



Chapter Four: Incompatible needs for intimacy and autonomy

In any relationship there will be some conflict over the regulation of intimacy and autonomy, but it manifests with a different set of problems in polyamorous relationships than in monogamous couples. No two people are perfectly matched in their respective needs for closeness as a couple and their need for separateness and privacy.

This spectrum can be conceptualized as a scale of zero to ten. There is a broad range, with complete independence at the zero end of the scale, and 24/7 “joined at the hip coupledness” at the other upper end. Each person has an ideal comfort zone that feels right to them for how much personal privacy, autonomy, and control over their own life they need, and how much love, intimacy, togetherness, and merging they want with a partner. One person in any given couple will always want more independence and more of a life of their own, and the other will always want more integration of their lives. Anyone between a two and an eight can find partners who want a similar balance between having a life of their own and being in a committed relationship, as long as they pick partners who are relatively close to their number on the autonomy/intimacy scale.

For monogamous couples, discrepancies in these needs often prove fatal to the relationship, since they are not allowed to meet any of their needs for love and intimacy outside of their primary relationship. If they are too far apart on the scale, they will be forever locked in a power struggle. One will fight to maintain some independence and control, carving out private time and space, and other will experience a chronic scarcity of time, attention, affection, and closeness. One person eventually flees due to the escalating demands for intimacy, or the other feels so starved for love and affection that they ends the relationship.

Open relationships can in fact solve SOME of the problems created by different autonomy/intimacy needs within a couple. Either partner can have additional relationships if they experience a scarcity of time and attention in their primary relationship. In addition, if a partner is feeling overwhelmed by their partner's demands for togetherness, they can encourage their partner to seek outside partners to take the pressure off them.