

[vice.com](https://www.vice.com)

What Is 'Radical Monogamy'?

Simon Doherty

7–9 minutes

Photo: Gender Spectrum Collection

There's a pretty high chance you haven't yet heard of "radical monogamy". Before writing this piece, I asked around to see if anyone knew of the term. The most common response was: WTF is that?

Though it has been written about before, most notably by [Gabrielle Kassel for Well+Good](#) a couple of years back and more recently by [Chal Ravens for Novara](#) (she doesn't actually use the expression "radical monogamy"), the concept hasn't yet permeated the mainstream outside of [Twitter arguments](#). This could partly be because it sounds like the kind of thing some guy with a sun tattoo might painstakingly explain [at an afters](#). Monogamy is the building block of [traditional cis het relationships](#), after all – unless you're in a queer relationship in an anti-queer country for example, what the hell's so radical about monogamy?

But, look – it's a thing now. One of radical monogamy's most prominent advocates is Boston-based [Robyn Ochs](#), an educator, speaker and grassroots activist who edits [Bi Women Quarterly](#). Ochs says her own journey towards embracing radical monogamy

involved a lot of self-scrutiny and questioning the cis het status quo. To explain the concept, she draws a contrast between “reflexive monogamy” – blindly accepting that it is somehow morally superior to have just one sexual partner – and the more informed and conscious choice of radical monogamy.

“From the day we're born, there's an overarching presumption that we'll grow up, fall in love with someone of the 'opposite' gender, get married and be monogamous,” Ochs explains. “As I grew and healed, I reached a place where it became clear to me that there is agency and power in questioning these cultural norms.”

After she had broken down this presumption enough to realise that “monogamy is not categorically superior to [polyamory](#)”, Ochs tried to “shut out the cultural noise around what type of relationship I *should* want, and ask myself instead, what I *do* want.” In other words: Monogamy can be a choice you arrive at – after considering your own agency and options – rather than a blind expectation.

Ochs says that “monogamy is the relationship configuration that works best for me,” but says she “arrived at that conclusion through a very different route than before.”

Radical monogamy is just the name Ochs gave to this process and conclusion. “To be honest, I have no idea whether I coined that term or whether other people did too. I don't think it really matters,” she says.

Brooklyn-based author and speaker Jericho Vincent also uses the term radical monogamy. They practise it with their husband and teach it as “a form of intimate relationship”, but say they weren't aware of anyone else using the expression before I got in touch.

For Vincent, it's a progressive alternative to the "old monogamy of our parents and grandparents [that] doesn't really work today." The latter doesn't work, they believe, "because it is often predicated on heteronormativity and misogyny and very frequently breeds boredom, disloyalty and stagnation."

Vincent's description of radical monogamy might sound appealing because it acknowledges that monogamy can feel restrictive – especially if you're a queer person who views traditional heteronormative systems with suspicion. But it also doesn't mean you have to abandon monogamy completely just because of its limits.

"Radical monogamy works for me because I've always wanted a gigantic love. I wanted to be one person's joy and delight and I wanted them to be mine," they say. "Then I grew up and I was told that was ridiculous, unrealistic and unhealthy, so I gave up on monogamy and practised polyamory. But now I've come around to believing that all those other people's messages were wrong. If approached with intentionality, effort and a willingness to grow, it is possible to have a love that's big and magical."

It's easy to say words like "effort and intentionality" – but what does that actually entail? And how is it any different to simply trying to make a relationship work? "If I'm bored and hungry for something new or dissatisfied with some element of my partner, instead of seeking to meet those needs in other intimate relationships, I face these issues and hold myself and my partner responsible for keeping our relationship vital and exciting for both of us," Vincent explains.

Radical monogamy isn't supposed to be easy, they add, but the

effort involved is simply part and parcel of getting to know someone on a deeper level. "Intimate relationships can trigger childhood trauma," Vincent says. "Radical monogamy creates a container of profound safety that allows me to face the trauma that I carry and to do the challenging work of healing that trauma."

Emilie Lavinia, a freelance journalist and health academic from London, thinks of radical monogamy in a similar way to Ochs. For Lavinia, it isn't so much "radical" as "a conscious choice made when a person is armed with all the facts".

Like many of us, Lavinia spent years clinging to the ideal that a monogamous relationship somehow has more value – we were all raised with fairytales and films about [soulmates and one true loves](#). Once she chipped away at this tenet of heteronormativity, she realised we shouldn't be too "prescriptive" about what constitutes a "healthy relationship." It's simply the one that makes you feel nourished.

"For me, radical monogamy is having experienced many types of relationships, understanding what works for me and choosing to be in a monogamous relationship," she says. "I know that monogamy and non-monogamy both work for me – but I don't feel any kind of shame or pressure about choosing either."

So, without wishing to sound too Carrie Bradshaw, can radical monogamy ever become a widespread term and practice?

[Zachary Zane](#), sex columnist and sex expert for [P.S. Condoms](#), believes everyone should be at least thinking about it; the important thing isn't the conclusion you arrive at, but the process of self-interrogation.

He also points out that monogamy needn't feel stifling, saying:

“You don't have to live with your partner [and] you don't have to spend every waking moment with them. You can have other fulfilling relationships in your life. This one partner doesn't need to fulfil all your needs even though you're monogamous.”

Vincent says they hope radical monogamy will grow in popularity and believes we shouldn't fall into the trap of [presuming polyamory](#) is the only “enlightened and progressive” relationship choice.

There are more ways to approach relationships than [having loads of partners](#) or marrying someone by 30 because that's what society says we “should” do.

“Some people really [do want monogamy](#),” Vincent says. “I think that's a healthy desire and I hope that for those who want it, radical monogamy will offer a totally new portal to a joyful, healthy, magical kind of love.”

[@mrnicklevine](#)

ORIGINAL REPORTING ON EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS IN YOUR INBOX.

By signing up, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#) & to receive electronic communications from Vice Media Group, which may include marketing promotions, advertisements and sponsored content.