

# Monogamy of the Heart: Extradynamic Sex and Gay Male Couples

Michael C. LaSala

**ABSTRACT.** Sixty-five coupled gay men were qualitatively interviewed to examine how they decided whether or not to be monogamous, and how some maintained openly nonmonogamous relationships. Unlike their monogamous counterparts, men in open relationships cognitively separated sex from intimacy and prized sexual variety. Although outside sex could stimulate insecurity, men in open couples established guidelines that safeguarded their health and affirmed couple primacy. Respondents in self-described monogamous unions who engaged in outside sex minimized its importance, and some reported that monogamy was assumed but never discussed with their partners. These findings suggest that clinicians be flexible regarding traditional ideas about sexual monogamy and commitment as they help gay couples improve communication and affirm couple boundaries. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>* © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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## NOTICE

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In the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, standards 1.05 (b) and (c) mandate that social workers seek the education necessary to understand and sensitively practice with diverse groups including gays and lesbians (NASW, 1999). However, to effectively assist gay male couples, social workers must be prepared to question commonly accepted norms governing sexuality, gender, and intimacy. Clinical social workers and family therapists who believe that sexual nonmonogamy is invariably a sign of relationship or personal pathology might be surprised to learn that many gay men are in couples in which both members have agreed to be sexually nonexclusive (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bringle, 1995; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Hickson et al., 1992; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985, 86; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). In studies comparing samples of gay male and lesbian couples ("Advocate Sex Poll," 2002; Bryant & Demian, 1994) or comparing gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983), gay male respondents have been found to be more likely to be in unions that allowed outside sex.

Mutually agreed upon sexual nonmonogamy in a committed couple runs counter to widely held notions linking sexual exclusivity and intimacy. Although a small amount of exploratory research suggests that some heterosexuals maintain satisfactory openly nonmonogamous marriages (Jenks, 1998), clinical writers have ignored or pathologized long-term committed relationships that are not sexually exclusive. Some therapists (e.g., Charny, 1992) suggest that extradyadic sex is always a sign that the primary relationship is troubled. Bowen believed that when tension rises between two people in a couple, there is a tendency to engage outsiders, resulting in an emotional triangle that deflects tension and stabilizes the original dyad (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For example, if a couple is in conflict about their sexual relationship, one member might engage in extradyadic sexual encounters, creating a triangle. Although this partner gets his/her needs met, unresolved conflict between members of the primary relationship, along with outside sexual relationships, could increase couple distance, rendering the most isolated partner at-risk for developing physical or emotional symptoms (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Some findings suggested that sex outside the relationship is related to gay male couple dissatisfaction (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985/86; Saghir & Robins, 1973). Nevertheless, subsequent studies have found no significant differences in relationship quality between samples of monogamous and openly nonmonogamous couples (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Kurdek, 1988; LaSala, 2004; Wagner,

Remien, & Carballo-Diequez, 2000), thus challenging the idea that commitment and sexual fidelity is inextricably linked.

Recently some family therapists have begun to suggest that openly sexually nonexclusive relationships might be workable for some gay men (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996, Johnson & Keren, 1996). Furthermore, some have proposed that those who judge gay male couples as dysfunctional solely on the presence of outside sex might be heterosexually biased, applying heterosexual norms of monogamy and intimacy that might be overly restrictive and irrelevant to their gay-male clients' needs and preferences (Green et al., 1996; Warner, 1999). However, other clinicians maintain 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, 2002).

The available information about men's sexual and relationship attitudes and behaviors may be helpful in understanding why some gay men establish nonmonogamous gay male relationships. It is believed that men, in contrast to women, are more likely to cognitively separate sex from love (Banfield & McCabe, 2001; Duncombe & Marsden, 1999; Lawson, 1988). Compared to women, men have been found to be more likely to engage in ongoing sexual relationships without wanting emotional involvement (Townsend, 1995), to state that they would consider having sexual intercourse with a stranger (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), and to give reasons for engaging in sexual behavior that emphasize sexual pleasure and recreation, rather than intimacy (Leigh, 1989). Glass and Wright (1985; 1992) found that more than 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.

It would be a mistake to proceed further without acknowledging that not all gay male couples are sexually nonmonogamous. Many gay men establish relationships in which sexual exclusivity is expected (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985, 86). 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). Gay men who had stated they were in sexually monogamous relationships but who had engaged in outside sex in the past year have been found to have lower relationship quality and satisfaction than those in strictly monogamous or open relationships (LaSala, 2004; Wagner et al., 2000). Thus, unlike their openly, sexually nonexclusive counterparts, men in monog-

amous agreement couples who engage in outside sex might indeed be deflecting tension from unresolved dyadic conflict.

Although the empirical literature suggests that some coupled gay men establish successful nonmonogamous relationships, some clinical writers remain unconvinced (Driggs & Finn, 1991; Greenan & Tunnell, 2002), perhaps because it is yet to be explained how couples manage outside sex and still maintain their relationship boundaries, avoiding what Bowen would consider damaging emotional triangles. Additional and current information is needed about how gay men choose their relationship style and also how sexually nonexclusive gay male couples maintain their relationships while allowing outside sex.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS**

This paper describes the qualitative findings from an overall research project that employed a mixed-method (quantitative-qualitative) design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The qualitative portion of the study addressed the following questions: What are the reasons gay men establish either monogamous or sexually nonexclusive relationship agreements? What is the impact of outside sex on monogamous and open couples? Can gay men in openly, sexually nonexclusive couples maintain their relationship boundaries and avoid destructive emotional triangles? If so, how?

In order to participate in the overall study, a respondent needed to be in a relationship with his partner for at least one year and living with him at the time of the study. A convenience sample of 264 coupled gay men was recruited via advertisements posted in a national magazine for lesbians and gays, on computer listservs of national gay and lesbian organizations, and hung in restaurants and coffee shops in central New Jersey, New York City, San Francisco, Washington DC, and Minneapolis. These men completed a self-administered questionnaire that included questions about their extradyadic sexual agreements and behaviors. For this project, sex was defined as oral or anal intercourse, or mutual masturbation. The questionnaire also included the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1979), a measure of relationship quality whose scores served as the dependent variable. Further information about the overall sample recruitment and selection, along with the quantitative findings are reported elsewhere (LaSala, 2004). At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were invited to include contact information if they were

willing to participate in a 90-minute telephone interview. Findings from the qualitative analysis of these interviews are reported in this paper.

### *Participants*

Sixty-five coupled men agreed to be interviewed. Twenty-six (26) of the men resided in the northeastern US, 14 in the Midwest, 11 in the South, 12 on the west coast, and 2 in Canada. Fifty-seven (57) were white, 2 were African American, 4 were Latino, 1 was Asian American, and 1 was Native American. Household incomes ranged from \$8040-\$400,000 with a median of \$85,000 and a mean of \$100,877.50 ( $SD = 77,532.41$ ). The age range of the respondents was 22-82 years old with a mean of 43 ( $SD = 11.65$ ). The length of time couples were together ranged from 1-40 years with a mean of 11.77 ( $SD = 9.03$ ).

The overall interviewed sample of 65 men consisted of both members of 23 couples (46 partners) plus 19 men who responded individually but whose partners did not volunteer to be interviewed. Of the total interviewed sample, 37 men (both partners in 13 couples and 11 participating individually) were in unions in which both partners stated they agreed to be monogamous, although 19 of these respondents (both partners in 4 couples, 3 men in couples with a "faithful" monogamous partner who also participated, and 8 individual responders) had engaged in extradyadic sex. Twenty-eight men (10 couples and 8 individual participants) were in relationships in which both partners agreed to permit extradyadic sex. Respondents described in this paper had DAS scores in the nonclinical ranges unless otherwise specified.

Of the 65 respondents, all but 7 reported regular sexual activity with their partners. Among these 7 men, 6 (5 monogamous respondents and 1 in an open relationship) were either too physically ill or had partners who were too ill to engage in sexual activity.

### *Data Collection*

Interviews were conducted over 18 months. I developed a standardized interview protocol of open-ended questions. Men were asked how and why they and their partners decided to establish monogamous or open relationships, whether they had sex outside their relationships, and how extradyadic sex affected their unions. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

I anticipated that a participant might not be completely honest about his sexual behavior or his feelings in the presence of his partner. There-

fore, interview appointments were scheduled at times when respondents were sure they would be alone.

### *Data Analysis*

#### *Coding of Data*

Grounded theory was the primary methodology used to analyze the data (Glaser, 1992). Upon completion of data collection, I read the quoted responses to a related set of questions. After reviewing the answers of 8-10 of the interviewees, I established initial codes. Examples of these preliminary codes were as follows: need for personal freedom, addressing unmet sexual needs, and insecurity. I sorted quoted responses by code using word processing software. As coding of responses within and across targeted areas continued, it became apparent that several codes cut across relationship categories (Glaser, 1978). For example, jealousy was an issue that cut across each relationship type, but was manifested and addressed in different ways depending on the couple's agreement.

Toward the end of the coding process, I wrote memos to identify and elaborate themes that emerged from the coding process, such as the role of jealousy in relationship decisions (Glaser, 1978). Memos also served as drafts of the results section of this paper.

*Reliability.* Since I shared common experiences with the respondents and could speak the language of gay culture, it was relatively easy to establish the rapport necessary to encourage participants to discuss this very personal area of their lives. However, I also ran the risk of allowing my potentially idiosyncratic view of gay life to bias my perceptions (LaSala, 2003; Martin & Knox, 2000). In order to minimize this possibility, coded segments of the interview transcripts were regularly reviewed with gay and heterosexual clinical and research colleagues throughout data collection and analysis. As a result of these reviews, I revised several codes. For example, after some preliminary coding, I was alerted that I might have been bringing a bias in favor of open relationships to my analysis. I was advised to more thoroughly review segments of the transcripts describing the respondents' feelings about their sex lives, and in doing so I became aware of how many of the men in open relationships had described outside sex as less than satisfactory. I also came to understand how men in monogamous couples perceived close links between intimacy and sexuality.

A lesbian colleague who was a psychotherapist specializing in clinical work with lesbians and gay men sorted data into key codes that emerged during the analysis. Although codes were not changed as a result of these reliability checks, occasionally our sorting choices for a particular response did not agree. In these instances, entire transcripts of the interview in question would be re-read and the response would then be discussed. As a result, several responses were recoded. The final overall agreement between her codes and mine was 90% with a range of 88-91% across key codes.

*Validity: Member Checking.* In addition to grounded theory methods, I also utilized the naturalist/narrative technique known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). To insure that respondents' reports were accurately captured and interpreted and also to provide an opportunity for follow up, I re-contacted respondents during the data analysis. During these contacts, I found that the respondents agreed with my understanding and coding of their responses, and 2 participants added related information that concurred with my original interpretations. In addition, the mixed impact of outside sex on some of the couples was clarified during member checks.

## ***FINDINGS***

### ***Monogamous Couples***

#### *Commitment and Exclusivity*

Virtually all of the men in sexually exclusive dyads chose to establish this type of relationship because they perceived monogamy to be inextricably linked to commitment and intimacy. The following man was 48 years old and in a 9-year relationship:

Well, I wanted someone special to share my life with, one person to relate to, one person to be with, share happy times, sad times, grow old together. [Monogamy] is a natural thing. If you're sharing your life with one person, it's natural. It's a physical commitment as well as emotional.

The following man was 40 years old and had been with his partner for 5 years:

For myself, certainly I wouldn't feel comfortable in an open relationship. I think for Dave it was an issue of commitment. I knew for me I would not feel secure if I knew Dave was not monogamous . . . It's about commitment. I really want a committed relationship and I am willing to give that for commitment in return.

As stated by his 38-year-old partner:

First, it would be really hurtful to Mike. But the other part is I do have a pretty good understanding of the intimacy that gets affected by looking elsewhere, whether going elsewhere is done truthfully or honestly, or whether it's hidden.

#### *Avoidance of Jealousy*

It should be noted that this last respondent was one of 8 currently monogamous men who had been in previously unsuccessful unions that were sexually nonexclusive either by mutual agreement or due to unfaithfulness. These respondents reported that in their previous relationships they learned or realized they had a propensity for jealousy and therefore, were unsuited for open relationships. Thus, in seeking their current partners, they carefully chose men who agreed to be monogamous. As a matter of fact, the second most popular reason given by the monogamous men for choosing an exclusive relationship was to avoid jealousy.

Nevertheless, monogamy in and of itself was not a fail-safe method for avoiding jealousy. A man in his mid-thirties and in a couple for 4 1/2 years reported feeling extremely jealous and suspicious of his partner. His frequent accusations were inflicting damage on the relationship, as evidenced by their numerous arguments and their low DAS scores. He reported "I am suspicious without a lot of basis. I think my jealousy stems from my low self-esteem rather than something concrete." As will be described later, feelings of jealousy and insecurity were also a challenge to be addressed by the respondents in nonmonogamous relationships.

#### *Fear of HIV*

An additional important reason for maintaining a monogamous relationship was fear of contracting HIV. As stated by this 38-year-old man in a 5-year union, "I think the first reason is because of AIDS and other



social diseases, sexually transmitted diseases.” The following 45-year-old man was in a 4-year relationship:

One reason we chose monogamy is because of AIDS and other STD's . . . I have my partner's health in my hands and in the same regard he has my health in his hands. You could look at it in two ways; we each have each other by the nuts, or we each care that much for each other, you can look at it several ways.

As will be described later, fear of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases played a role in the agreements of nonmonogamous couples as well.

### *Nonmonogamous Couples*

#### *Personal and Sexual Freedom*

Unlike their monogamous counterparts, nonmonogamous couples did not see sex as always intertwined with intimacy and commitment. They chose to establish sexually nonexclusive dyads to accommodate their needs for intimate companionship, personal freedom, and sexual variety. As a matter of fact, the most commonly stated reason given for establishing an open relationship was that couple members valued their own and their partner's personal freedom and eschewed the idea that one mate could satisfy all of their sexual needs. This 49-year-old man who had been with his partner for 4 years stated:

We've discussed at length the difference between having sex and making love, and not counting on one person to meet all of your needs, desires, and interests. I mean Sam is the number one provider for all my emotional needs. He and I are connected at the heart, bank account, day-to-day living, and he is the only man I will ever make love to.

The men in the following couple had been together 12 years. One partner aged 66 described the importance of emotional rather than physical fidelity:

I think one of the special things about being in a gay relationship is we get to define our relationships. We have monogamy of the heart and not the genitals.

His partner, aged 48, also talked about the importance of sexual freedom:

I hadn't been sexually active and I wanted to experience things and I thought I would be happier. I felt like I would be more satisfied having that freedom than being locked in monogamy and wishing I'd experienced it.

### *Impact of Outside Sex*

Twelve of the 28 openly nonmonogamous men reported that the impact of outside sex on their relationships was uniformly positive. It seemed that engaging in outside sex could reinforce the partners' commitment to each other. The following 45-year-old man was in a 15-year relationship at the time of the interview:

For me it has an overall positive effect. It helps me to realize how much I have and how blessed I am in my relationship with Rick . . . When I meet someone who is single and not in a relationship, it reinforces how lucky I am and blessed I am.

This respondent in an 8-year relationship believed discussing outside sexual encounters affirmed trust and also led to improved sex between him and his partner:

I think it's positive . . . talking freely about it with my partner reinforces our trust and it just feels good to share that . . . It reinforces our relationship certainly. And it's one of the elements that are part of the growing richness of our relationship over time. We may find other sexual needs outside of the relationships and by discussing it we can bring those techniques or ideas into our own relationship.

Ten (10) men mentioned that outside sex had both positive and negative impacts on the relationship, and 2 men saw the effects of outside sex as mostly negative. The downside of outside sex was almost always related to the stimulation of jealousy. Two men in separate, nonmonogamous couples reported minor dyadic impacts of competitive jealousy that emerged when a man believed his partner was having better extradyadic sexual experiences. However, jealousy related to feelings of inadequacy and insecurity was more influential and painful. As reported by a man in his mid-sixties in a 12-year union:

I think monogamy can feel like a prison for some people and we certainly are spared that negative response. We're not fighting against it. However, I think my reaction to Tim's desires tends to cool my interest [in having sex with him] because to a certain extent I am feeling some rejection there. If I could put it in a phrase, I feel that when we're having sex he's doing it to satisfy me, not to satisfy himself. I know he would rather be with someone else. Not that he doesn't love me because he loves me with his whole heart. There's no question about that.

His partner stated:

He explains his feelings and I try to work with him on that and understand why he's feeling the discomfort. And part of the discomfort is, to a certain extent I think he feels he's not satisfying me and that's why I'm searching. But we seem to work it out.

As stated by a 25-year-old respondent in a 3-year relationship:

Yes, I think it has an effect. Positive because it keeps us **more** interested in each other. It doesn't turn the relationship as **stale**. With outside sex, we remember how much we want to be with **each** other and how much we miss each other. The negative—the jealousy because deep down I wish I could have it open on my side and he would keep it closed. It cuts down on our time together.

Jealousy emerged as a more significant concern if one partner engaged in an ongoing relationship with an outside lover. As stated by the partner of the man last quoted:

In the beginning of the open relationship I met one guy who I still keep in touch with. He is now both our friends, but this guy is still my lover. I think my partner is still jealous. I also am jealous every time he is with somebody else. I may not tell him that. I think he is too.

It is noteworthy that this relationship ended soon after this interview, and their breakup is discussed later in this paper. Another man who had been in a 9-year union discussed how he recently fell in love with an outside partner. This put his primary relationship in jeopardy until the outside lover broke off their affair. To avoid the potential pitfalls of

jealousy, insecurity, and falling in love with an outside partner, men in mutually agreed-upon open couples established rules described later.

*Protecting the Primary Relationship: Safer Sex*

It is important to note that all but 2 of the men in openly nonmonogamous relationships reported that they agreed to engage only in safer sex with outside partners, meaning either using condoms for anal intercourse or avoiding anal sex all together. As stated by a 55-year-old man in a 15-year relationship:

If we have anal sex with someone else we would always wear a condom. And there is this great sense of us being a biological entity where we are sort of our own ecosystem of germs and . . . so we recognize that whatever one gets the other will get, so we are extraordinarily cautious about what we do because we are taking the risk not only for ourselves but for the other person, and we don't have any specific rules other than wearing a condom about that. But we are obviously both very sensitive to that.

Even though unprotected oral sex was usually considered safe sex, in one couple performing fellatio on another man was considered off limits, and in another couple there were some doubts about the safety of unprotected oral intercourse:

Safe sex. We have our own private interpretation of that. Safe sex is gloved anal sex. We also decided that oral sex without a condom was OK, although we may rethink that. There is new stuff that says that HIV transmission may be more related to oral sex than what was originally thought . . . although we have been having outside sex for 10 or 11 years and we are both HIV negative.

Reporting all outside sexual activities to one's partner seemed to serve as an accountability check for some of the men. As stated by a 48-year-old man in a 12-year relationship:

Basically, when we come home we have to describe to the partner everything that happened, that way there is no secrets. It also forces us to practice safe sex because we have to report that. It forces us to think because that [getting HIV] would change the relationship.

One man whose partner was HIV-positive claimed to have had over 1000 sexual partners and over 300 outside partners in the last year. When I gasped in surprise at his report that he remained HIV negative and avoided catching an STD, he scolded me: "HIV and STDs are not about how many partners you have, it is about whether or not you have safe sex. *You should know that by now.*"

*Protecting the Primary Relationship: Rules and Boundaries*

Twenty-three (23) of the 28 men in relationships that allowed outside sex reported establishing additional rules designed to keep love and sex separate and maintain boundaries that protected the primacy of the couple relationship. Some sustained these boundaries by limiting the time, duration and location where they had extradyadic sex. The following statement from a respondent in a 17-year relationship was typical:

You can't bring somebody home. No sex in our house and especially in our bed. You can see the person more than once, but if it starts to develop into something more than fuck buddies we have to talk about it. You can't stay overnight with somebody. You have to get back to the house at some reasonable hour.

All of these couples set guidelines prohibiting ongoing emotional involvement with outside partners. Most of these men agreed not to have more than one encounter with another man, which seemed to prevent the occurrence of a damaging emotional affair. For men who had continuous contact with a particular outside partner, it seemed more difficult to prevent this from occurring. The men in the following couple were in their mid-twenties, together for 3 years, and were quoted in a previous section. As stated by one partner:

We both are sensitive to the threat of other men forming emotional bonds with us that we neither invite nor want . . . If a {an outside} partner makes statements that indicate the development of an unwelcome emotional bond, we cool off sexual activity with that guy. We tell our lovers from the very beginning that we have a boyfriend and we have an open relationship. We keep our emotions out of our relationships with our lovers.

His partner described his own ongoing interaction with an outside lover:

I saw him on a Wednesday and we went to a show together and he told me he was falling in love with me. I had to tell him that if he

falls in love with me, I couldn't see him. I tell people I am in a relationship, an open relationship, don't fall in love with me. We can have sex and that's it.

As mentioned earlier, during member checks I discovered that this couple ended their relationship, in part because this respondent broke an important rule of their nonmonogamous agreement by becoming emotionally involved with another man. Only his partner agreed to a follow-up interview. He reported that even though he enjoyed the sexual variety of the nonexclusive relationship, he found that the jealousy and interference of outside sex in his union were intolerable. He looks back on this previous relationship as an experiment, and his current relationship is monogamous, which he claimed had always been his preference. The experience of this man not only suggests the importance of these rules but also how failure of a sexually nonexclusive union could lead one to pursue a subsequent relationship that is monogamous.

### *Threesome-Only Couples*

During a threesome or a threeway, both men in a couple have sex with an outside partner at the same time. A subgroup of 11 men (8 responding as couples and 3 individually) were in nonmonogamous couples that set rules limiting outside sex to threesomes. Compared to the openly nonmonogamous men who did not limit themselves to threesomes, these men seemed to be the least ambivalent about outside sex and the most positive about its relationship impacts. They believed that threeway sex spiced up their sex lives, and 10 of the 11 men spoke highly of the pleasure and benefits of threesomes on their relationships. The following 26-year-old was in a 6-year union:

Generally, it's always been a pretty positive area, simply because after every person we have sex [with] outside of the relationship, we always realize the sex we have with each other is better. It helps us realize how much we have. We always talk about it afterwards and we always come to the conclusion that the sex between us is always better. [However,] . . . it is something new and different.

As reported by a 36-year-old in a 7-year relationship:

Yes, it does have a positive effect, I think. Positive I think because there's always very handsome guys around and you could feel

frustrated by being around handsome guys . . . and the threesome lets us deal with the frustration side and also share something together.

Many of these men talked about how outside sex invigorated their sexual feelings for their partner. As reported by this 38-year-old respondent in a 3-year relationship:

Oh, it's definitely positive. Very frequently after engaging in a threesome, we'll have really amazing sex just the two of us, and when you get to your late, mid-thirties and you're able to have, you know, a sex partner leave and you just very quickly fall on each other, and have sex again, that's pretty amazing. You know, that's more like teenager style. It's a huge turn on to me to see how much our partners enjoy being with him, and just the aesthetic of looking at him being with someone else is very enticing and appealing. I appreciate the intimacy that I witness going on between him and another man when my partner is kissing the third party. So no, there is not even a scintilla of jealousy. I am enormously sexually attracted to my partner. I have never had more satisfying sexual relations with anyone in my life. But watching him fuck another man is an extreme turn on.

As exemplified by the previous respondent, these couples did not seem to struggle with jealousy as much as the other open couples. Because both partners simultaneously participated in this activity in each other's presence, these men felt couple primacy was reinforced and preserved. When asked specifically whether their threesome activity resulted in jealousy or insecurity, this 44-year-old in a 9-year relationship replied:

No, 'cause, he's good in bed. And I am usually participating. (Interviewer: That makes a difference?) Yeah. (Interviewer: Why?) Well it's more like a mutual thing. It's not one person with one person; it's him and I together.

Thus, for these men, limiting their outside sex to occasions when they were both present seemed to be a successful way to address their needs for sexual variety while avoiding jealousy. However, problems could emerge if the third party was more attracted to one partner than the other. As stated by a 33-year-old man in a 5-year relationship:

Both partners have to be comfortable with the third. Also you have to be mentally attracted to the third as well as physically. Physically you have to be attracted . . . When you talk to a person, you can get from where they are coming . . . what they like in terms of the sexual act. Is that something you can get along with? If it's somebody that both of us find attractive and that person clearly shows a sign of preference, that makes it awkward for the couple, and we don't like it either.

As his 35-year-old partner stated:

In our first threeway experience, the person was obviously more interested in my partner than myself and during the course of having sex, it got to the point where I was off to the side watching them have sex. It did bother me and it did develop into an argument the next morning.

For the most part, couples who limited themselves to threeways seemed to be the most able to engage in outside sex without ambivalence or jealousy. However, if not carefully managed, jealousy and conflict that interfered with couple boundaries was possible.

### *Monogamous with Outside Sex*

As stated earlier, 19 of the 37 men who reported they were in monogamous unions engaged in outside sex. It is interesting to note that 15 of these men reported never having openly discussed or established clear agreements with their partners about monogamy. The following 30-year-old was in 4-year union but had recently succumbed (once) to the advances of a friend:

I don't know if we ever had that type of conversation. We never sat down and said: "Let's have a monogamous relationship." I think with [my partner] it was kind of assumed.

This respondent was a 42-year-old man in a 16-year relationship and reported engaging in oral sex and mutual masturbation with friends during camping trips:

Well I guess kind of by default and I guess basically that's what it is: monogamous. I don't think we ever came to a formal conclu-



sion or agreement, so I guess it kind of evolved that way. I know his comfort level I guess. It just suited us not to rigidly define things. I guess we really never felt the need to. I mean in almost all regards and all aspects, we're pretty well suited to each other, so there's never been a reason to go nonmonogamous.

He described his activity with his friends as meaningless and "not really sex."

Most of these men reported feeling some guilt for engaging in outside sex. However, like this previous respondent, many downplayed its importance. Only 4 of the 19 men reported having more than one outside sexual encounter in the past year. Like the previously quoted respondent, this 48-year-old man in a 9-year union did not really perceive his own and his partner's outside activity as sex, so to him the impact on his relationship was minimal:

Would you call mutual masturbation sex? To me, that's just man-play. At the gym, that happens. After I work out I go to the steam room or the sauna and that's where they're at. Sometimes I am strong; sometimes I'm weak. And I come home and tell him about it. You can't help it sometimes; it's just passion. We're very up-front about it. He comes home and tells me [when he does it]: "I've been bad at the gym today." I know it means nothing.

Another man who was 52, and in a 30-year relationship described how early in their union, he and their partner pledged monogamy. Nevertheless, he had engaged in extradyadic encounters periodically throughout their lives together. He reported that his strictly monogamous partner knew of his behavior and disapproved. However, this conflict seemed to have little effect on their overall relationship satisfaction as indicated by their reports as well as their DAS scores, which were among the highest in the sample.

#### *Low DAS Scorers*

In the overall study, men who pledged monogamy but had outside sex were over-represented in the low scorer category on the DAS (LaSala, 2004). However, perhaps not surprisingly, only 2 low-scoring men in "cheating" relationships agreed to be interviewed, and they were both in the same couple. The unfaithful man in this very strained, 4-year dyad was ashamed of his outside sexual activity and was struggling to

stop it. Nevertheless, he also stated that their monogamous agreement was never directly discussed:

He [his partner] says monogamy is important to him and he could never be with someone who wasn't. He says: "I could never be in that situation." He talks about other relationships to give reference to our own. He never talks to me about monogamy in our relationship.

His faithful partner, who suspected the outside sexual activity, stated that he continually confronted this man and monogamy was discussed each time. These divergent reported perceptions suggest either poor communication skills or perhaps that the "cheating" partner was minimizing the established agreement in an effort to rationalize his behavior.

### *Sex with Partner, Couple Conflict, and Outside Sex*

As stated earlier, 7 of the respondents reported no sexual activity with their partners. Among these 7 men, 6 (5 monogamous respondents and 1 in an open relationship) were either too physically ill or had partners who were too ill to engage in sexual activity. The remaining respondent was in a 3-year monogamous agreement couple, had not had sex with his partner in over 6 months, and had recently participated in an extradyadic encounter. However, he reported that the main reasons he committed this act was because he was unemployed, had a lot of free time, and felt bored. As a matter of fact, for respondents in monogamous couples who had outside sex, dissatisfaction with sex with the partner was never a primary reason for engaging in outside sex. For 14 of these 19 men, extra-relational sexual encounters were isolated incidents that occurred because the opportunity happened to present itself, or because of an extended separation from the partner. The remaining 5 respondents described engaging in outside sex when they felt stress due to general couple conflict that was not specifically sexually related. As stated by a 35-year-old man in a conflicted 4 year relationship:

I guess I am not happy so I guess I don't feel good about the relationship or about myself, so I guess I am going to get strokes. Also, it's a physical release, so I feel I need to have a release and to know I have other options. When I am not feeling good about myself, sex can make me feel better in some ways. And when things aren't going well with Carl, I want to have fun, to have a release. I don't

think it's related to wanting him to feel bad as much as it's related to self-affirmation.

In contrast, when the men in open relationships were asked if they engaged in outside sex when there was relationship stress, virtually all of them asserted that it was imperative to avoid outside sex when there was any dyadic strain. As stated by the following 26-year-old respondent in a 6-year, threesome-only relationship:

If things are tense and if we have some sort of problem, then generally we just keep sex between us rather than being with someone else and throwing in another variable that might complicate the situation. If we are having problems, we generally don't do threesomes.

When asked if he had outside sex when things were tense or stressful in his relationship, this 45-year-old respondent in a 20-year non-monogamous relationship exclaimed: "Oh no! Just the opposite, when things are already stressful, I'd be crazy to do it. It's only when things are moving smoothly that I dare." Thus for nonmonogamous couples, abstaining from outside sex when the relationship seemed vulnerable could be seen as an additional protective guideline.

## *DISCUSSION*

Based on these findings, it might be a mistake to invariably judge nonmonogamy in gay male relationships as evidence of dysfunctional boundaries or pathological emotional triangles. Nonmonogamous partners (including several in self-reported monogamous dyads) were able to enjoy outside sex without significant damage to their primary relationships. Some even reported that outside sex reinforced their commitment to their partners and improved their sex lives with each other. However, despite the sexually liberal values of the nonmonogamous men, outside sex could stimulate jealousy and insecurity. When openly nonmonogamous couples experienced problems it was usually because they failed to establish or prioritize appropriate boundaries around the partner relationship. Thus, the findings challenge traditional notions, such as those of Bowen, that link sexual monogamy to couple satisfaction. However, the findings validate aspects of Bowenian theory that underscore the need for couples to establish appropriate couple bound-

aries, maintain couple primacy, and avoid emotional triangles (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

This paper adds to previous studies because it describes the reasons gay men establish their relationship styles and presents a variegated picture of the impacts of outside sex on open couples. Furthermore, unlike almost all of the previously cited research, this sample was collected in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, and the risk of HIV transmission played an important role in the respondents' decisions regarding extra-dyadic sexual agreements and behaviors. In addition, the possible importance of limiting outside sex to threesomes as a way of accommodating gay men's needs for sexual freedom and variety while maintaining couple boundaries is a finding that also contributes to the existent literature.

To further understand these findings it might be helpful to consider the social contexts of gay men. Opportunities for casual and even anonymous male-to-male sex are available in public bathrooms, parks, bathhouses, bar backrooms (Blumstein & Schwarz, 1983; Driggs & Finn, 1991), and via the Internet. It could be argued that such accessibility along with (or perhaps as a result of) a male-gendered ability to separate sex and love has resulted in the social acceptance of casual sex among large segments of the gay male population. This could explain the prevalence of open, gay male couples as well as why some of the respondents in monogamous agreement relationships perceived their outside sexual behavior to have little or no impact on their relationships. However, in response to our society's stigmatization of male-male sexual activity, many gay men learn before they come out to be ashamed of and to hide their sexual feelings and behavior. This may explain why some coupled gay men in monogamous agreement relationships continue to engage in covert, outside sex and are unable to honestly acknowledge and articulate their sexual needs to their partners.

These findings have several limitations. This sample was largely white and affluent. Gay men from various ethnic or racial groups might differ in how they perceive the link between sexual monogamy and relationship commitment. For example, findings from a previous study suggest that Latino gay men might be more likely to establish monogamous relationships than their African American or white Anglo counterparts (Wagner et al., 2000). Certainly, more information is needed about the roles race and ethnicity play in gay men's preferences regarding extra-dyadic sexual agreements and behaviors.

In addition, some couples who were conflicted about the issue of outside sex might have self-selected out of the sample. In the overall research project, there were 87 couples who initially agreed to participate

and requested survey packets, but failed to complete the questionnaires. Men from two of these couples informed me that they were struggling with problems related to extradyadic sex. Furthermore, it is likely that many men in monogamous-agreement couples who had outside sex felt too guilty or ashamed to agree to be interviewed about this topic. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that such couples were underrepresented in the overall sample. Though it might be difficult to recruit "cheating" gay men, their reports could further illuminate why some men promise to be monogamous yet engage in extra-relational sex.

Even though the men in open couples seemed satisfied in their relationships, this study examined gay male relationships more or less at one point in time. Several of the men in monogamous unions reported participating in unsuccessful open unions prior to their current relationships. In addition, during the course of this research an openly nonmonogamous couple had broken up for reasons related to outside sex. This suggests that for some, open relationships may not be sustainable. A longitudinal study could determine how openly nonmonogamous couples fare over time and whether they can maintain the boundaries necessary to avoid the dissolution of their primary partnerships.

Despite the limitations of this study, these findings begin to suggest how some gay men organize, establish, and maintain their various agreements regarding extradyadic sex, and this information has implications for clinicians. First of all, social workers need to consider that ideas connecting sexual monogamy and intimacy might reflect heterosexist norms that are not applicable to all gay male couples. Instead of evaluating couples in relation to these norms, practitioners are challenged to find a way to honor the preferences and self-determination of their clients. The presence of relationship problems among sexually nonmonogamous gay male couples might not indicate that they need to become monogamous but rather that they need help setting parameters for outside sex so it does not threaten the primacy of the couple or generate excessive jealousy. The setting of rules governing the nature, timing, and location of encounters was how some respondents in this study protected their relationships. Limiting themselves to threeways served this function for others. All of the respondents in sexually open couples stressed the importance of avoiding outside sex when there was tension in the primary relationship. Thus, practitioners assisting nonmonogamous gay couples with problems related to outside sex might want to suggest such guidelines as they help them affirm relationship boundaries.

Secondly, it is important to remember that some couples prefer monogamy because some gay men perceive sex, commitment, and intimacy as inseparable. Unlike the McWhirter and Mattison (1983) study, this research included long-term couples who were completely monogamous. However, the experiences and perceptions of some of the monogamous respondents suggest that outside sex in such couples might need to be carefully assessed to determine whether it is a sign of couple conflict or alternatively a benign activity of little importance. The finding that men in monogamous couples who had outside sex were less likely to report having openly discussed and established a monogamous agreement with their partners suggests that clinicians working with such couples might want to assess this area, and if necessary help such partners openly and honestly communicate and negotiate explicit agreements about outside sex. The impact of contextual issues such as stigma as well as the prevalence of opportunities for gay men to have anonymous sex should be discussed with these couples. Couple therapists might also suggest nonmonogamous options, such as threesome-only agreements, as they help their clients negotiate an arrangement that suits their needs and preferences.

In light of the recent public debates over same-sex marriage, it is important and timely to examine the diversity of successful, long-term relationships that depart from traditional models of coupling. Some argue that leaders in politics, religion, and medicine maintain social control by imposing the norm of heterosexual monogamy and condemning those who cannot or will not adhere to it (Rofes, 2000; Warner, 1999). Further examination of the issue of extradyadic sex among heterosexual and homosexual couples from a viewpoint unbiased by restrictive societal norms could uncover a variety of workable relationship models. Social workers and family therapists need more information about these alternative sexual arrangements to be able to modify their ideas sufficiently to effectively assist couples choosing options other than monogamy.

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