

Stigma, Halo Effects, and Threats to Ideology: Comment on The Fewer the Merrier?

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Comment on Conley, Moors, Matsick, and Ziegler (2012). Grounded in prior research, a framework is proposed that builds upon the authors' findings and outlines a perspective to organize future research directions. In particular, the violation of committed relationship ideology is suggested to help explain, in part, negative perceptions of consensual nonmonogamous (CNM) relationships, as well as less favorable views of singles, and other non-normative relationships. This broader conceptual view of the authors' findings encourages both future research on CNM relationships as well as further understanding of related phenomena stemming from relationship ideology.

Conley, Moors, Matsick, and Ziegler (2012) explore an increasingly relevant societal issue: whether those in consensual nonmonogamous (CNM) relationships are stigmatized, and whether halo effects surround those in monogamous relationships. Across experimental studies they demonstrated that people tend to have negative perceptions of those participating in CNM relationships relative to the rose-colored views of those participating in monogamous relationships. Although some might expect that the perceptions of those self-reported to be in CNM relationships drastically differ, Conley et al. also found that CNM individuals rated monogamous couples more favorably than CNM couples on a variety of relationship relevant traits. One possible explanation for the latter finding is that CNM individuals, despite being potentially disadvantaged by their non-normative relationship status, may be motivated to defend, rationalize, and even bolster the status quo, consistent with a framework outlined by system justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Although the link between beliefs about relationships and support for the broader sociopolitical system is seemingly distal, recent research has demonstrated that individuals are

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motivated to defend committed relationship ideology (e.g., beliefs associated with the institution of marriage), and this ideological defense has been connected with broad system-justifying needs (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011). With this research in mind, the goal of this commentary is to gain a better understanding of Conley et al.'s (2012) halo effect and stigma findings by examining CNM relationships in terms of committed relationship ideology, with an aim to serve as a potential guide for future research and eventual policy considerations.

Committed relationship ideology includes the assumptions that almost everyone desires to get married, engage in a monogamous sexual partnership, and have children. Moreover, an inherent aspect of relationship ideology is that those who meet these normative standards are perceived to be higher in status, more important, and generally better people than those who do not (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Instead of examining perceptions of CNM relationships, prior research has mostly compared perceptions of people in committed relationships to those who are single. For example, Morris, DePaulo, and colleagues have found that married people are perceived to be happier, more secure, and loyal, whereas those who are single are perceived to be less mature and socially adjusted (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Taylor, 2008). Greitemeyer (2009) also demonstrated that singles are stereotyped as being lonelier and more neurotic, as well as less extraverted, agreeable, and satisfied with their lives than those in relationships. However, there are exceptions to the largely negative views of singles (e.g., perceived independence, openness to experience), just as there are limits to the stigma surrounding CNM relationships (Conley et al., 2012).

It is evident that perceptions of CNM relationships documented by Conley et al. (2012) complements past research on the perception of singles. To broaden the scope of future research it may be worthwhile to consider other targets of stigma that may stem from challenges to committed relationship ideology. In other words, to what extent are the drivers of the stigma associated with CNM relationships unique? Are the halo effects surrounding monogamous relationships the same as when compared to any relationship status that is inconsistent with relationship ideology?

To answer these questions, it may be useful to consider the underlying mechanisms that motivate people to defend relationship ideology. Singles and those in CNM relationships may be negatively perceived, at least in part, because the defining features of these labels threaten beliefs associated with committed relationships, including epistemic and existential factors (e.g., see Sullivan, Landau, & Kay, 2012) that may serve to maintain these beliefs. For example, committed relationships, such as marriage, may be perceived as providing predictable, meaningful, and normative life paths, as well as offering a sense of control, structure, and order over people's lives (Day et al., 2011).

To better understand stigma associated with CNM relationships, it may be useful to use such a framework to compare CNM relationships not only to singles and those in monogamous relationships, but also to other relationship types that

may challenge relationship ideology. This may include examining perceptions of individuals who are married but choose not to have children. Although not well documented, this group may also be susceptible to negative perceptions relative to those who are married and have children. Another group that may be fruitful to examine includes those who are married and engage in non-normative sexual practices, other than those associated with CNM. Similar to CNM couples, those in this category may be subject to sexual prejudice (Herek & McLemore, 2013), but unlike those in CNM relationships, this group (broadly speaking) may not pose a direct threat to the monogamous aspect of marriage.

In conclusion, comparing CNM relationships to other potential threats to relationship ideology, may lead to a broader psychological understanding of the extent that stigma associated with CNM relationships is unique, or driven by the same mechanisms and to the same degree as other perceived threats to committed relationship ideology. Conley et al.'s 2012 findings are provocative on their own, but they may also prove to be influential by promoting additional scholarly research on perceptions of CNM relationships, and by encouraging more thorough investigations of the functioning of CNM relationships. Such advancements, in turn, may importantly affect cultural awareness of the true nature of these relationships and serve to inform policy decisions.

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