social classes had no right to choose or reject a groom. With marriage the husband gained legal power over his wife and her property. Aristocratic women could choose to spend their lives in a convent - which at least protected them from an undesired husband.

Even though the idea of marriage and the monogamous family has changed over the centuries and alternative forms of partnerships have become more visible, in 1979 the United Nations promoted social monogamy as the preferred form of marriage: “The African Women’s Rights Protocol is the only human rights treaty to explicitly articulate the choice of Monogamy as the

“preferred form of marriage’. It is also the only one to assert the widow’s right to child custody, inheritance and the right to remarry a person of her choice.” (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – [CEDAW](#); adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979). They argued that only in monogamous families can men and women gain equal rights since polygamy allows only men the right to several spouses.

2. Impact on lesbian partnerships – European view

Same-sex partnerships in Europe upheld the tradition of monogamous marriage – even though those relations were not legalized and thus acknowledged by the state – for a long time in history. Since romanticism introduced love as a reason for marriage, the concept of love and romantic marriage has played an important part in shaping lesbian partnerships as well. It can be assumed that most same-sex partnerships in Europe consist of monogamous couples – and are therefore comparable to opposite-sex partnerships. But undoubtedly the plurality of partnerships is increasing today, ranging from lifelong monogamous couples to ‘serial monogamy’ and polygamous concepts of partnerships. At the same time, the divorce rates of heterosexual couples are increasing: In 2006 in Vienna, about 60% of married couples got divorced; since a new divorce law was introduced in Spain in 2005, numbers jumped to 3/4 of marriages ending in divorce. In the Czech Republic, the divorce rate is about 50% and marriages last an average of 14 years. Spain was one of the latest European countries to introduce a divorce law – in 1980. According to a report by the Institute for Family Policy, with more than 141,817 divorces in 2006, Spain has become the country with the highest divorce rate in the European Union.

Data on divorce rates for civil unions between same-sex couples in European countries is rare. Processing this data, one should be aware, for example, that in Sweden about 62% of same-sex marriages involve male couples. According to a report of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy ([IMAPP](#)) and based on data from 2004, divorce rates among same-sex couples are very high as well. Gay male couples were 50% more likely to divorce within an 8-year period than were heterosexuals. Lesbian couples were 167% more likely to divorce than heterosexual couples. According to statistics released by the Dutch Government in 2005, the divorce rate of gay and lesbians couples in the Netherlands is nearly identical to that of heterosexual couples.

The concept of romance and romantic love seems to be less bonding than economic reasons. Therefore, the average duration of relationships is decreasing. People do not necessarily change the shape of their relationship but keep a series of socially monogamous relationships. The tradition of monogamous couples as the dominant type of partnership has an impact on how lesbians create and wish to live their relationships. Since no other types of partnership are promoted and legally accepted, LGBT organisations' foremost demand is for equal rights in recognizing and enacting civil unions for same-sex couples. But some LGBT organizations and political parties are still fighting for the legal acknowledgement of other types of partnerships, which for example could involve more than two people or elective affinities.

2.1 Hopes and wishes onto partner

Being part of a couple is socially more accepted and valued than being single.

In social and economic monogamous relationships, the partners have to fulfil most of the social, emotional, sexual and economical needs. Alongside the traditional concept of *monogamy*, *homophobia* plays an important part in how lesbians arrange their partnerships. Many lesbians are still "in the closet" and their partnerships seem to be the only place for self-realization. At the same time, some lesbians see a necessity to keep their partnerships secret. But even "outed" couples experience their partnerships as a place of shelter from homophobic attacks, as a place where they feel safe and free. Another impact on the arrangement of lesbian partnerships may be *gender-specific expectations* of the partner. Women are perceived as caring, loving and altruistic. Women share the same ideas about other women – even though they might reject them for themselves. Further, the presumed same gender-based socialisation is regarded as an aspect of closeness. Thus, some lesbians expect their partners to be 'giving', caring and highly empathic because they have the same socialisation. Differences are blocked out in order to maintain closeness. High expectations and needs may lead to frustration and anger since they will not be fulfilled. Conflicts may increase so as to restore closeness.

Violence may occur if differences aren't accepted or anxieties aren't quelled and closeness is not restored. Finally, the partner will be destroyed either symbolically or physically. The fear of losing either the partner or the partnership and the prospect of being single may hinder the decision to leave a violent partner.

2.2 Intimacy

As described in the introduction to this chapter, dyadic partnerships are embedded in a social system that imposes norms upon them and a couple only has limited scope to reject adoption of these norms. But partners, as individuals and as a couple, also develop specific “rules” within the partnership (intrinsic rules) aimed at strengthening the partnership. As well as producing a clear distinction between the couple (us) and society/others (them), these intrinsic ‘rules’ are also used as a “valorisation of uniqueness” of the couple. They are based on individual expectations of a relationship, such as the place of each member, individuation and separation, autonomy and dependency and modalities of distance and closeness.

Intimacy is linked with closeness, individuation and separation, autonomy and dependency. It means emotional closeness, requiring empathy for the other. According to Wikipedia, the free internet encyclopaedia, [intimacy](#) is “both the ability and the choice to be close, loving and vulnerable.” Intimacy means sharing oneself with one another. The inability to differentiate oneself from the other is a form of symbiosis. Same-sex partnerships and especially lesbian couples seem to be at higher risk of symbiosis than heterosexual couples due to the obvious fact of sharing the same sex. Since ‘gender’ is based on sex, one member of the couple may presume that her partner shares the same socialisation, experiences menses in similar ways and is also exposed to a sexist and hetero-normative society. Further, gender-specific expectations of partners may also play an important role, since women share societal norms of femaleness and consequently expect a certain ‘female’ character and behaviour.

Plurality and differences between women based on, e.g. ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, religion, etc. are blocked out or even disowned. According to feminist theory, mainly of last century, sex and gender are the crux of society’s hierarchal organisation. For a long time women were seen as ‘collective subjects’ sharing oppression based on sex and gender. This, on the other hand led to self-perception of a collective ‘we’. By the 90s of last century, this self-perception was questioned by some feminists because it usually meant “white, middle-class women without disabilities”. Especially the black women’s movement of United States demanded new perspectives taking into account the plurality of women’s living conditions. This also had an impact on European feminist movements.

A self-perception of women as collective subjects and a visible biological sameness may support crossing the boundary between intimacy and symbiosis in lesbian relationships. If the couple is not able to learn to accept and appreciate differences (at least up to a certain degree), symbiosis may be a well of disappointment, anger and finally violence. Additionally, disappointment about unfulfilled gender-based expectations of the partner, like caring, altruistic behaviour may contribute to a violent dynamic.