# New study identifies 'symbiosexual' attraction to relationships rather than individuals



In an intriguing exploration of human attraction, a new study conducted by Seattle University researchers has introduced the concept of 'symbiosexual' attraction. This research, led by Dr Sally Johnston, an adjunct professor of anthropology and sociology, argues that some individuals are primarily attracted to the dynamic energy and synergy between established couples rather than to the individuals within those relationships.

The study, recently published in the Archives of Sexual Behavior, surveyed 373 participants regarding their sexual and gender identities. Of those, 145 reported experiencing a distinct form of attractiveness towards the relationship dynamics of couples. This particular form of attraction, referred to as 'symbiosexual', focuses on the energy and interplay between the members of a couple, illustrating a shift from traditional perceptions of one-to-one attractions.

Dr Johnston’s interest in this phenomenon began during her research on ‘unicorns’ within polyamorous communities. 'Unicorn' is a term used to describe typically a bisexual woman who enters into a relationship with a heterosexual couple. Johnston noted that while unicorns often face objectification and poor treatment, some of them reported feeling attracted to the combined dynamic of the couple.

The study utilised data from The Pleasure Study, in which more than 90 percent of participants identified as queer and 87.5 percent as polyamorous, indicating a skewed but insightful sample largely consisting of white, middle-class university graduates. Among the respondents, 34 participated in detailed interviews, confirming consistent evidence of symbiosexual attraction.

Interviewed participants described their attraction in various terms. Hayden, one participant, said: "You feed off their energy, their attraction to each other… there’s an interplay between the couple". Another individual, Sage, noted, "I really think my ideal dynamic might be myself and a couple". This sentiment was echoed by Eden, who mentioned a desire for validation: "I have this desire to be desired, and I seek a lot of validation… When there are multiple people like that, I feel like, oh, yes, yes, I’m doing things right."

These insights suggest that symbiosexuals are generally extroverted, seek substantial intimacy and attention, and are less prone to jealousy. Many also identify as queer and report a stronger attraction to non-heterosexual couples.

Dr Johnston emphasises the need to rethink traditional models of sexual attraction and desire. “We need to rethink the nature of human attraction and desire as only one-to-one experiences,” she said. The study posits that there is a diverse population experiencing symbiosexual attraction, highlighting the multidimensionality and power dynamics within relationships.

This form of attraction, she asserts, is distinct from traditional polyamorous relationships where mutual attraction exists between all partners, as depicted in popular media such as the films Challengers and Professor Marston and the Wonder Women.

Moving forward, Dr Johnston plans to conduct further research to understand the prevalence of symbiosexual attraction in the general population. Key aspects under investigation will include its impact on mental health and relationship satisfaction. She hopes this work will contribute to reducing stigma in both monogamous and non-monogamous communities, thereby broadening the conceptualisation of desire in sexuality studies.

Throughout history, and in modern culture, the concept of love triangles and throuples has been a recurrent theme, as seen in Shakespearean plays and contemporary films like Challengers. Despite their frequent depiction, this study brings a novel scientific perspective to understanding the nature of such attractions.

Through her research, Dr Johnston has put forth a compelling argument that there are complex, previously understudied layers to human attraction, potentially expanding the understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and relationship dynamics.