



# Symbiosexuality: A Review of Discourses of Attraction to the “Third Force” Created by People in Relationships

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## Abstract

Symbiosexuality, the individual experience of attraction to people in relationships, has not been examined as a lived experience. Lack of recognition and examination of symbiosexuality is surprising when one considers studies of romantic and sexual desires and behaviors associated with more than two people. Also evident in the existence of the sexual identity label known as the unicorn and easily found in essays, memoirs, and dating apps, this attraction proves salient. Further, we find evidence of symbiosexuality outside Western discourses on desire and sexuality. Dominant conceptions and assumptions about sexuality and desire including mononormativity, respectability politics within polyamorous communities, and current conceptions of desire within western discourse contribute to symbiosexual invisibility. This invisibility harms several sexual minority groups, especially women and gender minorities within these groups. The purpose of this review is to describe and provide evidence of the phenomenon of symbiosexuality. Through a queer-feminist lens, I argue that recognition of symbiosexuality will fill a knowledge gap in the field of sexuality studies on the nature and shape of human sexual attractions and may be validating and/or empowering to those experiencing these types of attractions.

**Keywords** Symbiosexual · Unicorn · Non-monogamy · Sexual configurations theory · Sexual attraction · Polyamory

## Introduction

In a recent essay in *Vanity Fair*, Caroline Giuliani (2021) writes about exploring her sexuality through her experiences with dating couples. Giuliani describes herself as a unicorn, a term for a person who engages in sexual and romantic dynamics with couples (Johnston, 2022). She explains,

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I'm not sure if Aristotle was a unicorn, but the whole is definitely greater than the sum of a couple's parts. A unicorn not only dates the individuals, but also dates the relationship. This third force to flirt with is undoubtedly the most interesting one (p. 1).

Giuliani's description of her heightened interest in this third force seems to allude to something important about her sexuality and to the nature of sexual attraction.

The proliferation of labels in Western conceptions of sexual orientation beyond homosexual and heterosexual in the twenty-first century opened space for, and increased the visibility of, a range of erotic possibilities. As social and academic discourses embrace the existence of multiple, multidimensional, and fluid orientations of desire, binary assumptions about sexual attraction and orientation soften (Diamond, 2008, 2016; Jordan-Young, 2010; Van Anders, 2015). Increasingly hard to ignore in modern sexual behaviors and relationship practices, such as threesomes and three-person relationships, is the experience of attraction to relationships between people.

Until recently, this attraction lacked a term in academic discourse. Johnston and Schoenfeld (2021) coined the term *symbiosexuality* to describe the individual experience of sexual and/or romantic attraction to people in relationships. Pairing the root word *symbio*, from the Greek word symbiosis, meaning the shared relationship between living things, with *sexual* to mean an experience of attraction to the relationship and energy shared between beings, Johnston & Schoenfeld argued that some people experience a unique and specific attraction to the relationship and energy shared between people. While these sexuality scholars suggest that this experience of attraction, felt by an individual, is directed towards couples (two people in a romantic relationship), it is also possible that it may be directed towards other relationship configurations (such as three-person relationships or larger-group relationships). Distinct from just a willingness or openness to engage in multi-person sex with couples (such as threesomes) and distinct from an attraction to multiple genders (such as bisexuality), the phenomenon of symbiosexuality, as attraction to multiple people in relationship, remains largely unexplored. Investigating symbiosexuality, and the factors contributing to its invisibility, will fill a gap in the knowledge in the field of sexuality studies on the nature and shape of human sexual attractions and may validate and/or empower those who experience these attractions.

When we consider studies of romantic and sexual desires and behaviors associated with multiple people, including studies of threesomes (Lehmiller, 2018; Scoats, 2020) and three-person relationships (e.g., triads/throuples) (Sheff, 2014), the lack of recognition for symbiosexual attraction remains surprising. We also find evidence of this attraction in a recent memoir on bisexuality (Winston, 2021), evidence in the dating app *FEELD*, which is designed for group dating experiences, including individuals seeking couples (FEELD, 2022a), and evidence in the existence of the mainstream sexual identity label known as the unicorn (Giuliani, 2021; Johnston, 2022). While there is little data to date on the demographics of unicorns, the term is most frequently used to describe a bi- and pan-sexual woman open to engaging in sexual/romantic dynamics with established couples (Johnston, 2022; Moss, 2021). This identity label references a willingness and not necessarily an attraction but for

some the label likely overlaps with symbiosexual desires. Further, we find evidence of sexualities akin to symbiosexuality outside modern Western discourses on desire and sexuality (Antrim, 2020; Nelson, 2017; TallBear, 2018). For example, Antrim (2020) describes scenes in ancient Middle Eastern folktales of people who experience admiration and desire for couples and who participate in stoking the desire and connection between couples.

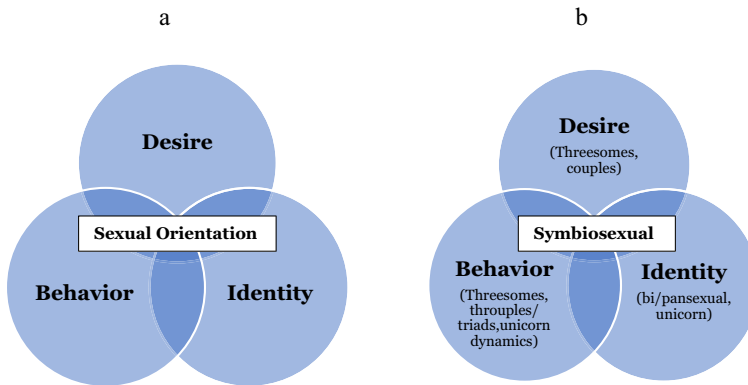
Dominant conceptions and assumptions about sexuality and desire may be contributing to the invisibility of symbiosexuality. First and foremost, mononormativity, the cultural valuing of monogamy and the assumption of twoness in relationships and desire (Pieper & Bauer, 2005), contributes to symbiosexual invisibility. Second, respectability politics within polyamorous communities where polyamorous people seek to distance themselves from a reputation of deviant or “unethical” sex and relationship dynamics contributes to symbiosexual invisibility and discrimination (Ferrer, 2018; Johnston, 2022; Montali et al., 2023). Third, current conceptions of the boundaries of desire and orientation within queer discourse (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2020) systematically ignore or—in some instances—directly discount or discredit symbiosexual desire and attraction.

Invisibility and discrimination of symbiosexuality harms several sexual minority groups and is uniquely harmful to women and gender minorities within these groups. Those specifically impacted include women and gender minorities who may identify as unicorns because of their attraction to couples and seek validation and a possibly less objectified label (Johnston, 2022). Also impacted are queer women and gender minorities who only experience attractions and desires directed toward single people and wish to state this, so they are not relentlessly sought out and/or harassed on dating apps by heterosexual couples (“unicorn hunters”), who assume that they exist to serve the fantasies and needs of the male member of the couple and reaffirm hegemonic masculinity (Johnston, 2022; Ward, 2020). Finally, symbiosexual invisibility impacts those who have had experiences with attraction to people in relationships but have not received recognition or validation for the experience or possibly have not consciously recognized their experience as one of attraction (Hayfield, 2021; Rosenkrantz & Mark, 2018).

The purpose of this review is to explore the question, what is symbiosexuality? Through a queer-feminist lens, I use Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT) and a multidimensional model of sexual orientation (Jordan-Young, 2010; Van Anders, 2015) to conceptualize and provide evidence of symbiosexuality as lived experience of sexuality. I also consider the sociocultural factors that may be contributing to symbiosexual invisibility.

## Symbiosexuality and Theory

Researchers conceptualize Western theories of desire and attraction through models of sexual orientation. These models offer a starting point for examining symbiosexuality. Current theoretical frameworks of sexual orientation leave space for desires and attractions not currently captured by available terms (asexual, bisexual, pansexual, sapiosexual, etc.). Jordan-Young (2010) defines sexual orientation as comprised of

*Multidimensional Model of Sexual Orientation (Jordan-Young, 2010)*

**Fig. 1** Multidimensional Model of Sexual Orientation (Jordan-Young, 2010)

three dimensions: sexual desires, sexual behaviors, and chosen identity labels. Citing Laumann et al., (1994) large-scale survey study, which presented findings that people reported sexual desires and behaviors that aligned only to a certain extent with their chosen sexual identity labels, Jordan-Young (2010) presents a multidimensional model to conceptualize sexual orientation which highlights how available identity labels neither encompass all of or necessarily function as more important than a person's sexual behaviors and desires when attempting to understand their sexual preferences. Using Laumann et al., (1994) Venn Diagram, which depicted percentages of overlap, as well as distance between a person's sexual desires, sexual behaviors, and their chosen sexual identity label, Jordan-Young (2010) proposes a Venn Diagram of these three factors to conceptualize sexual orientation (see Fig. 1a).

Conceptualizing sexual orientation in this way honors the complex nature of a person's sexuality and addresses the possibility that available identity labels may not just be overly simplistic in describing orientation, they may fail to capture dominant or recurring desires and behaviors comprising a person's sexuality.

Jordan-Young's (2010) multidimensional model is sufficient for considering and measuring the phenomenon of attraction to people in relationships as a potentially significant lived experience not captured by available identity labels. However, a person's sexuality may include a broad range of attractions, desires, fantasies, and behaviors they may not consider relevant to their sexuality (Kuperberg & Walker, 2018; Walker, 2014). These experiences are not necessarily captured in Jordan-Young's model. Van Anders' (2015) Sexual Configuration Theory (SCT) addresses parameters of sexuality that may be missed in Jordan-Young's conception of sexual orientation. Like Jordan-Young (2010), Van Anders (2015) contends desires, behavior, and identity should be considered as related but distinct phenomena comprising one's sexual orientation. However, Van Anders further proposes considering and validating other information about sexuality in the SCT framework, such as experiences with partnered vs solo sexuality and partner number, for addressing the complexity of a person's sexuality. Theories of sexuality must consider rich descriptions of lived experiences of sexuality

(Rubin, 1984). Van Anders' (2015) model appropriately recognizes erased, invisible, and "minority" sexualities exist as a product of culture, and thus, must be measured as such.

Sexual Configurations Theory provides the most useful framework for queer feminist investigation of an unstudied sexuality because it offers a lens of sexual diversity that challenges the current hierarchy of factors considered most relevant to one's sexuality. Further, SCT denaturalizes the distinctions between "majority" and "minority" sexualities by addressing the truth of complexity in all sexual and intimate lives. SCT addresses misalignment of sexual orientation labels and attractions not as evidence of confusion or uncertainty, but as evidence of this complexity. However, Van Anders (2015) also stresses that "felt-alignment" (p. 1200) may be a governing experience for how one comes to understand and label their sexuality. Finally, SCT recognizes the importance of labels, as they give us language to speak about specific sexual configurations and the complexity of the human experience.

Using the SCT framework (Van Ander, 2015) and Jordan-Young's (2010) multidimensional model of sexual orientation, I investigate symbiosexuality as a phenomenon describing a lived experience of sexuality. While not directly named, SCT makes space for the notion of symbiosexuality as a multi-person, multidirectional experience of desire. SCT is grounded in literature on diverse sexualities, including the literature on nonmonogamies (primarily polyamory). Van Anders (2015) explicitly highlights partner number, including the preference for more than one concurrent partner, as a component of a person's sexuality. She even makes the argument that partner number may better inform and precede gender/sex preference as a parameter of one's sexuality. Unlike attractions to individual persons, Van Anders explains that attractions to multiple persons may be thought about in a number of ways, including a preference for multiple partners simultaneously (i.e., threesomes). She asks about the relevance of temporality specifically and contemplates whether desire for multiple people in the same event is a distinct phenomenon from wanting multiple relationship partners concurrently, but not in the same event.

Using SCT and Jordan-Young's (2010) model, I conceptualize attraction to people in relationships as part of a person's sexuality. I define sexuality as a multidimensional concept including a person's chosen identity label, as well as their reported sexual and romantic desires and behaviors. Within the dimension of identity, use of the unicorn identity label or "misuse" of the pansexual and bisexual identity labels by people attempting to make sense of their desire for different gendered people in relationships may evidence symbiosexuality. Within the dimension of desire, desire for couples and/or desire for threesome experiences may reflect symbiosexual desires. Within the dimension of behavior, engaging in threesomes and non-monogamous sexual and relationship dynamics (including unicorn dynamics, threesomes, and throuples/triads) may describe symbiosexual behaviors (see Fig. 1b).

Whether symbiosexuality is recognized as a lived experience of sexuality, such desires and behaviors can be found locally (Lehmiller, 2018), globally (De Man & de Goade, 2020; Joyal et al., 2015), and across time (Antrim, 2020; TallBear, 2018). Discourses from more collectivistic, community-centric cultures (including Middle Eastern and Indigenous cultures) as well as discourses on the sexual identity known as the unicorn, threesomes, triads/throuples, and other consensually

non-monogamous relationship dynamics all evidence the phenomenon of symbiosexuality, but also curiously fail to label it as such. Language for this phenomenon needs more attention. In the following sections of this review, evidence of symbiosexuality is organized by its locations in the multidimensional Venn diagram of sexual orientation (Jordan-Young, 2010), including sexual identity, desires, and behaviors. I present evidence of symbiosexuality as a lived experience that may be part of one's diverse sexual desires or preferences. Since this review is grounded in queer-feminist agenda of undoing sexual and relational hierarchy and promoting benign sexual variation (Rubin, 1984), I investigate symbiosexuality not only as a valid "minority" attraction label, but as a feature of one's sexuality worthy of attention as a lived experience.

## Evidence of Symbiosexual Desires and Behaviors

Evidence of the phenomenon of symbiosexuality supports its existence as a lived experience. Within Jordan-Young's (2010) multidimensional model of identity, desire, and behavior, evidence of symbiosexuality, and its nature, can be found in discourses on the unicorn identity and digital and nonfiction evidence of symbiosexual desire. Descriptions of relationship-centered sexualities found outside modern Western discourses, in ancient Middle Eastern folktales and enduring Indigenous narratives, may also evidence and describe the nature of a phenomenon akin to symbiosexual desire. Finally, research on the prevalence and occurrence of threesomes and three-person relationships may be evidence of symbiosexual desire.

## Unicorn Identity and Symbiosexuality

Symbiosexuality is perhaps most evident and most directly dismissed within discourses on the sexual identity known as the unicorn. Women (and to a lesser extent other gender identities) who identify and/or who are identified as "unicorns" are increasingly visible on social media, in news and pop-culture media sources (FEELD, n.d.; Giuliani, 2021; Heiss, 2017) as well as online community websites for consensually non-monogamous (CNM) people (Johnston, 2022). A recent study of unicorn identity representations in a popular online CNM community found practitioners primarily define unicorns as individuals (often queer women) willing to enter sexual and/or romantic dynamics with established couples (Johnston, 2022). While there is no data to date on the demographics of unicorns, the reputation of unicorns is that they are "mythically rare" (Heiss, 2017; Johnston, 2022; Moss, 2021). Despite a reputation of rarity, discussions of unicorns and unicorn dynamics are prolific in non-monogamous discourses both online and in books on CNM. The amount of attention given to the unicorn identity in non-monogamous communities (including the swinging and polyamorous community) suggests whether felt as an experience of attraction or not, individuals exist who chose to enter sexual/romantic dynamics with couples (Johnston, 2022).

Some people who identify as unicorns may not be describing an attraction centering on a couple; they may only be describing a willingness to engage in sexual experiences with couples if they are attracted to each member of the couple individually. However, others may be using this label to describe a sexual attraction towards the couple as a unit. In her *Vanity Fair* essay, Giuliani (2021), a self-identified unicorn, shares her experiences dating couples whom she meets through *FEELD*, a dating app tailored to couples seeking a third partner to join their sexual and/or romantic relationships. On her dates, she talks about finding herself “seducing the connection between the partners more than either of them individually” (p. 1). In one instance, she recounts telling the male member of the couple how attractive she finds the energy between him and his partner. The energy she seems to be attracted to and is seducing is not that of the individual, but that of the couple, the chemistry and connection shared between them. Further, Giuliani (2021) seems to be more drawn to the chemistry and connection itself than to the individual people involved when she talks about how she is most interested in the “third force” of the relationship. This third force maybe be thought of as its own site of attraction.

Despite directly addressing her attraction to energies in her descriptions, Giuliani (2021) seems to struggle with how to describe her sexual identity. She explains through this “new-kind” of dating experience, she realizes she is attracted to people based on their “presence and energy, regardless of their biological sex, gender, or gender identity” (p. 1) and this realization starts her on a path of identifying as pansexual. While Giuliani seems to have an accurate understanding—both of the definition of pansexual and of her desire towards energies—her use of the label pansexual ignores her rich descriptions of desiring and seducing the chemistry or “third force” between a couple. She recognizes her “heightened response to their energetic flow” (p. 1) but does not articulate this response as an attraction somewhat unique from pansexuality, which only describes an attraction to individual human beings regardless of their identity. Giuliani describes her sexual orientation in terms of how it relates to individual people, but her desires and behaviors are indicative of an attraction to something beyond, other than, or in addition to, attraction to individuals’ energies. Her chosen identity label, pansexual, may therefore be limited—perhaps even directed—by the sexual identity categories available to her.

Conceptualization of sexual orientation as a Venn diagram of desire, behavior, and identity is easily mapped onto Giuliani’s (2021) descriptions of her sexuality. Before landing on the label pansexual, Giuliani initially describes herself as “at-least bisexual” because “threesomes were at the center of a personal Venn diagram” (p. 1). While Giuliani was not likely referencing Jordan-Young’s (2010) model of sexual orientation, her use of the term reflects an orientation experience of choosing an identity label that both partially overlaps with her sexual behavior choices (sex with couples may certainly fit a bisexual or pansexual profile) as well as somewhat misaligns (prioritizing and preferring sex with couples over other kinds of sex is not fully captured by nor required by the term bisexual or pansexual). In Giuliani’s case, this misalignment represents the distance between the meaning of the term pansexual and the meaning she assigns to her choice to primarily engage in threesomes. If she locates threesomes with couples at the center of her sexuality, then she describes



a preference not addressed by the term pansexual. She instead describes symbiosexual desire and behavior.

### Digital Evidence of Symbiosexuality

Digital evidence of symbiosexuality can be traced through the dating app *FEELD*. Initially designed for alternative dating and sexual experiences and specifically for three-person dating and sexual experiences, *FEELD* (previously called *3nder*) appeals to individuals seeking couples and vice versa (*FEELD*, 2022a, b). Recent posts on *FEELD*'s *Instagram* page include posts on threesomes, orgies, throuples, unicorns, couple's privilege, and quotes and tips from and for people seeking to date and have sex with couples (*FEELD*, n. d.). While *FEELD* validates and makes space for individuals who desire and engage in sex and dating with couples, without a less objectified label to describe this desire and practice, the app relies on the term "unicorn" for these individuals. App users frequently identify their sexual orientation (bisexual, pansexual, queer, etc.) and then use the unicorn emoji on their profile page to indicate a desire to engage sexual dynamics with couples. As such, this desire is treated as an addition or appendage to one's sexuality instead of another part—or even a central part—of one's sexuality.

### Symbiosexuality in Nonfiction

We also find evidence of symbiosexuality in the recent memoir, *Greedy*, by Jen Winston (2021). Winston, a self-identified bisexual, who describes experiences of confusion about her sexual identity label, includes an entire chapter in her book about her desire for and fixation on sexual and romantic dynamics with couples. In the chapter called "Crush on a Couple," Winston talks about her obsession with and pursuit of threesomes with couples. She explains how it took her time to recognize this desire as something outside of straight culture; a desire she describes as "inherently queer" (p. 93). She specifically describes her experience of desire for one couple, whom she met on *FEELD*. She recounts this couple as "radiant" and "glowing" (p. 99), with "sparkling eyes, [and] a bounce in their step" (p. 100). "You're incredible" she says to "neither one in particular" (p. 101). Clearly drawn to the couple as a unit, Winston struggles to explain her desire. She asks if such a desire was "even allowed?" (p. 100). She directly states, "I'd fallen for both of them, not as individuals but as a unit, attracted to their sparks, their honesty, and the strength of their bond" (p. 102). While Winston makes do with available sexual identity labels—including bisexual and polyamorous—to describe her experience, her account in this chapter is clearly one of symbiosexual desire and attraction.

### Symbiosexuality in Ancient Middle Eastern Discourses

We also find descriptions of relationship-centered sexualities outside modern Western discourses. These descriptions offer conceptions of desire that may capture the nature of symbiosexuality. Examining embodiments of desire in Middle Eastern



folktales, Antrim (2020) gives examples of how in several stories of *1001 Nights* (in Arabic: *Alf layla wa-layla*) “third parties act as go-betweens for or witness to a well-matched pair, resulting in a triangulation of desire” (p. 18). Antrim provides examples of stories from *1001 Nights* in which a third person expresses being overcome with admiration for the beauty or desirability of a couple. In one story analyzed by Antrim, a male merchant describes watching a couple reciting poetry to each other and exclaims “I have never before seen two people more beautiful than the two of them, as I have never before them seen a sun embrace a moon” (pp. 18–19). Here, the merchant is expressing desire and admiration for the couple, the togetherness of them, and the unique, heightened beauty that can exist when two beings together become the object of desire. In another story, a third person acts not just as an admirer, but as a player in a couple’s dynamics. Similar to Giuliani’s (2021) description of seducing the energy between couples, the woman in this story stokes the desire and romance between a couple by encouraging the man to see the beauty of the woman and encouraging the woman to see the devotion of the man. She also encourages them both to see the attributes of beauty and devotion as part of the desirability of their coupledness, its own entity.

Antrim (2020) believes “[s]uch scenes of witnessing, enabling, and enacting may have presented an opportunity for audiences outside the text to imagine themselves within the story” (p. 19). She goes on to suggest the possibility this triangulation might facilitate readers’ ability to fantasize about new erotic possibilities for themselves. While Antrim is able to recognize value in the position of a third party in erotic dynamics for readers, she relegates this position to one that offers possibility for movement between the eroticized bodies of each member of the couple. She fails to consider the possibility that readers may identify with the third parties: a person who desires and admires couples; a person who experiences symbiosexual desire.

### Relationship-Centered Sexualities in Indigenous Stories

We also find descriptions of relationship-centered sexualities that may capture the nature of symbiosexuality in Indigenous history and narratives, which both preceded and persevered through colonization. Before colonization, the primary social unit on the American continent was not the monogamous couple and nuclear family; rather, ethics of community, kinship, and interconnectedness produced a different social unit. Indigenous communities were organized by extended kin groups, which included plural marriages (TallBear, 2018). Native Hawaiians specifically used a term within their communities for romantic/sexual relationship structures including three people: *punalua*. *Punalua* described situations where “two men were with the same woman, or two women were with the same man” (Kauanui, 2017, p. 49) and also likely included relations involving three men or three women (Kauanui, 2017). While it remains unknown whether symbiosexual desire inspired this relationship structure, evidence of three person relationships in Indigenous culture makes space for this possibility.

As testimony, we find evidence of more complex, multi-directional experiences of sexual desire within these more elaborate/interconnected systems of relating in

native stories that describe the nature of sexuality in Indigenous cultures. Kim TallBear (2018) offers an example of such conceptions in her exploration of accounts of the *moreakamem*. The existence of *moreakamem*, Indigenous healers who experience reciprocity with all living things, symbolize a sexuality interconnected with energies and spirituality. The *moreakamem* embody reciprocal exchanges of energy and power occurring both between humans and between humans and non-humans (TallBear, 2018). Not an individual, directional desire, this type of sexuality is driven by work and balance in community. *Moreakamem* work to restore energy and balance in the relation of all things (TallBear, 2018).

*Moreakamem* sexuality embodies a force and drive that lacks need for desire and objectification of a single “other” in a relationship. TallBear’s descriptions of *moreakamem* evokes a sexuality informed by intersubjectivity (an awareness of interconnectedness and interdependence) and decenters objectivity. In turn, relations do not become hard objects. Lines and linear connections remain in these descriptions but are made less important as they represent only a small part of a greater web or system of relations. According to TallBear, understanding *moreakamem* relationality in community (instead of in coupledness) helps us to understand their sexuality (and ours too) as a form of reciprocity and power exchange. As such, “[w]e can begin to unthread it from an object like ‘gay’ or ‘straight’ that is ‘constituted once and unchanging’” (TallBear, 2018, p. 160). Instead, desire is “reconstituted over and over based on the intersubjective dynamism of two or more persons” (p. 160). We can trace and recognize symbiosexual desire in this intersubjective dynamic.

The Trickster serves as another example of expanded, alternate conceptions of sexual desire found in Indigenous oral literature offering space for considering symbiosexuality. In Indigenous cultures, the Trickster can embody multiple genders and sexualities and operate as a shapeshifter to attend to varied and voracious sexual desires (Nelson, 2017). While fictional, traditional cultural narratives greatly value the Trickster’s sexual nature: boundaryless, fluid, and spiritual. The Trickster is considered sacred and reflects an expansive “Indigenous eco-erotic repertoire” (Nelson, 2017, p. 240). Discourses of the Trickster combined with the reverence given to the role offer a very different conceptualization of the shape, nature, and possibilities of sexual desire and orientation. The Trickster represents a desire not centered on one human object. It is a desire that both is and wants multiple beings. The Trickster’s desire is motivated by connection to kinship and the earth, a wanting that is steeped in reciprocity and interconnectedness. Like the existence of the *moreakamem*, cultural valuing of the Trickster troubles subject-object sexual desires and offers a different way of thinking about desire as *temporally* multi-directional, motivated by restoration of relationships between all beings, and ever-changing, fluid, and unfixed. Symbiosexuality as a temporal experience of multidirectional and/or relationship-oriented desire is made possible through these figures.

Perhaps most recognizable as something akin to symbiosexuality in Indigenous stories, we find descriptions of “sexual” experiences between humans and relationships (kinship). The narratives explored by Nelson (2017) specifically portray women as mediators (seducers) of kinship through their sexuality. They represent a capacity to fall in love with things beyond or other than another human, as well as a fluidity and responsiveness to relationship shifts. Devotion to the restoration and

enhancement of relationship, harmony, connection, and balance describes a different, broader conception of sexual desire, one that has received academic attention in recent years. Referencing Lisa Diamond's (2008) studies of the nature of women's sexual desire, Nelson (2017) draws connection to feminine sexualities that are more fluid as well as more "context dependent" (p. 250) than person dependent. Nelson's (2017) descriptions of desire and connections to Diamond's (2008) research are inclusive and descriptive of symbiosexuality and may indicate gender differences exist in the experiences of symbiosexual desire and behavior. If such differences exist however, it is important to note these differences may be a product of socialization through cultural narratives, rather than innate. For example, recent studies found men experience sexual fluidity in ways similar to women (Anderson & Robinson, 2016; Katz-Wise, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2017) but social narratives about masculinity and associated belief systems may be operating to obscure the visibility of sexual fluidity in men (Grave et al., 2023; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2015).

### Threesomes Research

Just as evidence of three-person sexual and romantic dynamics in Indigenous cultures makes space for the possibility of symbiosexual desire, academic research on threesomes (three-person sexual encounters) offers evidence of symbiosexuality. While the majority of studies both in the previous decade and currently on threesomes and group sex studied and framed three-person sexual behavior as a taboo activity that increases sexual health risk (Chollier et al., 2023; Constantinou et al., 2022; Currin et al., 2016; Grov et al., 2013; Schick et al., 2015), some recent studies examine threesomes as legitimate sexual fantasy, desire, and practice (Herbenick et al., 2017, 2021; Joyal et al., 2015; Lehmler, 2018; Scoats, 2020; Thompson & Byers, 2017, 2021; Thompson et al., 2021, 2022). In a nationally representative sample of US adults, 10% of women and 18% of men report engaging in a threesome (Herbenick et al., 2017). Further, in a large-scale survey funded by the Kinsey Institute of over 4,000 participants, which asked about sexual desires and fantasies, participants reported threesomes as their number one most common fantasy (Lehmler, 2018). While not generalizable, the study included diverse participants from all 50 states. Over 1/3 of participants listed multi-partner sex (most used the term threesome specifically) as their number one fantasy of all time. The percentage of people in the U.S. who reported ever experiencing desire for a threesome was staggering: 95% of men and 87% of women (Lehmler, 2018). Recent studies have also found threesomes a very common desire in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Canada (De Man & de Goade, 2020; Joyal et al., 2015). Threesomes also consistently serve as one of top searched terms on Porn Hub (Porn Hub 2022 Year in Review, n. d.). Further, the threesome category continues to grow in popularity. In 2022, viewership of the threesome category increased by 34% worldwide (Porn Hub 2022 Year in Review, n. d.).

With so much interest in three-person sex in the US and around the world, it is reasonable to assume that for some people the desire to engage in threesomes and threesome behaviors indicates an attraction or preference towards sexual

dynamics with couples. Joyal et al., (2015) survey of 1516 Canadian fantasies specifically inquired about people's desire to have sex with couples whom they knew, 18% of women and 42% of men reported that fantasy. In another recent survey of interests, attitudes, and experiences with threesomes in young heterosexually-identified adults, researchers specifically asked, "How interested would you be in being the third person in a romantic couple's threesome, if the couple are your close friends (future contact with them)?" (Thompson & Byers, 2017). While this question was designed to assess differences in interest based on familiarity, it also taps into a potential interest in symbiosexual dynamics. Both male and female respondents indicated a preference to know the couple with whom they have a threesome. Thompson and Byers (2017) speculate this may be explained by a desire for comfort of the familiar and a desire to avoid the stigma of casual sex, but it may also be explained by experiences of desire and attraction to couples with whom respondents have had relationships. Threesomes may be inform or be inspired by these experiences of desire.

Non-monogamous sex is also reported in the top five of sexual fantasies in the US (Lehmiller, 2018). While non-monogamous sexual fantasies usually include only two people, Lehmiller specifies that for some this fantasy is about multi-partner experiences, which includes three-person sex scenarios. Specifically, Lehmiller finds within this fantasy category, 58% of men and 33% of women reported interest in a dynamic where they watch sex between their partner and another person (sometimes called cuckholding or triolism). Lehmiller suggests that popularity of triolism (three-person sex where one person remains peripheral to the act) provides evidence that it is not so much a paraphilia or solution to a sexual problem (latent homosexuality, sexual dysfunction, Oedipal complex, etc.), as it has been deemed in psychological discourses (Wernik, 1990). For some, the element of arousal in watching two people together in triolism dynamics may be explained by symbiosexual desire.

Lehmiller (2018) contends a desire for threesomes is primarily motivated by a desire for heightened sensory experiences or sensory overload, and a desire for triolism specifically may be explained by sexual expansion theory, which is the theory that humans have an innate need to expand their lives (and partnerships) to feel satisfaction. However, there is another possible explanation. The need to hoard partners and sensations may not serve as the motivation for some, high rates of reported desire for threesomes and multi-partnership relations may be indicative of an unrecognized sexuality. For some, desire for sex with people in relationships may be more accurately described as a primary sexual interest or attraction.

Two large qualitative studies have been conducted on threesomes. Both provide more qualitative evidence of symbiosexuality. Karlen's (1988) foundational study included data from hundreds of interviews and found many participants described experiencing something unique and magical about threesomes. By far the most popular dynamic discussed in Karlen's data was scenarios with a couple and a third person. In addition to seeking greater feelings of freedom, power, or intimacy in threesome experiences, some people explained they were just primarily drawn to threesomes. Karlen describes one interviewee as "preoccupied" (p. 14) with the threesome dynamic because the participant explains threesomes are his preferred sexual activity and turn him on more than other kinds of sex. Another interviewee

talks about how she knows people who are “obsessed” (p. 90) with threesomes. Obsessions and preoccupations with certain sexual dynamics may be indicative of a valid sexual preference. It can be argued that a preoccupation with threesomes may describe a pervasive experience of symbiosexual attraction or even a primary orientation.

More recently, Scoats’ (2020) qualitative studies on threesomes, which added to the themes of freedom, power, and intimacy found in Karlen’s (1988) study, found primary motivations for threesomes include exploring one’s sexuality and “sexual altruism” (Scoats, 2020, p. 56). Symbiosexual desire can be located within these themes. Scoats’ description of sexual altruism centers a desire to seduce and support a couple and their relationship, similar to the description Giuliani (2021) provided in *Vanity Fair* of her desire to seduce a couple and the connection between them and the description Antrim (2020) provided of the woman in *1001 Nights* who stoked desire between a couple. Providing an example of sexual altruism, Scoats (2020) includes a quote from one interviewee who explains their desire for threesomes is about the enjoyment to be “in service of two people and facilitate their relationship growing and becoming bigger and better” (p. 47). Further, while Scoats includes the motivation to explore one’s sexuality through threesomes by potentially discovering attraction and desire for bodies and genders outside of one’s declared sexual orientation, this discovery may also include an awakening to the attraction and desire for more relational, dynamic experiences available through sex with people in relationships, a potential realization of symbiosexual preferences.

### Three-Person Relationships Research

In addition to the research on three-person sexual encounters, research on the visibility and popularity of three-person relationships (including triads, throuples, and polycules) supports the hypothesis of the existence of symbiosexuality. Three-person relationships fall under the umbrella of non-monogamous relationships, the most studied and celebrated form of which is polyamory, a term commonly used to describe a committed, non-monogamous relationship preference or as core identity for desiring multiple sexual and romantic connections (Klesse, 2006, 2014; Sheff, 2014). Roughly 1.5 million adults in the US identify as polyamorous (Rubel & Burleigh, 2020). Research on polyamorous people indicates three-person dynamics function as the most widely practiced version of polyamory (Sheff, 2014, 2022a, b), the formation of which typically begins with a single person joining an established couple (Sheff, 2022a, b). Debates about whether polyamory can (or should) be considered a sexual identity remain ongoing (Klesse, 2014) as do experiences of stigma through erasure of those who hold non-monogamous identities (Füllgrabe & Smith, 2023). Regardless of whether someone may claim polyamory as an identity, it can be argued for some people symbiosexual desire may serve as a primary gateway and motivator for choosing non-monogamous relationships.

## Symbiosexual Invisibility

Evidence of symbiosexuality provides clues to the mechanisms contributing to the invisibility of the experience. Findings indicate for people who experience this attraction, their desires are systematically ignored or discounted through sociocultural mechanisms including mononormativity, respectability politics within polyamorous communities, and current conceptions of the boundaries of desire and orientation within queer discourse.

## Mononormativity

The mononormative assumption of the twoness of desire and relationships contributes to symbiosexual invisibility. Broader cultural stigma of threesomes and three-person relationships as deviant or abnormal can in part be explained by mononormativity. Even those in academia attempting to legitimize threesomes and three-person relationships as a valid practice struggle to think beyond sexual identities describing one-to-one desire. In the two large qualitative studies conducted on threesomes, Karlen (1988) and Scoats (2020) relegate the desire and practice to part of one's larger sexual and/or relationship preference which does not center the desire for two. Both authors imply their research subjects' sexual identity (gay, bisexual, etc.) necessarily precedes and trumps their interest in threesomes. Scoats (2020) addresses the relationships between interest in threesomes and identity directly when he states, "having a threesomes does not necessarily indicate an identity" (p. 129). While Scoats likely means to suggest that one need not identify as non-monogamous, polyamorous, or bi/pansexual because they engage in threesomes, his conclusion both implies and overlooks the possibility that having threesomes could in fact be a component of one's sexual identity. If a person prefers threesomes above all other sexual practices because they experience desire towards twosomes or because this leads them to experience a desire towards twosomes, symbiosexual desire functions as a central component of their sexuality.

Further, those fighting the mononormative assumptions contributing to plurisexual marginalizations and erasure may inadvertently invalidate symbiosexual desire. For example, in Hayfield's (2021) extensive research on plurisexual identities, she argues that we wrongfully link the ontology of bisexuality to the ontology of the unicorn and as such do not take it seriously. While Hayfield is appropriately challenging the rare and mythical reputation of unicorns as an accurate portrayal of people with plurisexual desires, she fails to address the fact that there are plurisexual adults who do identify as unicorns because of a key component of their sexuality: a willingness to have sex with couples (Johnston, 2022). Hayfield's defense of bisexuality and the defense she offers her bisexual study participants implies (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that unicorn sexual identities and accompanying desires are not real. If people experience attraction to couples, but the only word available to describe this attraction or sexual preference ("unicorn") exists as a word synonymous with "not real" and functions as a phenomenon from which another

marginalized sexual identity (bisexuals) seek to distance itself, invalidation and misunderstanding is inevitable.

## Polyamory Respectability Politics

Activity within the polyamory community also contributes to symbiosexual invisibility and marginalization. People who identify as polyamorous, a minority relationship identity, often feel compelled to fight for rights, recognition, and validation within a culture strongly privileging monogamous relationships (Ferrer, 2018; Johnston, 2022). Polyamorous people attempt to fight mononormativity and manage their reputation by demonstrating ways they do not fit the stereotypes (e.g., reckless, hypersexual, shallow, and not able to commit to or honor romantic relationships) (Conley, et al., 2013; Ferrer, 2018; Hurtzler, et al., 2016). In turn, the reputation of the unicorn within the polyamorous community as a vulnerable, objectified, and emotionally unhealthy woman affirming hegemonic masculinity through receptivity to unicorn hunting (Johnston, 2022) is an identity from which polyamorous people seek to distance themselves. While a third person joining a couple is acknowledged as a common dynamic within the polyamorous community (Sheff, 2022a), there is much discussion of the validity and “health” of this choice and how it should not be considered part of polyamory (Johnston, 2022).

The issue of potential power imbalances remain central to the discourse on three-person dynamics, and specifically unicorn dynamics, within polyamory. The most widely circulated book on the topic of polyamory and non-monogamy, *The Ethical Slut* (Hardy & Easton, 2017), addresses triadic relationships and the important and difficult task of maintaining equitable power dynamics. The importance of balancing power in triadic dynamics functions as a primary topic in polyamorous therapeutic literature (Kauppi, 2021) and community forums (Johnston, 2022). People warn those interested in joining couples to be wary of “unicorn hunters” (Johnston, 2022; Kauppi, 2021), couple’s seeking a third person (typically a bisexual woman) to join them sexually, and sometimes romantically (Beggan, 2021; Johnston, 2022). A frequently used term “couple’s privilege” (Johnston, 2022, p. 8) describes the powerlessness a single person who joins a couple experiences.

The assumption and emphasis on equal power dynamics in three-person dynamics in polyamorous communities directly discounts a desire for dynamics with couples. Kean (2018) explains how polyamory practitioners distinguish triadic relationships from other multi-person dynamics; specifically, that they are branded as “equilateral,” balanced, and without hierarchies. These distinctions highlight how both the ethical profiles associated with polyamory and discrimination of the couple (and associated assumptions of couple’s privilege) erases three-person dynamics with power differences or visible couple dynamics within the triad. Those with symbiosexual desire may not desire erasure of the primacy of a couple within sexual/romantic dynamics or efforts towards equal distribution of power. Further, these efforts may actually reduce attraction, desire, and related access to pleasure.



Discounting of and discrimination against unicorn dynamics within the polyamorous community may make it difficult to examine the prevalence and lived experience of those who experience attraction to couples. People who inquire about dating and having sexual relationships with couples—and who may experience symbiosexual desire—are met with shame, hostility, and discouragement (Johnston, 2022). People specifically warn women they will be used and disrespected and deem their interest in sexual dynamics with couples as ignorant and/or dangerous (Johnston, 2022). People regard their feelings as wrong or consider them uneducated about non-monogamous relationships (Johnston, 2022).

## Current Conceptions of Desire and Orientation

Symbiosexual invisibility also reflects the current limits of the conception of desire and orientation within sexuality studies. Sexuality scholars expanded dominant conceptions of sexual orientation in scientific discourse of “having a direction” of attraction or desire towards specific persons (American Psychological Association, 2022) to address components of sexuality beyond one’s attraction to persons of a certain gender (i.e., heterosexual, gay, lesbian) or genders (i.e., bisexual, pansexual). These components include descriptive qualifiers addressing the nature of that direction (sexual vs romantic), the strength of that direction (i.e., lack of, or limited, sexual desire), and the consistency of that direction (fluid desires). These qualifiers troubled the concept of sexual orientation, broadening the spectrum of possibilities for the way a person thinks about and identifies their own sexuality to include not just queer, bisexual, and pansexual orientations (Ahmed, 2006; Hayfield, 2021), but asexual orientations (Bogaert, 2004, 2015), fluid orientations (Diamond, 2008), and even orientations to remaining outside the bounds of our current imaginations, such as an orientation to the wild (Halberstam, 2020). Despite the work of queer sexuality scholars to expand the concept of sexual orientation through these new terms and descriptions of human sexuality, the concept fails to address lived experiences of desire beyond single lines of attraction towards single objects, whether that line is straight, slanted, or “wonky” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 66).

The queering of sexual desire and orientation as a concept in both academic and social arena, remains astoundingly and literally “straight”: a line of attraction between one being and another. Conceptualizing sexual orientation in this way has left many experiences of sexual desire and attraction—including multi-directional, multi-object experiences of attraction—invisible or outside the bounds of available terms for sexual phenomena.

## Conclusion

The possibility of a heightened erotic power coming from an awareness and openness to multiple sources of pleasure, and even multiple people, at once is not new to sexuality discourse (Lorde, 1984; Vassi, 1976; Wade, 2004). In her book,

*Transcendent Sex*, research scholar Jenny Wade (2004) identifies a “third presence” or “field or force that seems to exist between two lovers and to arise from their mutuality”, the existence of which can create a transcendent sexual experience (p. 273). This third presence created by two people in a romantic or sexual encounter may also offer something enticing or transcendent to those that witness it. Supporting this idea of multi-person, preferable and/or transcendent experiences, erotic writer Marco Vassi (1976) directly challenges the assumption that there is something superior or more perfect in an erotic encounter of two people. In his book, *The Metalsex Manifesto*, Vassi contends that a sexual encounter of three people specifically is not just a mathematical addition of one but a unique—and potentially preferable and transcendent—experience of desire and sexuality for certain people. Vassi believes attending to more dimensions (shapes) of sexual desire and interactions can offer new possibilities for sexual experiences and understanding. Similarly, feminist philosopher Karen Barad (2012) challenges notions of the boundaries we use to define ourselves and others and contends we grossly oversimplify human touch and interaction as something directional and unentangled.

Some lesbian and queer theorists also embrace these entangled, complex ways of thinking about sexuality and contend humans capable of experiencing a broad sexual landscape of complex, deviating desires and unconventional orientations (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2020). However, while Sexual Configurations Theory specifically has made space for considering and theorizing simultaneous, multi-partner sexuality (Van Anders, 2015), the idea of *temporal*, multidirectional attractions as a “queer” human experience remains curiously unexamined by those pushing the boundaries of sexual orientation categories and binaries in sexuality research. In turn, symbiosexuality remains unrecognized in scientific arenas.

Embracing the concept of symbiosexuality may facilitate expansion of theoretical conceptualizations of sexual desire and orientation in the field of human sexuality. While the term can be explained within available frameworks of sexual orientation and desire (Jordan-Young, 2010; Van Anders, 2015), the nature of a symbiosexual desire may also reflect another more complex truth about sexuality. If we can accept that humans are capable of desiring multiple things and attending to multiple things at the same time, we must consider the possibility that this capacity may extend to sexual desires, just as it extends to sexual behaviors (i.e., threesomes, group sex, and orgies). Perhaps, for some individuals, combining desires that complement one another or attending to multiple desires simultaneously increases erotic energy and pleasure. Further, just as Middle Eastern, and Indigenous narratives of sexuality and desire offer different conceptions of desire, perhaps recognition of symbiosexual desire may facilitate both individual and academic perceptions of different shapes or qualities of desire and attraction.

In her interactions with couples, Giuliani (2021) recounts experiencing an energetic shift from a date with one person: “[e]nergetically, it’s ping-pong” (p. 1) to a date with two people, it’s “more like volleying a beach ball with no net and no playbook” (p. 1). In this shift, she describes a departure from something oppositional to something more playful, multidimensional, and erotic for her. Perhaps desire and attraction, as Vassi (1976) proposes, can be experienced in different shapes and dimensions, such as desire triangles, circles, squares, or even shapeless baths of

energy sharing? Perhaps Giuliani's experiences with couples as well as Winston's (2021) are constitutive of their sexuality in such a way that they may be described as a significant lived experiences of desire and sexuality worthy of space and recognition (Rubin, 1984). It is my hope that recognition of symbiosexuality may offer validation and support for this sexual minority. Further, I hope it will serve the queer feminist agenda to honor and embrace a greater diversity of sexualities and undo sexual and relational hierarchies (Rubin, 1984) centered on factors such as mononormativity.

We find evidence of symbiosexuality in discourses on the unicorn identity, in digital and nonfiction declarations of desire for and attraction to couples, in non-Western discourses, and in three-person sex and relationship research. However, whether researchers describe a desire for engagement in sexual interactions with people in relationships as an obsession or preoccupation (Karlen, 1988; Winston, 2021), a primary interest (Giuliani, 2021; Scoats, 2020), a very popular fantasy (Lehmiller, 2018), or an unethical, unhealthy non-monogamous dynamic (Johnston, 2022), all these descriptions fall short of considering this desire and attraction a valid lived experience.

Dominant cultural assumptions and conceptions of desire and sexuality function to ignore, obscure, and/or discount symbiosexuality. Mononormativity (specifically, the assumption of the "rightness" of two-person sexual and relationship dynamics) largely contributes to the discounting and discrediting of symbiosexuality. However, even within polyamorous and non-monogamous communities that honor multiple concurrent partnerships, discrimination against the unicorn identity and against people (particularly women) interested in sexual interactions with couples discounts and discourages symbiosexual desire and expression. Further, portrayals of women who experience this desire or engage in sexual behavior with couples as vulnerable, objectified victims (Johnston, 2022) or as "emotional waifs" (Karlen, 1988, p. 15) remain invalidating, harmful, and sexist.

While important to pay attention to reports of sexual and relationship harm in individuals' experiences with couples (Ward, 2020), without research it is unknown whether these portrayals are accurate to and encompassing of the primary nature and lived experience of sexual interactions with couples. James Beggan (2021) contends "defense of unicorns and complementary criticism of unicorn hunters can actually be read as an endorsement of a convention that fails to recognize the range of motives unicorns may possess" (p. 123). Beggan (2021) argues the power dynamics in triads are miscalculated by those offering advice within the non-monogamous community and those who identify as unicorns may actually have quite a bit of power in the "three-way marketplace" (p. 163). Future research on people's sexual and romantic experiences with couples is needed to understand the nature of these experiences.

Further, the notion in non-monogamous communities that totally equitable power dynamics are preferable (or even possible) in sexual experiences with three people is perplexing. Power differences remain a very popular sexual fantasy and source of desire (Bauer, 2014; Joyal et al., 2015; Lehmiller, 2018). Some argue preference for power differences (like those in BDSM practices) can be considered a sexual orientation (Sprott & Williams, 2019). In addition to a sexual preference for power

differences, power differences can also be a relationship preference. For example, in BDSM relationships which place a high value on communication and consent practices, people report built-in power differences increase relationship health by facilitating a sense of security and strengthening partner bonds (Cutler et al., 2020). A person may desire couples not in spite of but *because of* power differentials, whether they seek less power or more power in their sexual and relationship experiences. Further, threesome dynamics specifically have the potential to disrupt established power differences between different genders, races, abilities, etc. (Schippers, 2016). A shift from discrediting and ignoring unicorn dynamics as categorically unhealthy and disempowering to examining them as valid and potentially pleasurable and/or empowering experiences is needed. Offering new language may promote self-understanding and self-actualization which for some may include adoption of the term symbiosexual or reclamation of the unicorn identity as descriptive of an empowered person who experiences symbiosexual desire and sexual pleasure with couples. Future research is needed to identify people who experience symbiosexual attraction and determine if the term resonates for their lived experience.

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