

Extradyadic Sex and Gay Male Couples: Comparing Monogamous and Nonmonogamous Relationships

Michael C. LaSala

ABSTRACT

In this study, the author compared the relationship quality of sexually monogamous and nonmonogamous gay male couples. Among a nationwide surveyed sample of 121 gay male couples, no differences were found between strictly monogamous and openly nonmonogamous couples on scores of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). In addition, mean DAS scores for both groups were within functional ranges. However, self-reported monogamous couples in which 1 or both members engaged in extrarelational sex were less adjusted and satisfied than their nonmonogamous and strictly monogamous counterparts. The findings suggest that for some gay men, sexual monogamy may not be a necessary component of a satisfactory, committed relationship, and social workers assisting gay male couples might need to reconsider traditional ideas about sex, intimacy, and commitment.

Although many committed, long-term gay male couples are sexually monogamous, findings suggest that many others are not. Surveys before and after the onset of the AIDS epidemic suggest that a proportion of gay men are in relationships in which both members have agreed to be sexually nonexclusive (“Advocate Sex Poll,” 2002; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bringle, 1995; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Davidovich, de Wit, & Stroebe, 2000; Hickson et al., 1992; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985–1986; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). In studies comparing samples of gay and lesbian couples (“Advocate Sex Poll,” 2002; Bryant & Demian, 1994), as well as gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), gay respondents have been significantly more likely to be in couples that allowed extradyadic sex.

The available research comparing the relationship quality of monogamous and nonmonogamous gay male couples is

dated and inconclusive. Some of these findings suggest that sex outside the relationship is related to couple dissatisfaction (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Saghir & Robins, 1973). When Kurdek and Schmitt (1985–1986) compared 98 men in self-described monogamous relationships with 34 men in open couples, they discovered that men in monogamous relationships reported less tension and more favorable attitudes toward their unions than their nonmonogamous counterparts. However, other investigators found no significant differences in relationship quality between samples of monogamous and nonmonogamous couples. Peplau (1981) discovered no differences between samples of partners in closed and open relationships on measures of relationship quality. Blasband and Peplau (1985) reported that relationship quality was equivalent for the sexually exclusive and open gay couples in their sample. Kurdek (1988) compared

34 open and 31 closed couples and found no significant differences on couple satisfaction or adjustment in his sample. In McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) sample of 156 gay male couples, all of those who had been together more than 5 years described their relationships as nonmonogamous by mutual agreement, leading the authors to conclude that sexual nonmonogamy might be related to couple longevity. The purpose of the study described in this article was to provide current findings to help clarify whether nonmonogamous gay male relationships can be functional and comparable to their monogamous counterparts.

Several writers have offered pathologizing explanations for the tendency of some gay men to engage in sexually nonexclusive relationships. Because of early and repeated exposure to negative attitudes about homosexuality from peers, family, and society, the realization that one is gay and a member of a stigmatized group can be accompanied by psychological distress and self-condemnation (Goffman, 1963; Meyer & Dean, 1998). Upon recognition, gay youths may conceal and repress their unwanted homosexual attractions, and this repression is believed to result in shame, internalized homophobia, and compartmentalizing of sexual feelings as adults. This process may render some gay men unable to integrate sex and emotional intimacy in long-term relationships (Colgan, 1987; Driggs & Finn, 1991; McVinnay, 1998; Sullivan, 1996).

If it is true that gay men compartmentalize and isolate their sexual feelings from their other emotions, conflicted gay couple members may be prone to distancing from each other by creating what Bowenian family therapists call *emotional triangles* with extradyadic sexual partners (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Krestan & Bepko, 1980). Bowenian theorists believe that when tension increases between two people, they seek to involve a third person, such as a child, parent, or an outside lover (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Anxiety and distress get diverted when couple members get their unmet emotional needs addressed by people outside the couple. Unfortunately, this diversion often eliminates the couple members' motivation to solve the problems between them. Within ongoing emotional triangles, dyadic conflict remains unresolved, and one or both couple members could become symptomatic (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Some clinicians argue that sexual nonmonogamy interferes with couple intimacy and that successful, open, gay male couples are more the exception than the norm (Driggs & Finn, 1991; Greenan & Tunnell, 2003). However, others have suggested that mutually agreed upon open relationships may be workable for some gay men (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996; Johnson & Keren, 1996), and that practitioners who judge gay male couples as dysfunctional solely on the presence of outside sex might be operating from a "heterocentrist frame of reference" (Green et al., 1996, p. 216), applying heterosexual norms of monogamy and intimacy that are not congruent with their clients' needs and preferences. Such practitioners might be overlooking the possibility that some gay men

establish sexually nonexclusive relationships in order to balance their needs for intimacy with their male-oriented desires for sexual freedom and variety. It is believed that men, in contrast to women, are more likely to cognitively separate sex from love (Banfield & McCabe, 2001; Duncombe & Marsden, 1999), and though investigators disagree as to the causes (biology, social conditioning, or a combination of both), available findings seem to reflect this tendency. In a sample of 253 heterosexual men and women, men were significantly more likely than women to report engaging in ongoing sexual relationships without wanting emotional involvement (Townsend, 1995). Compared with women, men have been found to be significantly more likely to approve of sex in a casual relationship (Hyde & Oliver, 2000) and to consider having sexual intercourse with a stranger (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Glass and Wright (1985, 1992) found that over half of the men in their sample who had extramarital sex stated that their marriages were actually happy or very happy and that they pursued extramarital relationships for sexual excitement rather than emotional fulfillment. When 844 gay, lesbian, and heterosexual respondents were asked their reasons for engaging in sexual behavior, men (both gay and heterosexual) were more likely than women (both lesbian and heterosexual) to give reasons that emphasized sexual pleasure and recreation rather than intimacy (Leigh, 1989).

This possibly gendered tendency to cognitively separate sex from love and to pursue sexual variety is reflected in the reasons gay men give for maintaining sexually nonexclusive relationships. Blasband and Peplau (1985) found that men in open relationships reported a stronger desire for sexual excitement and diversity than their monogamous counterparts. The sexually nonmonogamous couples interviewed for McWhirter and Mattison's (1984) study stated that outside sex was solely recreational and added variety to their sex lives without interfering with their emotional commitments to their partners. Although more current research is needed, these findings begin to suggest that for some coupled gay men, nonmonogamy might not necessarily be a dysfunctional effort to avoid intimacy or divert conflict.

Nevertheless, many gay men establish relationships in which sexual exclusivity is expected ("Advocate Sex Poll," 2002; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985–1986). Unlike their sexually open counterparts, men in couples in which monogamy has been mutually agreed upon usually consider outside sex a betrayal of trust (Marcus, 1999). In the previously cited studies, relationship satisfaction for couples who broke their monogamous agreements was not examined. However, in a sample of 63 HIV-serodiscordant gay male couples in New York City, those who were not in mutually agreed upon open relationships but engaged in extradyadic sex in the year prior to the study had lower relationship quality than those who were in either strictly monogamous or open relationships (Wagner, Remien, & Carballo-Diequez, 2000). Thus, unlike their openly nonexclusive

counterparts, men in monogamous agreement couples who engage in outside sex might indeed be deflecting tension from unresolved dyadic conflict.

The contradictory perspectives and antiquated findings in the existent literature on couple satisfaction and sexual monogamy among gay male couples indicate the need for further research. By undertaking this study, I sought to provide additional, updated information in this area by comparing sexually exclusive and nonexclusive couples in order to answer the following research question: Do gay male couples differ on relationship quality or satisfaction on the basis of whether they identify their relationship as either monogamous or openly nonmonogamous? In addition, I sought to test the following hypothesis: Gay male couples in which both men state they are monogamous but at least one partner has had outside sex (broken agreement couples) will experience less relationship quality than couples who have maintained their agreement (strictly monogamous and open couples).

Method

In this article, I describe the quantitative findings from a study that employed a mixed-method (quantitative–qualitative), quantitative-dominant design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire survey, at the end of which they were invited to include contact information if they were willing to participate in an interview. Interviews focused on the reasons the men established their relationship agreements, and these findings have been reported elsewhere (LaSala, 2003, in press).

Sample

A convenience sample was recruited via computer electronic mailing lists of several national gay and lesbian organizations. In an effort to reach potential respondents who did not own computers, I advertised the study in a national magazine targeted at gays and lesbians. In addition, colleagues and I posted advertisements in restaurants and coffee shops in central New Jersey; New York City; San Francisco, Washington, DC; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. I also distributed flyers to members of two African American and Latino gay social organizations in New York City. Potential participants contacted me by telephone or e-mail to ask questions and to make arrangements to receive survey packets. Each packet consisted of two surveys and two stamped, self-addressed return envelopes. Each couple who was sent a survey was assigned a number, and each partner within every couple was randomly assigned the letter A or B. Thus, for example, respondents designated 100A and 100B were 2 men within the same couple. Number and letter labels were written on survey forms and return envelopes. Each partner was instructed to complete the survey independently and to return his survey separately using the envelope with the corresponding number–letter label. Respondents were also asked to refrain from discussing

their responses with their partners until after they had both returned the completed surveys. Because return envelopes and surveys were labeled with the respondents' numbers and letters, couple-members' surveys could be matched after they were received. Enclosed in each survey packet was a consent form describing the respondents' rights and protections, including the confidentiality of their participation and responses. Participants indicated their informed consent by returning signed copies along with their completed surveys in the return envelopes.

To be eligible to participate, each dyad needed to have been a self-described committed couple (as opposed to “dating” or “seeing each other”) for at least 1 year. In addition, the partners had to be cohabitating at the time of the study. Surveys were sent to 460 men in 230 couples, and 264 (57%) were returned. Both men in 121 couples completed and returned the surveys, along with 22 individual men whose partners did not return the survey. Because the unit of analysis was the couple, only data from the 121 couples were analyzed.

Of the 242 gay men in these couples who completed the survey, most identified themselves as White (see Table 1). In one couple, neither partner reported his ethnicity. For analysis purposes, this variable was collapsed into White ($n = 213$) and non-White ($n = 27$). In addition, the sample consisted of predominantly long-term couples who were middle and upper-middle class. Couples from the northeastern United States were overrepresented.

TABLE 1. Demographics of the Sample

DEMOGRAPHIC	<i>n</i>	%
Ethnicity		
White	213	88.0
African American	7	2.9
Latino	14	5.8
Asian American	4	1.7
Native American	2	0.8
U.S. region of origin		
Northeast	45	37.2
Midwest	22	18.2
South	25	20.7
West	25	20.7
Other	3	2.5

Note. Age, $M = 43$ years ($SD = 11.26$); years together, $M = 9.49$ ($SD = 8.51$); and income, $M = \$106,464$ ($SD = \$68,022.02$)

Because an unknown proportion of gay men do not publicly identify themselves, the characteristics of the general population of gay men are largely unknown (Martin & Knox, 2000). However, it is assumed that this mostly White, affluent, northeastern sample of openly gay men is not representative.

Measures

Relationship quality. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976, 1989) is a widely used 32-item self-report measure of couple relationship quality that has also been utilized in research with gay and lesbian couples

(Kurdek, 1988, 1992b; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985–1986; Wagner et al., 2000). For the key dependent variables, the dyadic adjustment total score, which measures overall relationship adjustment, was used in addition to its subscale scores: affectional expression (satisfaction with affection and sex in the relationship); dyadic consensus (the extent of agreement between partners on important relationship matters such as money, recreation, household tasks, etc); dyadic cohesion (common interests and activities shared by the couple); and dyadic satisfaction (the amount of tension in the relationship, level of satisfaction, the extent to which the individual has considered ending the relationship). As has been done in previous studies of gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1988; Wagner et al., 2000), individual partner DAS scores were summed and divided by 2 to obtain a single score for each couple. However, intracouple differences in relationship scores were also examined.

Spanier (1976, 1989) has suggested that dyadic adjustment scores below 100 are indicative of poor couple functioning. Such cutoff scores have not been established for the subscales. However, Spanier (1989) did suggest scores that would be considered “below average” (47 for dyadic consensus, 36 for dyadic satisfaction, 8 for affectional expression, and 11 for dyadic cohesion).

For this sample, the DAS had excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$). Dyadic consensus (.84), dyadic satisfaction (.79), and dyadic cohesion (.80) had good internal consistency. The alpha coefficient was lower (.59) for affectional expression, as has been previously found in other studies (Kurdek, 1992a; Spanier, 1989).

Relationship agreement. At the beginning of the questionnaire, sexual activity was defined as giving or receiving oral or anal sex or participating in mutual masturbation. Using a typology suggested by Shernoff (1995), I asked men to describe their relationship by checking one of several categories: open/nonmonogamous (“We have agreed to have sex outside of the relationship”); threesome only (“We have agreed to have outside sex only in threesomes or groups that include my partner”); monogamous (“We have agreed to be monogamous; I have only had sex with my partner since our relationship began”); and broken monogamous agreement couples (“We have agreed to be monogamous but I have had sex outside the relationship”). On the basis of the partner’s responses, couples were categorized as strictly monogamous, monogamous with outside sex (broken agreement), and open.

There were 4 couples in which partners did not agree on relationship category because 1 partner reported the relationship was monogamous, and the other stated it was an open relationship. Follow-up interviews with both partners in these dyads revealed that in 2 of these couples, 1 partner had misread or misunderstood the item on the questionnaire and marked “monogamous” in error. Therefore, these 2 couples were classified as open. Both partners in the other dyads had stated they agreed to be monogamous, but 1

partner in each couple had engaged in outside sex in the past year, so they were classified as broken monogamous agreement couples.

No significant differences were found between three-some-only and open couples on any of the relationship quality or demographic variables, so these two couple types were combined to create a single category of nonmonogamous couples. In addition, the survey included questions about the frequency of outside sexual activity since the beginning of the relationship and during the past year. Because a previous study (Wagner et al., 2000) suggested that outside sex in the past year for monogamous agreement couples could indicate acute relationship problems, monogamous couples in which at least 1 of the partners had had outside sex in the past year were identified and examined during the analysis. Men were also asked to indicate whether they had discussed their extrarelational sexual behavior with their partners.

Results

Frequencies

In the sample, 73 couples (60.3%) reported that their relationship agreements were monogamous, and 48 (39.6%) stated that they were in sexually open/nonmonogamous relationships. In 33 (45.2%) of the 73 monogamous agreement couples, 1 or both partners reported outside sex since the beginning of the relationship; 17 (51.5%) of the broken monogamous agreement couples reported outside sex in the past year.

In the openly nonmonogamous couples, frequency of outside sex since the start of the relationship ranged from 2 to 2,500 incidents with a median of 41.5 and a mode of 6. Frequency of outside sex in the past year for these couples ranged from 0 to 350 occurrences with a median of 8 and a mode of 2. Among the broken monogamous agreement couples, the frequency of outside sex since the start of the relationship ranged from 1 to 63 incidents with a median of 5 and a mode of 1. For these couples, frequency of outside sex in the past year ranged from 0 to 10 incidents with a mean of 2 ($SD = 2.71$).

All of the couples who were nonmonogamous by mutual agreement reported discussing at least some of their outside sex with their partners. In 11 (33.3%) of the 33 couples with broken monogamous agreements, none of the outside sex was discussed. Of the 17 monogamous couples in which at least 1 partner had outside sex in the past year, there were 4 couples (23.5%) in which outside sex had not been discussed.

Relationship Agreement

To answer the research question, I used *t* tests to compare the 73 couples identifying themselves as monogamous to the 48 self-reported open dyads (see Table 2). There were no significant differences on demographic variables or length of relationship, dyadic adjustment, affectional expression, dyadic consensus, or dyadic cohesion. Monogamous couples

TABLE 2. A Comparison of Mean Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Subscale Scores for Monogamous and Nonmonogamous Couples

SCALE OR SUBSCALE	ALL MONOGAMOUS COUPLES (<i>n</i> = 73)		NONMONOGAMOUS COUPLES (<i>n</i> = 48)		<i>t</i> (119)	<i>p</i> (TWO-TAILED)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Dyadic Adjustment	117.30	12.33	119.55	9.98	-1.06	.294
Affectional Expression	9.21	1.69	9.07	1.53	0.47	.642
Dyadic Consensus	50.02	5.26	50.91	4.54	-0.96	.337
Dyadic Cohesion	17.51	3.35	17.59	3.32	-0.13	.898
Dyadic Satisfaction	40.59	4.10	42.01	3.20	-2.136 ^a	.035

^a Because of significant differences in variances, 115.49 degrees of freedom were used for this *t* test.

scored significantly lower ($p < .05$) on dyadic satisfaction than their open counterparts. However, when broken monogamous agreement couples were removed from the monogamous group, there was no longer a significant difference between monogamous and nonmonogamous couples on dyadic satisfaction.

Spearman's correlations were used to determine whether either frequency of outside sex since the start of the relationship or in the past year was related to couple quality for the openly nonmonogamous agreement couples. No significant associations were found.

Broken Monogamous Agreement Couples

In order to test the research hypotheses, I calculated a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) comparing the following three groups: nonmonogamous ($n = 48$), strictly monogamous ($n = 40$), and broken agreement ($n = 33$) couples, and no significant differences were found. However, when broken agreement couples were compared with all other couples combined, monogamous couples with outside sex had lower dyadic adjustment and dyadic satisfaction (see Table 3; because the hypothesis predicted that couples in which partners broke their monogamous agreement would score lower on the relationship quality variables, one-tailed *t* tests were used.)

As Table 4 indicates, monogamous agreement couples in which at least 1 partner had outside sex in the past year ($n = 17$) had significantly lower scores on dyadic adjustment, affectional expression, and dyadic satisfaction than the rest of the sample ($n = 104$).

Broken agreement couples who engaged in outside sex in the past year ($n = 17$) were found to be significantly lower in satisfaction, $t(31) = 2.23$, $p = .027$ (one-tailed), and in affectional expression, $t(29) = 1.78$, $p = .043$ (one-tailed), compared with those whose outside sex occurred over a year ago ($n = 16$). When monogamous agreement couples who broke their agreement in the past year were removed

from the sample, the remaining broken monogamous agreement couples (outside sex over a year ago) did not significantly differ from the rest of the sample on any measure of relationship quality.

Additional Findings on Broken Agreement Couples

Discussion of outside sex. There were no significant differences found between broken monogamous agreement couples where outside sex was discussed compared with broken monogamous agreement couples in which the men had not done so. However, broken agreement couples in which 1 or both men had had sex in the past year and had not discussed it ($n = 4$) scored lower on affectional expression compared with couples who had discussed it ($n = 13$), $t(13) = -2.64$, $p = .009$ (one-tailed). Of course, these findings must be interpreted very cautiously because of the very small subsample sizes.

Frequency of outside sex. Spearman's correlations were used to determine whether either frequency of outside sex since the start of the relationship or frequency of outside sex in the past year was related to couple quality among broken monogamous agreement couples. No significant associations were found.

Functional versus low scores on relationship quality. Spanier (1989) defined overall dyadic adjustment scores below 100 as indicative of poor dyadic adjustment, and the group means for each couple type (monogamous, broken agreement, broken agreement in the past year, nonmonogamous) fell above this cutoff. Furthermore, mean scores for couple types were comparable to those found in other research with nonclinical samples of lesbian and gay couples (Kurdek, 1988; Wagner et. al., 2000). However, when the couples were examined individually, 10 couples had dyadic adjustment scores below 100. Four of these couples (40%) were monogamous and had broken their agreement at some point in the relationship, and 2 had done so in the past year.

TABLE 3. A Comparison of Mean Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Subscale Scores for Monogamous Couples With Outside Sex Compared With All Others

SCALE OR SUBSCALE	MONOGAMOUS WITH OUTSIDE SEX (<i>n</i> = 33)		ALL OTHER COUPLES (<i>n</i> = 88)		<i>t</i> (119)	<i>p</i> (ONE-TAILED)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Dyadic Adjustment	115.27	10.26	119.29	11.76	1.73	.043
Affectional Expression	8.88	1.61	9.27	1.62	1.18	.119
Dyadic Consensus	49.15	4.31	50.83	5.17	1.66	.050
Dyadic Cohesion	17.11	2.94	17.71	3.47	0.89	.188
Dyadic Satisfaction	40.21	3.66	41.51	3.84	1.67	.048

TABLE 4. A Comparison of Mean Dyadic Adjustment Scale and Subscale Scores for Monogamous Couples With Outside Sex in the Past Year Compared With All Others

SCALE OR SUBSCALE	MONOGAMOUS WITH OUTSIDE SEX IN PAST YEAR (<i>n</i> = 17)		ALL OTHER COUPLES (<i>n</i> = 104)		<i>t</i> (119)	<i>p</i> (ONE-TAILED)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Dyadic Adjustment	113.38	10.03	118.98	11.54	1.89	.031
Affectional Expression	8.41	1.69	9.29	1.59	2.09	.020
Dyadic Consensus	49.18	4.10	50.57	5.11	1.07	.145
Dyadic Cohesion	16.97	2.60	17.64	3.43	0.77	.223
Dyadic Satisfaction	38.91	3.92	41.52	3.69	2.68	.004

The mean subscale scores were comparable to nonclinical samples of lesbian and gay couples (Kurdek, 1988; Wagner et al., 2000). However, 22 couples fell into the “below average” category for affectional expression, as did 5 for dyadic cohesion, 31 for dyadic consensus, and 17 for dyadic satisfaction. Chi-square results indicated that broken agreement couples were not more likely to fall into low-score categories than all other couples combined. However, it was discovered that couples who had broken their agreements in the past year were more likely to have low scores for dyadic satisfaction, $\chi^2(1, N = 121) = 3.87, p = .049$, and affectional expression, $\chi^2(1, N = 121) = 3.89, p = .048$, than all other couples combined.

Intracouple score differences. Because the method of attaining couple scores could obscure variability within couples and because significant within-couple differences on relationship quality measures could be an indication of couple discord (Kenny, 1996; Kurdek, 1992b), intracouple differences for dyadic adjustment and the subscales were calculated for each of the couples, and mean differences were computed for each couple type and compared. No significant differences were found based on whether the couple agreed to be monogamous or open. In addition, no significant differences were found when comparing broken agreement couples with all other couples. However, compared with all other couples, monogamous agreement couples with outside sex in the past year had larger mean intracouple differences on satisfaction, $t(119) = -2.5, p = .007$ (one-tailed), and on dyadic cohesion, $t(119) = 1.81, p = .037$ (one-tailed).

Monogamous agreement couples in which 1 member had had outside sex in the past year and the other had not ($n = 14$) were examined to determine whether the men who had had outside sex had lower or higher satisfaction or dyadic cohesion scores than their partners. In 7 (50.0%) of these 14 couples, the man who broke the agreement rated dyadic satisfaction higher than his partner, and in the other 7 the man who did not have outside sex had the higher score. However, in 9 (64.3%) of these couples, the partner who broke the agreement reported lower dyadic cohesion. In 4 of the remaining couples, the man who broke the agreement rated dyadic cohesion higher than his partner, and in 1 couple there were no intracouple differences on this subscale.

Discussion

In order to be maximally effective with this population, social workers and other human service professionals need to be aware of how gay male relationships may or may not fit commonly accepted notions about the connection between sexual exclusivity and relationship commitment. This study builds on previous research that suggests that some gay men are able to maintain functional relationships that allow extradyadic sexual contact (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1988; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Wagner et al., 2000). As stated previously, findings suggest that many men separate sex from love and prize sexual variety (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Glass & Wright, 1985, 1992; Hyde & Oliver, 2000; Leigh, 1989; Townsend, 1995); thus it makes sense that some male–male couples would establish sexually open relationships to accommodate both their intimacy needs and their desires for sexual diversity. In general, the men in this study who were in relationships in which both partners agreed to be sexually nonexclusive (along with many who pledged monogamy but had outside sex) appeared to maintain healthy and satisfying primary relationships. This suggests that commonly held notions linking sexual exclusivity with intimacy, such as those found in Bowenian theory, might not reflect the preferences and realities of all gay male couples.

However, on the basis of these findings, it is a mistake to assume that all gay men have sex outside of their primary relationships. In contrast to results from a previous study that found no couples together over 5 years who were completely sexually monogamous (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984), one third of the couples in this study were in monogamous agreement relationships with no outside sex, and 14 of these couples were together over 5 years. Furthermore, human service professionals should not assume that outside sex is always acceptable for gay male couples. Monogamous agreement couples in which 1 or both partners engaged in outside sex in the past year were overrepresented among low scorers on subscales measuring satisfaction with sex, affection, relationship tension, and commitment. Like heterosexuals who are sexually unfaithful to their spouses and partners (Brown, 1991; Pittman, 1990), some gay men in monogamous agreement couples who have recently broken their agreements may be struggling with an inability to adequately resolve couple conflicts

and maintain intimacy. Such couples might be seeking to stabilize their unions by creating emotional triangles with outside partners that deflect unresolved couple discord (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Krestan & Bepko, 1980).

Generalizability of these findings is limited for several reasons. First, this sample was largely affluent, urban, and White and therefore may not represent the diversity of gay couples. For example, gay men from various ethnic or racial groups may differ in how they perceive sexual monogamy and relationship commitment. Findings from a previous study suggest that Latino gay men might be more likely to be in monogamous relationships than their African American or White Anglo counterparts (Wagner et al. 2000). Thus, in the future, researchers examining this topic might need to expend additional efforts to ensure the participation of respondents of color as well as gays from lower socioeconomic classes and rural settings (e.g., additional advertising in venues targeting these populations, respondent-driven sampling, etc.).

In addition, closeted men who are not connected to gay groups, who do not join electronic mailing lists, and who do not read gay-oriented publications are probably underrepresented in this sample. It could be argued that closeted gay men might have less opportunity to meet outside sexual partners, so they may be less likely to establish mutually agreed upon sexually nonexclusive relationships or engage in sex outside of monogamous dyads. However, closeted gay men who are habituated to pursuing clandestine sexual encounters may continue to do so with outside partners once in a committed couple. Though this is a difficult subpopulation to access, more information is needed about the relationships and sexual behaviors of closeted gay men.

Furthermore, couples conflicted about the issue of outside sex might have self-selected out of the study. There were 87 couples who initially agreed to participate and requested survey packets but who failed to complete the survey. Men from 2 of these couples informed me that they were struggling with problems related to sex outside their relationships and therefore decided not to participate. Thus, couples who were in some way troubled about this topic might be underrepresented in the sample.

Nevertheless, on the basis of these and previous findings, practitioners may need to consider that for gay male couples, mutually agreed upon sexual nonmonogamy is not necessarily a sign of couple discord or triangulation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Krestan & Bepko, 1980). This article includes research findings that suggest that both monogamous and openly nonmonogamous gay couples can be satisfied with their relationships. In another article (LaSala, 2001), I described clinical case studies that demonstrated how social workers can incorporate this information in their work with coupled gay men. For example, clinicians assisting broken monogamous agreement couples can help partners discuss their relationship dissatisfaction and also help them determine whether they would like to either reaffirm or perhaps revise their original relationship agreement to be sexually exclusive.

Furthermore, I described how social workers can help openly nonmonogamous couples set guidelines so that their extradynamic sexual behavior does not interfere with their primary relationships. Together, the information from these two articles adds to the available knowledge about gay men by describing a potentially unique aspect of gay male coupling and by offering social workers ways of integrating an understanding of this aspect into their clinical work.

The findings of this study raise questions as to why some gay men choose to establish and maintain sexually exclusive unions and others do not. Are men in strictly sexually monogamous couples more likely than their nonmonogamous counterparts to perceive a strong link between sex, love, and commitment? If so, what factors or conditions influence these tendencies?

In addition, more information is needed regarding gay men who break their monogamous agreements. Unlike their heterosexual counterparts, gay men engage in sex acts and relationships that are stigmatized by the larger society. Even before they realize they are gay, gay men learn that sexual feelings and behaviors between men are shameful and should be hidden. For some gay men, this shame might persist after they come out and therefore could handicap their ability to be open and honest with their partners about their sexual feelings (Greenan & Tunnell, 2003). If one considers this socially conditioned propensity to be ashamed of and to hide one's sexual behaviors and feelings, it is perhaps not hard to understand why some gay men might choose to carry on a secret sex life rather than openly discuss and resolve their conflicts with their partners. Certainly, more research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to determine whether there is a connection between societal disapproval and the reasons some gay men break their monogamous sexual agreements.

These findings also raise questions as to how open couples prevent outside sex from interfering in their primary relationships. Furthermore, how do they deal with the risk of transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases? Findings from one study (Hickson et al., 1992) suggested that nonmonogamous, coupled gay men protect themselves and their unions by promising each other they will only engage in safe extradynamic sex and agreeing not to have more than one sexual encounter with the same outside partner. Additional quantitative and qualitative findings are needed to determine how men in open couples are able to engage in extradynamic sex without it interfering in their dyads.

In light of the current debates over same-sex marriage, more empirical information is needed regarding the variety of successful, committed, long-term relationships people establish to suit their needs and preferences. Findings from such research could further challenge our commonly accepted ideas about the connection between intimacy, sexual exclusivity, and commitment and perhaps suggest guidelines for couples (heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian) who wish to maintain intimate relationships that do not follow the traditional norms of heterosexual, monogamous marriage.

References

- The Advocate sex poll. (2002, August 20). *The Advocate*, 869/870, pp. 28–43.
- Banfield, S., & McCabe, M. P. (2001). Extra relationship involvement among women: Are they different from men? *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 30, 119–142.
- Bell, A., & Weinberg, M. (1978). *Homosexualities: A study of diversity among men and women*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Bepko, C., & Johnson, T. (2000). Gay and lesbian couples in therapy: Perspectives for the contemporary family therapist. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 26, 409–419.
- Blasband, D., & Peplau, L. (1985). Sexual exclusivity versus openness in gay male couples. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 14, 395–412.
- Blumstein, P., & Schwartz, P. (1983). *American couples: Money, work, sex*. New York: Morrow.
- Bringle, R. (1995). Sexual jealousy in the relationships of homosexual and heterosexual men: 1980 and 1994. *Personal Relationships*, 2, 313–325.
- Brown, E. M. (1991). *Patterns of infidelity and their treatment*. New York: Bruner/Mazel.
- Bryant, A. S., & Demian. (1994). Relationship characteristics of American gay and lesbian couples: Findings from a national survey. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 1(2), 101–117.
- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. S. (1993). Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychological Review*, 100, 204–232.
- Colgan, P. (1987). Treatment of identity and intimacy issues in gay males. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 14, 101–123.
- Davidovich, U., de Wit, J. B. F., & Stroebe, W. (2000). Assessing sexual risk behaviour of young gay men in primary relationships: The incorporation of negotiated safety and negotiated safety compliance. *AIDS*, 14, 701–706.
- Driggs, J. H., & Finn, S. E. (1991). *Intimacy between men*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Duncombe, J., & Marsden, D. (1999). Love and intimacy: The gender division of emotion and “emotion work”: A neglected aspect of sociological discussion of heterosexual relationships. In G. Allan (Ed.), *The sociology of the family: A reader* (pp. 91–110). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Glass, S. P., & Wright, T. M. (1985). Sex differences in type of extramarital involvement and marital satisfaction. *Sex Roles*, 12, 1101–1120.
- Glass, S. P., & Wright, T. M. (1992). Justifications for extramarital relationships: The association between attitudes, behaviors and gender. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 29, 361–387.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Green, R.-J., Bettinger, M., & Zacks, E. (1996). Are lesbian couples fused and male couples disengaged? Questioning gender straightjackets. In J. Laird & R.-J. Green (Eds.), *Lesbians and gays in couples and families: A handbook for therapists* (pp. 185–230). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Greenan, D. E., & Tunnell, G. (2003). *Couple therapy with gay men*. New York: Guilford.
- Hickson, F. C., Davies, P. M., Hunt, A. J., Weatherburn, P., McManus, T. J., & Coxon, P. (1992). Maintenance of open gay relationships: Some strategies for protection against HIV. *AIDS Care*, 4, 409–419.
- Hyde, S. H., & Oliver, M. B. (2000). Gender differences in sexuality: Results from meta-analysis. In C. B. Travis & J. W. White (Eds.), *Sexuality, society, and feminism* (pp. 57–77). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Johnson, T. W., & Keren, M. S. (1996). Creating and maintaining boundaries in male couples. In J. Laird & R.-J. Green (Eds.), *Lesbians and gays in couples and families: A handbook for therapists* (pp. 231–250). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Kenny, D. A. (1996). Models of non-independence in dyadic research. *Journal of Personal Relationships*, 13, 279–294.
- Kerr, M., & Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation: An approach based on Bowen theory*. New York: Norton.
- Krestan, J. A., & Bepko, C. S. (1980). The problem of fusion in the lesbian relationship. *Family Process*, 19, 277–289.
- Kurdek, L. A. (1988). Relationship quality of gay and lesbian cohabitating couples. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 15, 93–118.
- Kurdek, L. A. (1992a). Assumptions versus standards: The validity of two relationship cognitions in heterosexual and homosexual couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 6, 164–170.
- Kurdek, L. A. (1992b). Dimensionality of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale: Evidence from heterosexual and homosexual couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 6, 22–35.
- Kurdek, L., & Schmitt, P. (1985–1986). Relationship quality of gay men in closed or open relationships. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 12, 85–99.
- LaSala, M. C. (2001). Monogamous or not: Understanding and counseling gay male couples. *Families in Society*, 82, 605–611.
- LaSala, M. C. (2003, January). *Love, intimacy, and outside sex: A qualitative study of gay male couples*. Paper presented at the Seventh Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work Research, Washington, DC.
- LaSala, M. C. (in press). Monogamy of the heart: A qualitative study of extradyadic sex among gay male couples. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*.
- Leigh, R. C. (1989). Reasons for having and avoiding sex: Gender, sexual orientation and relationship to sexual behavior. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35, 199–200.
- Marcus, E. (1999). *The male couple's guide: Finding a man, making a home, building a life* (3rd ed). New York: Harper Collins.
- Martin, J. I., & Knox, J. (2000). Methodological and ethical issues in research on lesbians and gay men. *Social Work Research*, 24, 51–59.
- McVinney, L. D. (1998). Social work practice with gay couples. In G. P. Mallon (Ed.), *Foundations of social work practice with lesbian and gay persons* (pp. 209–227). New York: Harrington Park.
- McWhirter, D. P., & Mattison, A. M. (1984). *The male couple: How relationships develop*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Meyer, L., & Dean, L. (1998). Internalized homophobia, intimacy, and sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men. In G. Herek (Ed.), *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peplau, L. (1981, March). What homosexuals want in relationships. *Psychology Today*, 15(3) 28–38.
- Pittman, S. (1990). *Private lies: Infidelity and the betrayal of intimacy*. New York: Norton.
- Saghir, M. T., & Robins, E. (1973). *Male and female homosexuality: A comprehensive investigation*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins.
- Sherhoff, M. (1995). Male couples and their relationship styles. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 2(2), 43–58.
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Measuring dyadic adjustment: New scales for assessing the quality of marriage and similar dyads. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 38, 15–28.
- Spanier, G. B. (1989). *Manual for the Dyadic Adjustment Scale*. North Tonawanda, NY: Multi-Health Systems.
- Sullivan, A. (1996). *Virtually normal: An argument about homosexuality*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Townsend, J. M. (1995). Sex without emotional involvement: An evolutionary interpretation of sex differences. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 24, 173–206.
- Wagner, G. J., Remien, R. H., & Carballo-Dieguez, A. (2000). Prevalence of extradyadic sex in male couples of mixed HIV status and its relationship to psychological distress and relationship quality. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39, 31–46.

Michael C. LaSala, PhD, LCSW, is assistant professor, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey School of Social Work and also practices clinical social work with gay men at the Institute for Personal Growth in Highland Park, New Jersey. Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to mlasala@rci.rutgers.edu or School of Social Work, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1167.

Author's note. This research was funded by grants from the Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality Grants-in-Aid Program and the Rutgers University Research Council. An earlier version of this paper was presented on February 26, 2002, at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education, Nashville, TN.

Manuscript received: December 4, 2002

Revised: September 15, 2003

Accepted: September 25, 2003