

Open Relationships in Gay Culture

From The Soul Beneath the Skin: The unseen hearts and habits of gay men, by David Nimmons

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(This is an astounding piece of homework that suggests our open-relationship culture isn't hurting anyone... and in fact it may just be doing us a world of good! – Troy)

The first, most provocative sexual innovation involves the gay rescripting of monogamy, and its centrality to emotionally committed coupledness. It is late on a Saturday afternoon and more than one hundred men are crowded into a meeting room in a downtown Pittsburgh hotel. It is among the best-attended sessions of Creating Change, the annual conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Some are couples, singles, and more than one stable three- or foursome. But they all share one bond in common. They have come to discuss how to create, sustain, and nurture their relationships. All are in open relationships, that is, non-monogamous. The crowd is barely seated before they begin to talk, offering tips, experiences, war stories.

Within moments, the room takes on the air of a revival tent, crackling with excitement. The men are testifying like mad: "We only do it in three-ways." "It's OK if neither of you knows the person." "Just on our designated 'boys'-night-out. ""Only when we travel." "Never with someone in our town." "Yes, but fucking is reserved for just us." "So long as we never kiss." "We're vanilla at home, but he gets kink outside."

Like a roomful of rabbis, these men offer an endlessly inventive series of interpretations on their erotic Talmud. For one, the nuptial bedroom is off-limits. Another forbids "emotional entanglements." Permissible so long as you don't know the person's name. Never in our house. Acceptable as a one-time event. No staying overnight. The room bursts into laughter at the strategy offered by a fresh-faced couple from San Jose: Extracurriculars are divulged within twenty-four hours and the straying one buys his mate a nice dinner—or pays him twenty dollars. "It's worked for five years," they giggle. In this conference room, a hundred Emily Posts are sharing the etiquette of how it's done in polite (gay) society so nobody gets hurt.

One could imagine oneself in a room of priests or cardinals each arguing for his heartfelt and scrupulously observed interpretation of canon law. Like a lavender Leviticus, some rules spring directly from health concerns: "We always play safe outside. We always use protection with each other." Others see the relationship as the one place where latex Lever intrudes.

The strategy least discussed here is the most common one: "Don't ask, don't tell." The very mention of it underscores a sweet paradox. Surely, "don't ask, don't tell" is a common strategy in gay coupledness, but

the difference is that among us it often has an affectional valence. We use it as a delicate consensual system of spared feelings and sustained intimacies. When the military brass imposed it, one wonders if they appreciated the irony that they were borrowing a habit gay men had perfected to humanely manage our rich web of erotic and affectional bonds. The boys at the Pentagon no doubt imagine that the “don’t ask, don’t tell” dogma was their idea. In fact, they are borrowing a social custom used by millions of fags to maintain our intimate relationships. But in the armed forces, the policy is used to reinstated shame and secrecy, and has become the most tortured of military doctrines, in the process twisting the military brass into a political and PR pretzel. The military in a clumsy institutional way aped a social practice gay men have long elaborated and refined, the better to be in affectional relation with each other.

Still, the men in this room today are hardly your basic “don’t ask, don’t tell” kinda crowd. Forgoing sessions about street activism or campus organizing, they have voted with their feet (or other organs) to come

- to give the lowdown about what’s real in their lives. And talk they do. Some men prefer to know nothing; others wish not to be told ahead; others insist on disclosure afterward. Some prefer to know it happened, without details; others prefer a who-did-what-to-whom instant replay, no gory details spared. Each explicates his own systems and rules, an endless flow of nuance and interpretation.

Similar discussions have ignited in every corner of gay male life. The topic takes over AOL chat rooms (m4mtakenbutlooking), smolders in HIV prevention conferences, echoes at Café Flore in San Francisco, on gay swim teams and at Palm Springs poolsides, at Radical Faeries encampments and Pocono leather runs. The last two Gay Men’s National Health Summits have each had workshops on open relationships. The topic has been moderated at each of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s annual Creating Change conferences for the past several years.

Most striking in these discussions is their huge sensitivity and care. An extraordinary inventiveness and imagination underlie the complex etiquette they are discussing. Under these fluorescent lights, these men are doing what clans of men have forever done as they gather around flickering campfires. They are handing down lore, passing along the wisdom of the tribe. Rooms like this are a place we go to learn what works and doesn’t. Try this, don’t eat those other berries, they’re trouble. In a powerful and sweet cultural moment, we are participating in collective self-definition, teaching each other about how to behave with each other. In this living oral tradition, we are writing the manual on ourselves, scribing the next page of our own erotic etiquette. With each line, we define one of our most significant affectional and ethical innovations.

In addition to these men’s testimonies, much evidence now demonstrates that non-monogamy is a robust and established cultural practice among us. Precise numbers are hard to pin down, but it is estimated that between 40 and 50 percent of gay men are in committed couples at any given time. Among those men, however, the shape of things is extremely well established. A stack of research confirms that about three-quarters of gay men in stable, long-term relationships are consensually non-monogamous, without it necessarily threatening the viability of the couple. A 1977 German paper

claimed “most homosexual males renounce sexual fidelity.”¹ In 1979, Harry and Lovely found a majority to be open in their sample of gay couples.² The same finding came the next year in a book subtitled *A New Look at Gay Couples*.³ The following year, Peplau and Cochran found more than 70 percent of the couples they surveyed were open.⁴

Similar findings have been reported by a variety of researchers, in many locales, over the two decades since: among 320 Dutch gay couples⁵ among committed gay male Christian couples in Nottingham, England (“the majority of couples were expectationally and behaviorally nonexclusive”).⁶ A University of California team found 57 percent of gay men studied were non-monogamous.⁷ Others sampled both before and after the onset of the HIV epidemic, and found seven in ten long-term male couples were open. A decade later, in a New York sample, two-thirds of the men were open.⁸ In the landmark book, *The Male Couple*, McWhirter and Mattison reported that virtually all of their sample of long-term stable gay men’s relationships moved to be open.⁹ The same finding arises in several large national studies in this country, among them the *Sex in America* book.¹⁰

The weight of evidence makes clear that monogamy occupies a radically different niche in the ecosystem of committed gay relationships than in the larger society. Statistics on heterosexual nonmonogamy are notoriously variable, with enormous political stakes, and have ranged from 10 percent to about 25 percent of married couples. In round numbers it’s fairly clear that approximately the same percent of gay men aren’t monogamous in long-term couples as heterosexual men are. But look beyond the numbers and statistics, to consider the lesson in these numbers. Are we just hopeless pigs, and this just one more confirmatory example for the gay-men-are-dogs brigade? Or might something else— something far deeper—be going on?

Most men in our sample had devoted a good deal of thought to the issue of sexual exclusivity.

—David Blasband

¹ S. Schaefer, “Sociosexual Behavior in Male and Female Homosexuals: A Study in Sex Differences,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 6(5) (1977): 355—364.

² J. Harry, “Gay Marriages and Communities of Sexual Orientation,” *Alternative Life Styles* (2)(1979): 177—200.

³ M. Mendola, *The Mendola Report: A New Look at Gay Couples* (New York: Crown, 1980).

⁴ L.A. Peplau and S.D. Cochran, “Value Orientations in the Intimate Relationships of Gay Men,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 6(3) (1981): 1—19.

⁵ A. A. Deenen, L. Gijs, and A. X. Van Naerssen, “Intimacy and Sexuality in Gay Male Couples,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 23(4) (1994): 421—431.

⁶ A. K. T. Yip, “Gay Male Christian Couples and Sexual Exclusivity,” *Sociology* 31(2) (1997): 289—306.

⁷ L. McKusick, T.J. Coates, and S. Morin, “Longitudinal Predictors of Reductions in UAI Among Gay Men in San Francisco,” *American Journal of Public Health* 80(8) (1990): 978—983.

⁸ G.J. Wagner, R. H. Remien, and A. Carballo-Diequez, “‘Extramarital’ Sex: Is There an Increased Risk for HIV Transmission? A Study of Male Couples of Mixed HIV Status,” *AIDS Education & Prevention* 10(3) (1998): 245—256.

⁹ D. P. McWhirter and A. M. Mattison, *The Male Couple* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

¹⁰ R. T. Michael et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (New York: Warner Books, 1994).

Any such practice that is majoritarian in a subculture, as is nonmonogamy in gay life, suggests an underlying cultural difference. Were we a native people somewhere, “polyandry” is the term anthropologists would use for having so many bonded male sexual mates. Indeed, the next time you stroll the sidewalks of Castro, Montrose, or Fort Lauderdale, consider that you walk the tribal homeland of America’s only openly polyandric tribe. (A cheeky anthropologist might even note that the varieties of queer polyandric sexual culture bear a striking resemblance to one other uniquely American subpopulation. Like us, that group celebrated males having diverse sexual and marital mates. They also proclaimed it as part of their spiritual and cultural creed. You might think it odd that our closest living socio-sexual relatives, the once-polygamist Mormons, are so vexed by us. Joseph Smith, meet Walt Whitman. Talk amongst yourselves. Maybe Salt Lake City isn’t quite as far from San Francisco as it looks on the map. We are, you might say, kissing cousins.)

Clearly, any behavior whose prevalence approaches three in four assumes cultural dimensions. It is not that millions of gay men were absent the day they taught the rules, or know the rules and simply cannot abide them, or are simply flouting them. To interpret non-monogamy as infidelity or cheating is to miss the point in a most stuning way. When a clear majority of stable, successful long-term gay couples redraw the rules to include outside sex, and still about a quarter don’t, it says that *we have clearly elaborated a parallel set of acceptable cultural norms*. It seems that the natives of these lavender provinces are not so much cheating as choosing.

The interesting thing here is not that we flick and philander, but that we don’t box it up in that way. Gay male culture—in some ways like European straight male culture—offers permission, language, rituals, and support for this exploration. Listen carefully to the men in chat rooms, read the studies, and you hear an elaborated politesse of practice and protection—emotional and physical—underlying the statistics. One would be hard-pressed to cite any other Western culture which has invented such a nuanced emotional erotic etiquette, one that functions to spare feelings, maintain bonds, and respect boundaries. In writing such radically different rules, we have given ourselves a wider, accepted, more elaborated permission.

Of course, nobody is required to sleep around, but if you both choose to, you need not lie to your mate, your peers, or yourself. As one author researching gay open couples noted: ‘Lacking a cultural model to which they can relate, lesbians and gays attempt to form new models of behavior unique to lesbian and gay relationships.’¹¹ Gay psychologist Larry Kurdek at Wright State University has studied gay couples for a decade, and has found great strengths in gay relationships. One of those is that unlike heterosexual couples, we “come into relationships with very few pre-defined roles. We basically have to construct those roles.” As a result, he says, “researchers often describe our relationships as being built on a general ethic of equality.” It makes sense, really. After all, in a society where we cannot marry, by definition all of our relationships are extramarital. We just do them after our own fashion.

¹¹ W. M. Burdon, “Deception in Intimate Relationships: A Comparison of Heterosexuals and Homosexual/Bisexuals,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 32(1) (1996): 77—91.

Nonmonogamy? There's a lot of good stuff to be said about it, and a lot of bad to be said about it. It's just. . . the bad stuff has mostly been said.

—Eric B, Cleveland

Researchers of sexual jealousy consistently find that it is notably “lower for men in homosexual couples,” that “men in heterosexual couples have higher levels of sexual jealousy than men in homosexual couples” and that “sexual jealousy was inversely correlated with what the researchers called a ‘self-actualization personality.’¹² “Others have found that gay men “indicated lower levels of experiencing and expressing sexual jealousy, less exclusive relationships, and higher levels of extradyadic sexual relations by their partners” than comparable straight men.¹³ Other researchers have found much the same.¹⁴

Experts now suggest that such differences aren't individual, but cultural. “The homosexual group generally experience relationships in which partner's sexual exclusivity is not expected.”¹⁵ A 1992 British research team found 72 percent of gay male couples were nonmonogamous after five years, recognized it as a culture norm, and suggested that open relationships be better incorporated into public health programs.¹⁶ Similar approaches have been recommended by AIDS public health authorities researchers in Australia.¹⁷

Even the research language provides a subtle but telling recognition of this cultural difference. Look at the index in a recent landmark national sex book, *Sex in America*. It indexes the heterosexual findings under “infidelity,” but the gay male sections under the term “non- monogamy.”¹⁸ In such subtle ways do our innovations seep into the larger culture. In the words of another researcher: “The results strongly implicate culture . . . in the development of sexual jealousy. The finding that men in homosexual relationships have lower levels of sexual jealousy than men in heterosexual relationships . . . suggest that culture is also involved in the development of a sexually jealous attitude . . . Sexual jealousy, viewed as an attitude, is mediated by culture and personality.”¹⁹

¹² R.O. Hawkins, “The Relationship Between Culture, Personality, and Sexual Jealousy in Men in Heterosexual and Homosexual Relationships,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 19(3) (1990): 67—84.

¹³ R. G. Bringle, “Sexual Jealousy in the Relationships of Homosexual and Heterosexual Men: 1980 and 1992,” *Personal Relationships* 2(4) (1995) 313—325.

¹⁴ R. G. Bringle and L.A. Bunk, “Extradyadic Relationships and Sexual Jealousy,” in *Sexuality in Close Relationships* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991); J. W. Engel and M. Saracino, “Love Preferences and Ideals: A Comparison of Homosexual, Bisexual and Heterosexual Groups. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 8(3) (1986): 241—250

¹⁵ R. O. Hawkins, (1990) op. cit.

¹⁶ F. C. Hickson et al., “Maintenance of Open Gay Relationships: Some Strategies for Protection Against HIV,” *AIDS Care* 4(4) (1992): 409—419.

¹⁷ S. Kippax, et al., “Sexual Negotiation in the AIDS Era: Negotiated Safety Revisited,” *AIDS* 11(2) (1997): 191—197; A.E. Grulich et al. “HIV Serostatus of Sexual Partners of HIV-positive and HIV-negative Homosexual Men in Sydney,” *AIDS* 12(18) (1998): 2508.

¹⁸ R. T. Michael et al., (1994) op. cit.

¹⁹ R. O. Hawkins, (1990) op. cit.

They are recognizing what gay men have long known: Here at the gay café, our menu lets you choose from column A or column B. We have laid ourselves a different smorgasbord, and by all accounts, many of us find it tasty. But how tasty is it, really? How well does this Brave New Amorous World really work? In a paper, "Sexual Exclusivity Versus Openness in Gay Male Couples," the authors state: "No significant differences were found in the quality of open vs. closed relationships in terms of love and liking for the partner, satisfaction, or commitment." Those men "in open relationships emphasized the benefits of sexual variety and personal independence, whereas subjects in closed relationships stressed their desire to avoid jealousy." From the Netherlands, a paper in the Archives of Sexual Behavior noted "both partners' attitudes that sexual encounters are positive for relationship functioning."²⁰ A similar work, "Relationship Quality of Gay Men in Closed or Open Relationships," examined several measures of relationship health and stated: "Partners in both types of relationships were more similar than different."²¹

At the height of British gay liberation, one of their manifestos proposed: "Our heterosexual detractors betray their limited vision by their mistaken assumption that promiscuity is incompatible with lasting relationships." We may, it suggests, "be in the happy position of being able to enjoy both at once."²² A quarter century of accumulated numerical evidence appears to indeed suggest that this utopian assertion was not far off the mark. The majority of long-term gay male couples have indeed opted for such arrangements. They have voted with their, urn, feet, suggesting that it is a happy alternative for many. According to gay couple gurus McWhirter and Mattison, "We believe that the single most important factor that -keeps couples together past the ten-year mark is the lack of possessiveness they feel. Many couples learn that ownership of each other sexually can become the greatest internal threat to their staying together."²³

Jeff and his lover, Kent, see it that way. Jeff starts: "We opened up things in year five—seven years ago. Kent had always had an interest in doing things I didn't want to, and it got to where I could see he wasn't happy. We were arguing about it, and our eyes were straying." "000hhh, yeah," grins Kent. "We knew something had to give. And the more we thought about it, we know we really love each other, love our lives." At that point, Jeff chimes in: "Plus, over time, we got to be not, well, you know, not entirely each other's type." They both laugh. "For us, being open seemed to us a way to keep together, and both get what we wanted. Then we come home and snuggle."

Alden and Raul, who have made Memphis home for nine years, have made a completely different choice. "We're the jealous types," Raul explains. "It just wouldn't work for us, and we both know it. Three-ways are OK—because we're both there, you know, having fun together. It's something we do with each other as much as with a third. That we do a lot." "We call them 'snacks.'" Alden grins. "As in, you know, wanna get on-line tonight and order in a snack?"

²⁰ A. A. Deenen, L. Gijs, and A. X. Van Naerssen, "Intimacy and Sexuality in Gay Male Couples," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 23(4) (1994): 421—431.

²¹ L.A. Kurdek and J. P. Schmitt, "Relationship Quality of Gay Men in Closed or Open Relationships," *Journal of Homosexuality* 12(2) (1985): 85—89.

²² A. Hodges and D. Hutter, *Downcast Gays* (London: Pomegranate Press. 1974).

²³ D. P. McWhirter and A. M. Mattison, (1984) op. cit.

From snuggles to snacks, for better and worse, richer and poorer, it seems that three in four long-term gay couples have opted to add a new rider (literally) to the gay marriage contract. One can choose outside sex as a standard option in the till-death-do-us-part policy, without it threatening the sanctity of a committed relationship.

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When it comes to emotions, we think that these Gay couples may operate on very different principles than straight couples. Straight couples may have a lot to learn from gay and lesbian relationships.

—Dr. John Gottman, Gottman Institute

There are larger, culture-changing implications here. We can't predict what might happen if more committed straight couples came to recognize, as so many gay men do, a more nuanced palette between emotional fidelity and sexual exclusivity, if they drew new lines between trust, truth, and sex. Could a franker set of permissions lessen the sexual chasm between men and women, offer stable couples new domains in which to practice intimacy? Might it actually increase truth-telling among married couples? Could they find, as many gay men report, that it can actually reduce tensions and enhance the intimacy that successful long-term partners need with each other? Could it even help redefine the idea of a committed couple, not as a domain where cheating is winked at, joked at, gossiped about, shrugged at, or expected, but as the forum where intimate partners take the risks to tell the real truth of themselves and their desires? Of course, such changes have one grim implication, enough to keep one awake nights. If there comes a day when "cheating" boyfriends, "lying hearts" and "other" women pass into obsolescence, of course, country music lyrics will never be the same. But then again, neither will the country.

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