

An Open Secret:  
The Truth About Gay Male Couples

by Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

“Being queer means pushing the parameters of sex and family, and in the process, transforming the very fabric of society.”

--National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy director,  
Paul Ettelbrick (Kurtz, 2003)

April, 2010-- Today, with same-sex marriage being hotly debated, the promiscuous nature of gay relationships, especially those of gay men, is becoming more widely recognized.

In 1948, Kinsey observed that long-term homosexual relationships were notably few. Now, more than fifty years later, long-term gay male relationships may be more common, but the fact remains that they are typically not monogamous.

In one recent study of gay male couples, 41.3% had open sexual agreements with some conditions or restrictions, and 10% had open sexual agreements with no restrictions on sex with outside partners. One-fifth of participants (21.9%) reported breaking their agreement in the preceding 12 months, and 13.2% of the sample reported having unprotected anal intercourse in the preceding three months with an outside partner of unknown or discordant HIV-status (1).

This study follows the classic research of McWhirter and Mattison, reported in *The Male Couple* (1984), which found that not a single male pair was able to maintain fidelity in their relationship for more than five years. Outside affairs, the researchers found, were not damaging to the relationship's endurance, but were in fact essential to it. “The single most important factor that keeps couples together past the ten-year mark is the lack of possessiveness they feel,” says the authors (p. 256).

The gay community has long walked a thin public-relations line, presenting their relationships as equivalent to those of heterosexual married couples. But many gay activists portray a very different cultural ethic. Michelangelo Signorile describes the campaign “to fight for same-sex marriage and its benefits and then, once granted, redefine the institution completely--to demand the right to marry not as a way of adhering to society's moral codes, but rather to debunk a myth and radically alter an archaic institution.” (1974, p 3).

#### Research Findings on Promiscuity

In 1968, Hoffman stated: “Sexual promiscuity is one of the most striking, distinguishing features of gay life in America” (p. 45). A much-cited study by Bell and Weinberg (1978), published by the Kinsey Institute, and often called the most ambitious study of homosexuality ever attempted, gathered its data before the AIDS crisis had begun. This study showed that 28 percent of homosexual males had had sexual encounters with one thousand or more partners. Furthermore, 79 percent said more than half of their sex partners were strangers. Only 1 percent of the sexually active men had had fewer than five

lifetime partners. The authors concede: "Little credence can be given to the supposition that homosexual men's 'promiscuity' has been overestimated" (p.82). "Almost half of the white homosexual males...said that they had had at least 500 different sexual partners during the course of their homosexual careers," (p. 85).

A few years later, Pollak (1985) described sexual behavior among gays as "an average several dozen partners a year" and "some hundreds in a lifetime" with "tremendous promiscuity" (p.44). He said:

The homosexual pick-up system is the product of a search for efficiency and economy in attaining the maximization of "yield" (in numbers of partners and orgasms) and the minimization of "cost" (waste of time and risk of one's advances being rejected). Certain places are known for a particular clientele and immediate consummation: such as "leather" bars, which often have a back room specially reserved for the purpose, saunas and public parks. (p. 44)

William Aaron's autobiographical book *Straight* draws similar conclusions:

In the gay life, fidelity is almost impossible. Since part of the compulsion of homosexuality seems to be a need on the part of the homophile to "absorb" masculinity from his sexual partners, he must be constantly on the lookout for [new partners]. Constantly the most successful homophile "marriages" are those where there is an agreement between the two to have affairs on the side while maintaining the semblance of permanence in their living arrangement. [p. 208]

He concludes:

Gay life is most typical and works best when sexual contacts are impersonal and even anonymous. As a group the homosexuals I have known seem far more preoccupied with sex than heterosexuals are, and far more likely to think of a good sex life as many partners under many exciting circumstances. [p.209]

Emphasis on Sexuality

One writer – who, it should be mentioned, strongly sympathizes with the gay community about the stresses of social discrimination – observes conditions among gay men as follows:

It must be remembered that in the gay world the only real criterion of value is physical attractiveness... The young homosexual will find that his homosexual brothers usually only care for him as a sexual object. Although they may invite him out to dinner and give him a place to stay, when they have satisfied their sexual interest in him, they will likely forget about his existence and his own personal needs....Since the sole criterion of value in the homosexual world is physical attractiveness, being young and handsome in gay life is like being a millionaire in a community where wealth is the only criterion of value. [Hoffman 1968, pp. 58, 153, 155]

Aging is also viewed particularly negatively in the homosexual culture, with high value placed on youth (Bell and Weinberg 1978).

In his psychoanalytic study of ten couples, six of whom were homosexual, Gershman (1981) observed

that in homosexual coupling, “sexuality is of greater importance and plays a larger role.” Gershman found that the majority of male couples he studied had agreed upon an open relationship, as long as the affairs were conducted discreetly. He found that while the male couples studied were capable of high compatibility in many other respects, there was great difficulty in maintaining sexual interest.

With the exception of the pioneering work of Warren (1974), for many years, little attention was given to long term gay relationships. When McWhirter and Mattison published *The Male Couple* in 1984, their study was undertaken to disprove the reputation that gay male relationships do not last. The authors themselves were a homosexual couple, one a psychiatrist, the other a psychologist. After much searching they were able to locate 156 male couples in relationships that had lasted from 1 to 37 years. Two-thirds of the respondents had entered the relationship with either the implicit or the explicit expectation of sexual fidelity.

The results of their study show that of those 156 couples, only seven had been able to maintain sexual fidelity. Furthermore, of those seven couples, none had been together more than 5 years. In other words, the researchers were unable to find a single male couple that was able to maintain sexual fidelity for more than five years. They reported:

The expectation for outside sexual activity was the rule for male couples and the exception for heterosexuals. Heterosexual couples lived with some expectation that their relationships were to last “until death do us part,” whereas gay couples wondered if their relationships could survive. (p.3)

McWhirter and Mattison admit that sexual activity outside the relationship often raises issues of trust, self-esteem, and dependency. However, they believe that

“the single most important factor that keeps couples together past the ten-year mark is the lack of possessiveness they feel. Many couples learn very early in their relationship that ownership of each other sexually can become the greatest internal threat to their staying together. (p. 256)

Other researchers have also seen sexual freedom as beneficial to gay relationships (Harry 1978, Peplau, 1982).

Yet in reality, there remains a contradictory longing for greater stability. In a study of thirty couples, Hooker (1965, p. 46) found that all but three couples expressed “an intense longing for relationships with stability, sexual continuity, intimacy, love and affection”- but only one couple in her study had been able to maintain a monogamous relationship for ten years. Hooker concluded, “For many homosexuals, one-night stands or short-term relationships are typical” (p.49).

The desire for sexual fidelity in relationships and the benefits of such a commitment are universal. In the long history of man, infidelity has never been associated with maturity. Even in cultures where it is relatively common, it is no more than discreetly tolerated.

Faced with the fact that gay male relationships are in fact promiscuous, gay writers have no choice but to promote the message that monogamy is not necessary.

Redefining “Fidelity”

McWhirter and Mattison believe that gays must redefine “fidelity” to mean not sexual faithfulness, but simply “emotional dependability.”

How can a relationship without sexual fidelity remain emotionally faithful? Fidelity as such is only an abstraction, divorced from the body. The agreement to have outside affairs precludes any possibility of genuine trust and intimacy.

### A Clinical Understanding of Gay Infidelity

Gay relationships are typically burdened with each man’s same-sex defensive detachment, and their need to compensate for that same-sex detachment. Therefore the relationship will often take the form of an unrealistic idealization of the other person as an “image.” In pursuing the other man as a representation the masculine introject that he himself lacks, many gay men either develop a self-denigrating dependency on the partner, or they become disillusioned because they discover “he has the same deficit I have.”

As he did in relationship with his father, the homosexual man fails to fully and accurately perceive the other man. His same-sex ambivalence and defensive detachment mitigate against trust and intimacy. When he becomes disillusioned, he will often continually set his hopes on the possibility of yet another, more satisfying partner.

In seeking out and sexualizing relationships with other males, the homosexual is attempting to integrate a lost part of himself. Because this attraction emerges out of a deficit, he is not completely free to love. He often perceives other men in terms of what they can do to fulfill his deficit. Thus, a giving of the self may seem like more of a diminishment than a self-enhancement.

A man who is depressed may gain a temporary sense of mastery through anonymous sex because of its excitement, intensity, even danger – followed by sexual release and an immediate reduction of tension. Later he is likely to feel disgusted, remorseful, and out of control. He feels regretful, regains control and feels all right again. But when there is nothing to “feed” that healthy state, it will be a matter of time until he gets depressed, feels powerless and out of touch with himself, and seeks anonymous sex again as a short-term solution to getting back in touch and feeling in control.

Often a homosexual client will report seeking anonymous sex following an incident in which he felt ignored or slighted by another male. Feeling shamed and victimized, he acts out sexually as a way of reasserting himself and getting something back he feels was taken from him. Once again, he feels guilty and has to repent or make amends. Many gay men become addicted not just to the sexual release, but to the entire compulsive, life-dominating cycle-- if not through overt behavior, then through preoccupation and fantasy.

In these repetitive, compulsive, and impersonal sexual behaviors, we see a focused engagement with the object--with a desire for an intense relationship, but at the same time, a resistance toward genuine intimacy. Hoffman (1968) describes the “sex fetishization” found in gay life (p. 168), and Gottlieb (1977) points out the strong element of sexual fantasy that has become institutionalized in gay culture. Masters and Johnson (1979) also found that those fantasies tend to be more violent than those of heterosexuals.

Homosexual attraction is often characterized by a localized response to body parts or aspects of the person, but when interest in these traits diminishes through familiarity, there follows a loss of interest in

the person as a whole. In comparison, “straight” men are generally, in my clinical experience, not as trait-fixated. While some men may envision their ideal woman as tall, blond, blue-eyed, and large-breasted, we hardly see a distinct disinterest in women without these specific traits.

### The Problem of Sexual Sameness

In homosexual sex, the “body parts don’t fit.” Therefore sex must be “individually enjoyed rather than mutually experienced” (p. 214) by a technique of “my turn – your turn” (p.214) and “you do me, I do you.” (Masters and Johnson, 1979). Where orgasmic episodes are experienced separately, considerable discussion is required for their negotiation.

Sexual sameness also diminishes long term interest and creates the need for greater variety, including other partners (Masters and Johnson 1979).

McWhirter and Mattison (1984) corroborate this viewpoint, saying, “The equality and similarities found in male couples are formidable obstacles to continuing high sexual vitality in their lasting relationships” (p. 134).

These similarities between two men provide one possible explanation for gay promiscuity. Women are “wired” for nurturance and child-rearing, and a stable primary relationship is necessary for their protection and the protection of their children. Thus a woman introduces a restraining influence into the relationship that two men will never experience.

Indeed, gay-activist social commentator Andrew Sullivan has found that as a gay man matures, his relationships will likely split between those men he is friends with, and those he has sex with, but that the two groups will not likely overlap. Gay men, he says, “have a need for extramarital outlets.” (1995, p. 95).

This “new order” approach advocated by gay activists is part of a general cynicism toward mainstream values and the possibility of monogamy. Churchill, for example, reveals a hopelessness about the possibility of enduring relationships, either homosexual or heterosexual:

It may be reasonably supposed that there never was nor ever will be any person who can fulfill all of the spiritual and physical needs of another person. Hence, husbands and wives alike must spend a good deal of time and effort in artful deception and flattery... They must sustain the illusion upon which their marriage is based and upon which their sexual relationship is justified. [1967, p. 301]

Churchill describes the “dreary” picture brought to mind by the term family man:

It is difficult...to imagine any person who is engaged with the world at large as a family man or a homebody. It is almost impossibility for any man or woman who is laden with the cares and preoccupations particular to family life to be very deeply concerned with others. (p. 305)

Of the traditional Judeo-Christian family, he says:

Far from being the source of each and every good, it is one source of a great many social and moral

evils. If all the homely virtues are learned in the bosom of the family...it should not be forgotten that many of the more contemptible vices are also learned in the bosom of the family: complacency, jealousy, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, envy, selfishness, rivalry, avarice, prejudice, vanity, and greed. (p. 304)

## Conclusion

Although homosexuals do lack cultural supports, such as the freedom in every culture to marry a same-sex partner, I believe this is not the cause of gay promiscuity. I believe the central cause of gay promiscuity is to be found in the inherent sexual and emotional incompatibility between two males. Men were designed for women, and when some factor—psychological, biological, or a combination of both—interferes with that wired-in design, the freedom to marry a partner of the same sex cannot change the fact that “something’s not working.”

---

For additional data, see "Romantic Relationship Difficulties," (pages 70-71), "Interpersonal Relationships," (page 80-81) and "Promiscuity as a New Social Norm," (pages 81- 83), in the Journal of Human Sexuality, Vol. 1, 2009, published by NARTH, [www.narth.com](http://www.narth.com).

## Footnote

(1) Neilands, Torsten B.; Chakravarty, Deepalika; Darbes, Lynae A.; Beougher, Sean C.; and Hoff, Colleen C. (2010), “Development and Validation of the Sexual Agreement Investment Scale,” Journal of Sex Research, 47: 1, 24 — 37, April 2009.

---

## References:

Aaron, W. (1972). *Straight*. New York: Bantam Books.

Bell, A., and Weinberg, M. (1978). *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity among Men and Women*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Churchill, W. (1967). *Homosexual Behavior Among Males: A Cross-cultural and Cross-species Investigation*. New York: Hawthorne Books.

Gershman, H. (1981). Homosexual Marriages. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41:149-159.

Gottlieb, D. (1977). *The Gay Tapes*. Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day Scarborough House.

Harry, J. (1978). Marriages between gay males. In *The Social Organization of Gay Males*, ed. J. Harry and V. Devall. New York: Praeger.

Hoffman, M. (1968). *The Gay World: Male Homosexuality and the Social Creation of Evil*. New York: Basic Books.

Hooker, E. (1965). An empirical study of some relations between sexual patterns and gender identity in

male homosexuals. In *Sex Research, New Developments*, ed. J. Money, pp.24-52. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston.

Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B. and Martin, C. E. (1948). *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Philadelphia, PA: W.B. Saunders.

Kurtz, Stanley, "Beyond Gay Marriage," *The Weekly Standard*, August 4 - August 11, 2003, Vol. 8, No. 45.

Masters, W., and Johnson, V. (1979). *Homosexuality in Perspective*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.

McWhirter, D., and Mattison, A. (1984). *The Male Couple: How Relationships Develop*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Peplau, L. (1982). Research on homosexual couples: An overview. *Journal of Homosexuality* 8:3-7.

Pollak, M. (1985). Male homosexuality. In *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. P. Aries and A. Bejin, pp. 40-61. New York: Basil Blackwell.

Signorile, Michaelangelo, "Bridal Wave." *In Out*, December 1994.

Sullivan, Andrew, *Virtually Norman: An Argument about Homosexuality*, New York: Knopf, 1995.

Warren, C. (1974). *Identity and Community in the Gay World*. New York: Wiley & Sons.