

Does Marriage Imply Monogamy? By Lanz Lowen & Blake Spears

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Guest Opinion

We're a long-term gay male couple with a certain ambivalence about gay marriage. First off, it wasn't something to which we aspired and after 33 years together, it seems rather 'after-the-fact' and superfluous. Secondly, given we have an open relationship, we wonder about the assumptions friends, family and colleagues would make about our relationship if we were to get married. If they don't know us well, would they assume our relationship is traditionally bounded? If they do know us well, would they think we were hypocritical to get married, given our history of non-monogamy?

Of course, from a societal and legal perspective, we are whole-heartedly supportive. The stories of couples wedding have given us a better appreciation of why marriage for some is an important milestone, blessing, or symbol of acceptance and validation.

However, we are interested in whether the institution of marriage as it applies to the LGBT community carries the same assumptions as mainstream heterosexual marriage. The implication gay marriage has on the nature of our gay relationships has particular significance because we are currently conducting a study of how long-term gay couples handle 'outside sex'. We initiated the study because it was an important element, and at times charged issue in our own relationship. We were curious how other long-term couples (8+ years) who chose to be non-monogamous navigated these waters. What did they find helpful? What's problematic? What's the impact on intimacy, trust and commitment?

When we first began the study, we worried that openly acknowledging non-monogamy would be seen as counter-productive to the LGBT community's push for gay marriage. Fortunately that has not been the case. Either we've managed to fly under the radar, or most couples, including those who are monogamous, recognize this as a significant aspect of many gay relationships.

Half-way into the study (we've completed 90 interviews with 45 couples), we have found a number of our 'non-monogamous' couples are either already legally married or are making plans to wed. So, at least from this side of the fence, it appears that gay marriage doesn't necessarily equate with being monogamous.

Although it is premature to draw conclusions, it is abundantly clear that every relationship is quite unique. Not surprisingly, our community is quite creative when it comes to defining and cultivating our relationships. Some patterns we've observed so far:

- Some couples start out being open from Day One and continue without a great deal of change. Others open their relationship between Years 6 and 10 and often experience an evolution in how they handle outside sex.
- Some couples use outside sex to supplement or even replace their waning sex lives together. Other couples use outside sex to enhance and energize their sex lives as a couple.
- Some couples find their differences around age, libido, sexual interests, and degree of desired intimacy lead to complications and difficulty as they open their relationship. Other couples found opening their relationship as a way of satisfying and ameliorating their differences.
- Some couples have little difficulty with outside sex and see no need for rules or frequent conversation. Other couples are more concerned about having clear agreements and find they must talk a great deal in order to overcome concerns about jealousy, insecurity and trust.

On the macro level, we have been struck by a strong hesitancy in the community to make these experiences readily discussible. Recruiting couples has been more difficult than we anticipated. And we have heard from many couples that they don't feel comfortable discussing these types of issues even with other couples. Ironically, 'open, honest communication' is at the top of everyone's list of what helps.

So, we're happy to support gay marriage. But also advocate the discussion of how same-sex relationships may be similar and different from heterosexual relationships. We're not proselytizing. Our study is focused on open relationships, but we have had great conversations along the way with couples who are in very rewarding long-term monogamous relationships. The espoused myths in our community are clearly erroneous. It's not true that honest, long-term monogamous relationships are non-existent, impossible or unsatisfying. It's also not true that non-monogamy is inevitable or non-enduring. Let's support and sanction gay couples within the larger society, but also push for greater openness and communication about what healthy relationships look like within the LGBT community.

The authors, Lanz Lowen & Blake Spears are looking for long-term gay, non-monogamous couples who are willing to be interviewed. They can be contacted at lanzlowen@aol.com or dbspears@aol.com