

Monogamous or Not: Understanding and Counseling Gay Male Couples

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Abstract

Mental health practitioners might be surprised to learn that many gay men establish and maintain relationships that allow outside sexual activity. However, for both monogamous and non-monogamous gay male couples, difficulties can arise which indicate that a couple needs to revisit, revise, or reaffirm their original agreements regarding extrarelational sex. This article reviews the existing literature on monogamous and open gay male unions and offers clinical case examples that suggest how to assess and assist coupled gay men, incorporating an understanding of this aspect of gay male relationships.

SURVEYS DONE BEFORE AND AFTER the onset of the AIDS epidemic suggest that many gay men are in relationships in which both members have agreed to be sexually nonexclusive (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bringle, 1995; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Hickson, Davies, Hunt, Weatherburn, McManus, & Coxon, 1992; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985/1986; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found that all of the men in their sample of 156 couples who had been together over 5 years described their relationships as non-monogamous by mutual agreement or "open." In a nationwide survey of 1,749 gay men and lesbians, 10% of the gay men stated they were in open relationships (Bryant & Demian, 1994). Among a United Kingdom sample of 252 coupled, gay men, 56.3% were in relationships that allowed for outside sex (Hickson et al., 1992). While the percentages vary, these findings suggest that a proportion of coupled gay men agree not to be sexually exclusive.

Some older research attempted to determine how non-monogamous gay male relationships compared with their monogamous counterparts. Saghir and Robins (1973) found that coupled gay men who were monogamous were more satisfied than their non-monogamous counterparts. These same authors discovered that those in open unions were initially monogamous, but changed their agreements because they were unhappy in their relationships. In another 1970s study, gay men in open

couples were found not to be as psychologically healthy or as satisfied as those in monogamous dyads (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Although it is unknown whether the non-monogamous couples in this study were initially monogamous and "opened up" their relationships because they were unhappy, the men in non-monogamous couples were more likely than their monogamous counterparts to state that their partners "failed to respond to their sexual requests" (p. 133).

However, the findings that men in sexually nonexclusive couples were less satisfied were not replicated in subsequent studies. Peplau (1981) found no differences between samples of partners in closed and open relationships on measures of intimacy, satisfaction, security, and commitment. In another study, no couples who had been together over 5 years remained monogamous, which was interpreted as an indication that non-monogamy was related to couple longevity (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). Blasband and Peplau (1985) reported that relationship quality was equivalent for the sexually exclusive and open gay couples in their sample. In a study comparing 98 men in monogamous relationships with 34 in open couples, Kurdek and Schmitt (1985/1986) found that partners in open relationships lived together longer. However, men in monogamous relationships reported less tension and more favorable attitudes toward their relationships than their non-monogamous counterparts when controlling for length of time together. In a later study,

Kurdek (1988) compared 34 open versus 31 closed couples, finding once again that open couples lived together longer. However, he found no differences on measures of couple satisfaction or adjustment. Certainly, in light of the possibility of changes in gay male relationships since the 1980s, more current research is needed. Nevertheless, the available information begins to suggest that some gay men may be able to maintain functional relationships that are not sexually monogamous.

Findings from studies of heterosexual men and women imply that men tend to cognitively separate sex from love, which might explain why some gay men establish relationships that allow extra-dyadic sex. Among a sample of 252 heterosexual men and women, Townsend (1995) found that men were significantly more likely than women to report having ongoing sexual relationships without wanting emotional involvement. Comparing 75 men and 73 women, Buss and Schmitt (1993) discovered that the men were much more likely to state that they would consider having sexual intercourse with a stranger. Among a sample of 300 men and women, Glass and Wright (1985) found that more than half of the men who had extramarital sex stated that their marriages were happy or very happy and that their extramarital relationships were solely sexual in nature. Of those in their sample who had engaged in extramarital sexual behavior, 75 % of the men, compared to 53 % of the women, cited the need for sexual excitement, rather than emotional fulfillment, as justification for extramarital intercourse (Glass & Wright, 1992). Although Glass and Wright studied marital infidelity as opposed to mutually agreed upon extrarelational sexual activity, these findings are useful in that they suggest that men may be able to cognitively and emotionally separate sex and love.

The findings on sex and love for heterosexual men may begin to explain why some coupled gay men might be able to engage in extrarelational sex without compromising couple intimacy. In one study comparing monogamous and nonexclusive gay male couples, men in open relationships reported a stronger desire for sexual excitement and diversity, yet did not differ from their monogamous counterparts on measures of love, liking, relationship satisfaction, or commitment (Blasband & Peplau, 1985). Shernoff (1995) stated that for coupled men who agree to be non-monogamous, the term fidelity does not mean sexual faithfulness but refers to the "emotional primacy of the relationship between two men" (p. 45). The sexually non-monogamous couples interviewed for McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) study clearly stated that outside sex was solely recreational and added variety

to their sex lives without interfering with their emotional commitments to their partners.

Nevertheless, many gay men do choose to create and maintain monogamous relationships (Berger, 1990). Men may elect to establish monogamous relationships to avoid jealousy (Blasband & Peplau, 1985). For a monogamous couple, outside sex is considered a betrayal and poses a threat to the relationship (Marcus, 1999). Thus, it is important to distinguish between mutual agreements to be non-monogamous and infidelity in a monogamous union.

While further study is needed, the available literature suggests that some gay men might separate sex from emotional involvement. As a result, a variety of extra-dyadic sexual agreements may be possible among gay couples. Social workers need to maintain a nonjudgmental understanding of this possibility as they help troubled gay couples resolve their conflicts. The couples in the following case examples were experiencing communication difficulties that related to extrarelational sexual attractions. In each of the cases the practitioner assessed the issue of monogamy/non-monogamy in the context of the couple's communication problems and helped the partners resolve their conflicts while affirming or modifying their agreements to suit their particular needs.

Alex and Bill: Renegotiation Required

Alex and Bill had been in a relationship for 24 years. Both men were in their mid-50s and lived in a middle-class suburb. Alex owned a florist shop and Bill was an office manager for a law firm. They shared a beautifully decorated home where they hosted elegant dinner parties for a circle of friends who considered them the ideal couple. From the start of their relationship, Alex and Bill had decided that they were not going to abide by what they considered the constraining and oppressive practice of heterosexual marital fidelity. Earlier in the relationship, their custom of reporting outside sexual adventures to each other often aroused them, leading to passionate sessions of lovemaking. However, they were pursuing counseling because of a problem related to their agreement to be non-monogamous. Four weeks prior to their first session, Bill had met an attractive younger man, Chris, at a work-related event. Bill proceeded to date Chris several times. Recently, after spending an afternoon with Chris, Bill arrived late to a dinner party the couple was hosting. Alex was angry that Bill's outside sexual behavior was interfering in their social life. He was also insecure over what appeared to be Bill's new romance.

Building Bridges and Fine-Tuning Their Original Agreement

During the first session, the social worker encouraged Alex and Bill to tell each other their feelings about this affair. He encouraged them to replace angry accusations with “I-statements” that expressed how each man felt. It quickly became clear that the men’s emotional needs were going unmet in their relationship. Through the years, Alex and Bill had begun to take their relationship for granted, neglecting to do things to nurture their union like setting aside quality time for just the two of them. Their demanding careers consumed most of their time and energy. The little free time they had was spent socializing with friends. While they claimed never to argue, longstanding unresolved disagreements about money were never directly discussed, and these submerged conflicts added to their distance. Although they had explicitly agreed to be nonexclusive, Alex and Bill had never set guidelines for their extra-dyadic sexual behavior. The silent chasm between the two men, combined with the lack of rules for outside sexual involvement, made the couple ripe for a damaging emotional affair.

Early in treatment, the worker asked the men whether their problems meant they needed to separate. However, both Alex and Bill insisted they wanted to continue their relationship. The practitioner also inquired whether it was now time to “close” their relationship and become sexually monogamous. In response, Alex and Bill stated that they distinguished between emotional and sexual involvement, and that in this case the problem was the outside emotional relationship, not the sex.

During the first session, the social worker coached Alex to ask Bill to end his affair so that they could begin to rebuild their own relationship. Bill agreed to do so. The men began to plan a long-postponed vacation and at the clinician’s suggestion, they built into their busy schedules a regular time to be alone together. During subsequent sessions, the practitioner helped Alex and Bill raise and resolve conflicts regarding their finances and their leisure time. He also assisted them in establishing guidelines for extrarelational sexual behavior. Both men agreed to the rule that an outside partner could not be seen more than twice, and that such liaisons could not interfere with the couple’s previously established plans. While therapy helped the men resolve these specific issues, in-session discussions also assisted Alex and Bill in developing the communication skills to address future problems as they emerged. By the end of treatment, their relationship had improved, and 6 months after their last session, Alex and Bill reported that the improvements were enduring.

John and Mark: A Crisis

John and Mark, both in their mid-30s, co-owned a condominium in a large city. At the time they sought treatment, John worked as a chef at a local restaurant and Mark was employed as a stockbroker. For the past 10 years, the couple had what John thought was a monogamous relationship. However, Mark had confessed that during a recent business trip he had a brief sexual liaison with another man. Following this disclosure, a heated argument ensued and Mark admitted to engaging in two other outside sexual encounters during their relationship. Mark stressed that he engaged only in safer sex with these other men. He also insisted that he wanted his relationship with John to continue. Nevertheless, John wondered if it was time to end their union. He loved Mark and the life they had built together. However, John doubted he could ever trust him again. This painful crisis led the couple to seek treatment.

The practitioner first suspected that the couple was experiencing unacknowledged intimacy difficulties which led Mark to seek sex with other men. He explored their satisfaction in their relationship prior to this current crisis. The men described how they had built a life together; they jointly owned a home, were close to each other’s families and had a cherished group of supportive friends. They both loved to travel and shared a passion for the theater. Shared rituals like Friday night dinners out, just the two of them, along with frequent late-night conversations about their dreams and goals, formed the foundation of their closeness. The couple also spoke of how they could lean on each other during difficult times. Last year, John’s mother died after a long illness and Mark was there to comfort John as he mourned. Both men agreed that they had grown closer as a result of this experience.

John and Mark also described how they were able to resolve most of their conflicts. However, this current crisis threw them into turmoil. John felt angry, betrayed, and disappointed in Mark. From the time he realized he was gay, John had dreamed of experiencing the same type of stable, committed relationship enjoyed by his parents. His sense of security was rocked by Mark’s disclosure of several outside sexual encounters. However, John knew he was not yet ready to leave the union.

Mark also wanted to remain in the relationship. He loved John and was happy with the frequency and quality of their sex life, yet he also enjoyed the sexual attention of other men. Mark felt he missed out on the sexual variety and experimentation experienced by his

heterosexual peers during adolescence and his occasional sexual adventures seemed to make up for this loss. The couple had friends who were in relationships in which outside sex was openly tolerated. Like these friends, what Mark desired was to maintain his relationship and to occasionally engage in casual sex with other men. Although he felt he could talk to his partner about almost anything, Mark worried that raising this sensitive issue with John would make his partner angry enough to leave the relationship. However, Mark knew that hiding this secret was driving a wedge between them.

Although John hoped the union would continue, he wanted assurance that Mark would no longer “stray.” Mark also wanted to remain in the relationship, however he was unwilling to promise that he would never have sex with another man. Both men stated that although they never explicitly discussed an agreement to be monogamous, sexual exclusivity was mutually assumed from the start. It certainly seemed that now was the time to finally discuss this issue.

An ability to ask questions in a nonjudgmental manner that regards sexual nonexclusivity as a potentially viable relationship option could aid the clinical social worker in determining whether renegotiating monogamy is what is needed to resolve this type of crisis. While the men discussed and explored the possible causes of this crisis, the practitioner introduced the idea of examining their previously implicit agreement: “As you might be aware, many gay male couples are able to have satisfying, long-term relationships that are ‘open’ or sexually nonexclusive. Have either of you ever considered this option?”

Although Mark seemed very interested in altering their relationship agreement, his partner was more tentative. John considered monogamy to be the norm for intimate unions and he had particular trouble conceiving of a relationship in which outside sex was allowed, even though he admitted to occasional attractions to other men. In order to encourage the couple to discuss whether an open relationship was appropriate for them, it was important for the clinician to raise this option nonjudgmentally.

Helping Mark and John Communicate

Mark wanted to try having an open relationship with John, but he knew his partner was reluctant. During the session the clinician urged Mark and John to talk about this issue with each other as he listened. John stated that he worried Mark’s desire for outside sex was an indication that he did not love him. At times, John would attack Mark by calling him a sex maniac. Not surprisingly, Mark would react defensively.

As he heard the two men talk, the social worker suspected that fear of losing each other was what lay behind John’s anger and Mark’s defensiveness. He interrupted the men’s discussion by asking John to use “I” statements to tell Mark how his outside sexual activity made him feel. He instructed Mark to initially just listen, and then state what he thought John had said and felt, checking with his partner to be sure he heard him accurately. In this way, John was able to directly communicate to his partner his fears that Mark’s desire for outside sex meant he was somehow inadequate. John shared with Mark his apprehension that he would someday find someone to replace him. Because John was expressing his feelings without attacking, Mark felt less defensive and was able to understand and respond to John’s insecurity. Mark verbally reaffirmed his commitment to John and worked hard to reassure him that he was not looking for another long-term partner. While he loved John and enjoyed the life they had built together, Mark wanted to more fully explore, express, and satisfy his varied sexual needs.

After several sessions, John began to discuss his own burgeoning curiosity about outside sex. This growing interest, along with his partner’s continued reassurance, led John to agree to attempt an open relationship for a trial period of 6 months. As the couple reached this agreement the social worker asked questions that encouraged the men to establish rules regarding extrarelatinal sexual activity. When could outside sex occur? Were any activities forbidden? How would they protect themselves from AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases? Would they discuss their liaisons with each other or keep them a secret? The practitioner prompted the couple to discuss these issues as he listened, occasionally coaching them as they formulated mutually agreed-upon guidelines. Mark and John agreed to engage in outside sexual activity only when one or the other was away on business. In an effort to avoid potential emotional involvement, seeing another man more than once was prohibited. In addition, they promised to only partake in safer sex with outside partners.

After 6 months, Mark and John evaluated their revised sexual agreement. John was surprised to learn that he was able to enjoy occasional outside sex. He also reported feeling less jealous about Mark’s extrarelatinal sexual activity. It seemed that the men’s outside sexual lives taught them new sexual techniques that they shared with each other. Both men reported feeling a fresh sense of freedom and adventure. Occasionally sharing their exploits, as well as their feelings about them, seemed to breathe new life into their relationship. More importantly, resolving this seemingly insurmountable conflict left the

men feeling an increased sense of closeness, which was enhanced by the communication skills learned in therapy.

However, some modification was needed. There was an occasion when Mark returned home from a business trip one day early to find John in their bed with another man. This incident left both Mark and John feeling uncomfortable and as a result, they agreed not to bring outside sexual partners into their home. After making this adjustment in their agreement, the couple proceeded to enjoy their open relationship.

The Importance of Monogamy: Ricardo and Keith

Ricardo and Keith had been together as a couple for 2 years. Both men were in their late 20s and lived in a condominium in the suburbs of a small city. Ricardo, an amateur bodybuilder, had emigrated from Central America as a teenager and now worked in the field of human services. Keith was an accountant for a large telecommunications firm. Both men's previous unions ended when their partners violated their agreements to be sexually monogamous. When Keith and Ricardo fell in love, they promised to stay sexually faithful. They agreed that if either man "cheated," the relationship would be terminated.

The couple now sought counseling for communication problems. What quickly became clear to the worker was that this couple had many conflicts and few resolution skills. When a disagreement emerged, Ricardo would try to persuasively lecture his partner to see things his way. Keith, a quiet man who preferred to avoid conflict, perceived Ricardo's monologues as haranguing efforts to dominate him. In response, he would withdraw into a sullen, silent retreat, making resolution virtually impossible. What was also apparent was how very suspicious and jealous the men were of each other. They constantly questioned each other about their whereabouts while apart, and if one man was not where he said he would be, or he was late coming home, angry accusations of sexual infidelity would ensue. Keith's ongoing friendship with his ex-lover led Ricardo to suspect that they were continuing their sexual relationship. Keith's recent refusal to initiate sex, as well as his emotional withdrawal when confronted, was perceived by Ricardo as proof that his partner had something to hide. In a related fashion, Keith's jealousy was aggravated by the admiring glances Ricardo's flashing smile and bodybuilder's physique inspired. Ricardo admitted that lately, he found himself strongly sexually attracted to the men he worked out with at his gym and this confession further fueled Keith's insecurity and suspicions.

Reaffirming the Monogamous Commitment

The worker wondered aloud if Ricardo and Keith's problems with jealousy were concealing one or both men's wishes to engage in outside sex. Had either of them been thinking about perhaps changing their relationship agreement? Were they aware that some men in long-term relationships were able to make non-monogamy work for them? Ricardo believed his recent feelings of attraction to other men were related to the frustrations in his current relationship, and he was adamant that he did not want to act on these feelings. Both men resolutely stated that even though they had friends in open relationships, they knew that their tendencies to feel jealous meant that monogamy was the more suitable choice for them. In addition, Keith and Ricardo believed they could never truly achieve the intimacy they both desired if they shared their partner sexually with someone else. Hearing each other verbalize their commitment to a monogamous union reassured the men of the solidity of the relationship and helped to ease their insecurities.

The worker openly supported the men in their relationship choice. He framed their adoption of good conflict resolution skills as a way to protect their monogamous relationship, making it as impervious to outside attractions as possible. He helped the men to resolve their numerous difficulties by teaching Ricardo to lecture less, listen more, and to elicit his partner's point of view. Keith was encouraged to assert his opinion to Ricardo, rather than retreat, and to find ways to interrupt his partner when he lectured. The worker also helped the men reassure each other of their commitment and their promise to stay monogamous. By the end of treatment, the couple had established new ways of communicating and restoring confidence in each other. This, in turn, helped Keith to feel secure enough to take risks in their physical relationship and once again initiate sex with Ricardo. Six-month follow-up revealed that their improvements had continued and that their relationship remained monogamous.

Conclusions

The presence of outside sex may not automatically indicate that a gay couple is in trouble. Additionally, for monogamous couples, extrarelational sexual behavior or feelings do not necessarily mean that the relationship agreement needs to be altered. To assist gay male couples with problems related to outside sex, the partners' overall relationship satisfaction, along with their specific preferences should be considered. For Bill and Alex, outside

sex had historically added excitement to their relationship, while Bill's emotional affair indicated that they had drifted apart. For Mark and John, infidelity in a monogamous relationship did not lead to dissolution, nor a recommitment toward monogamy, but instead signaled the need for more honest communication which ultimately led to their agreement to be sexually nonexclusive. Conversely, Ricardo's attractions to other men did not signify that the couple needed to "open up" but rather that insecurity and sexual problems between the two men called for resolution. By encouraging Ricardo and Keith to talk to each other about the issue of outside sex, the practitioner helped the two men renew their commitment to monogamy. Thus, while it might be important sometimes to suggest non-monogamy as a possible relationship option, getting members of a gay male couple to openly communicate their feelings regarding outside sex and other intimacy related concerns is critical to an accurate assessment and successful treatment.

When assisting non-monogamous gay male couples, it is important to determine if the partners have set rules for outside sexual behavior. Findings from a survey indicate that gay men in open partnerships establish rules to prevent extra-dyadic sexual behavior from interfering with their primary relationships (Hickson et al., 1992). Alex and Bill, along with John and Mark, needed help establishing such guidelines. Inquiring about rules and getting the partners to talk to each other about them is a way to help couples create or modify existing guidelines to fit their particular preferences and circumstances.

Gay men have been stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, and male-to-male sex has been stigmatized in our culture (McVinney, 1998). Gay male clients may fear that heterosexual social workers will pathologize their sex lives, which could discourage them from raising their sexual problems in treatment. To counteract this possibility, the clinician must demonstrate that she or he is willing to discuss these issues. In keeping with the social work value of self-determination (NASW, 1996), practitioners need to respect client preferences and be prepared to assist gay men in deciding what type of relationship works best for them. By openly stating an understanding of the various options available for male unions, the practitioner may be implicitly assuring client couples that he or she is objective and knowledgeable enough to help them resolve issues related to extra-dyadic sex in a way that suits their specific needs.

Within some couples, men might be mismatched in their relationship style preferences. John could have refused to agree to an open relationship, and this would

have presented a difficult clinical dilemma. Social workers should treat such couples as they would any relationship in which members disagree about a significant aspect of their union. Presenting non-monogamy in a nonjudgmental manner could encourage such men to broaden their ideas about potential relationship options, increasing the likelihood of a compromise. However, the topic of extrarelational sex can arouse strong emotions, and partners who are unable to concur on this issue may eventually terminate their relationship despite the clinician's best efforts.

Although the ability to separate sex from love may explain why some men engage in open relationships, other explanations are also possible. Internalized homophobia, the availability of casual sex, and the lack of legal sanctions for gay couples have all been blamed for some men's failure to achieve intimacy, as evidenced by their participation in open relationships (Driggs & Finn, 1991; McVinney, 1998). Clearly, more research is needed on the comparison between open and closed relationships and on the conditions under which these different relationship options are functional or pathological.

The case examples in this article described clinical work with only two types of couples: monogamous and open. Shernoff (1995) identified additional possibilities including sexually nonexclusive but unacknowledged open relationships, and "ménages" or couples who engage in sex together with a third person. Further study of each of these types of couples could help social workers, as well as marriage and family scholars, to understand more fully the diversity and related clinical needs of all types of gay male couples.

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Author's Note: Appreciation is expressed to James I. Martin, associate professor, the Ehrenkranz School of Social Work, New York University, for his review of previous versions of this manuscript.

Manuscript received: February 15, 2000

Revised: June 19, 2000

Accepted: June 29, 2000