

Making sense (trying to!) of varying statistics on gay monogamy

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<http://members.aol.com/gaymatter/monog.htm>

There are surveys and studies that seem to imply that gay monogamy is statistically insignificant. But there are also studies that seem to show that there is a significant incidence of monogamy among committed gay couples. What do we do with these two groups of studies with results that seem deeply contradictory?

Studies implying gay monogamy is statistically rare

1. Consider the research of McWhirter and Mattison. These men interviewed 156 male couples and concluded that in these relationships "fidelity is not defined in terms of sexual behavior, but rather by their emotional commitment to one another" (The Male Couple; David P. McWhirter, M.D., and Andrew M. Mattison, M.S.W., Ph.D.; Prentice-Hall, 1984; p 252). The researchers -- a gay couple themselves -- reported that two-thirds of the couples began their relationship with the expectation of sexual exclusivity, but that the partners became more permissive with time. They found that all the couples who had been together at least 5 years had incorporated some provision for outside sexual activity in their relationships. In fact, the authors concluded 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." (McWhirter and Mattison's work is summarized in the professional volume, Textbook of Homosexuality and Mental Health, ed. Robert P. Cabaj and Terry S. Stein; American Psychiatric Press, 1996.)

2. Two Harvard-trained gay men wrote a book giving a blueprint for using the mass media to normalize homosexual lifestyle (After the Ball; Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen; Doubleday, 1989). The book also acknowledges that "the cheating ratio of 'married' gay males, given enough time, approaches 100%...Many gay lovers, bowing to the inevitable, agree to an 'open relationship,' for which there are as many sets of ground rules as there are couples" (p330).

3. In his book, Virtually Normal (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), conservative gay writer Andrew Sullivan contrasts male-female marriages with same sex relationships and explains, "there is more likely to be a greater understanding of the need for extramarital outlets between two men than between a man and a woman" (p202).

4. According to a 1991 study of 900 homosexuals by Dr. Martin Dannecker, German "sexologist" who is a homosexual himself, 83% of the males living in "steady relationships" had numerous sexual encounters outside the partnership over a one-year period. (This study was seen at <http://forever.freeshell.org/gayprom.htm> and other web sites.)

5. A study of young Dutch homosexual men, published in the journal AIDS (May 2, 2003 p1029-1038) by Dr. Maria Xiridou, gives yet another indication that homosexual men tend to not be monogamous, even when they are involved in long-term relationships. The Dutch study -- which focused on transmission of HIV -- found that

men in homosexual relationships on average have eight partners a year outside those relationships (cited in a July 11, 2003 The Washington Times article; at <http://www.washtimes.com/national/20030711-121254-3711r.htm>).

Studies implying large percentage of gay couples practice monogamy

There is also the other side. There is research that paints what appears to be a healthier picture, one where the gay community is partially in line with the traditional standards which society has had for heterosexual couples.

1. Gay male couples who go through a public "union ceremony" seem to show a higher commitment to monogamy. Gretchen Stiers's 1999 study, *From This Day Forward*, looked at nearly every gay male couple in Massachusetts who had gone through a commitment ceremony. Among these highly committed couples, over 80% of them indicated that they practiced monogamy. (From <http://www.nationalreview.com/contributors/kurtz080301.shtml>)

2. A 1994 study in *The Advocate*, the largest national gay and lesbian magazine, reported that 52% of the gay male couples described themselves as being monogamous ("The 1994 Advocate Survey of Sexuality and Relationships: The Men," *The Advocate*, August 23, 1994, pp. 16-24). (From a web article by Thomas Fronczak, a psychotherapist working with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals, and founder of the Gay Fathers Support Network; at <http://www.tomfronczak.com/articles/csb.htm>.)

3. A survey was done in 1988-1989 that involved 560 male couples (<http://www.buddybuddy.com/survey.html>). Survey forms were circulated through gay churches and community centers, but most couples requested the forms after reading notices in the gay press, so these also were some of the "very most committed" gay couples. Among these couples, 63% said that their sexual agreement was one of monogamy, 26% said their relationship was one of monogamy with agreed exceptions, and 11% said they had agreed to non-monogamy.

4. Vermont allows civil unions between same-sex couples; so two University of Vermont psychology professors did a study comparing these homosexual couples in civil unions with 1) homosexual couples not in unions and 2) married heterosexual couples. Among the findings: 79 percent of married heterosexual men felt non-monogamy was not okay, compared with only 34 percent of gay men not in civil unions and 50 percent of gay men in civil unions. (From a web article hosted by "Out In The Mountains" -- Vermont's voice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues; at http://www.mountainpridemedia.org/oitm/issues/2003/01Jan2003/news06_firstyear.htm.)

Possible explanations for the apparent contradiction

What do we do with these two sets of apparently contradictory survey results/statistics? One says that gay monogamy is statistically very small. The other says that a (relatively) large percentage of gay couples practice monogamy.

Is there any way of explaining away or nuancing the first set (that gay monogamy is statistically insignificant)? I don't see any. But I do see some considerations that might mute the second set.

1. For instance, the factor of time. Are most of those who self-describe themselves as monogamous still in the first few years of their relationship? The fact that even Christian gay communities offer each other little support in monogamy ups the odds that it will be only a matter of time before gay couples succumb to the pattern of the larger gay community around them.

Among the gay male couples in Stiers's 1999 study who went through a public "union ceremony," even though 80% of these men indicated that they practiced monogamy, a mere 10% of even these most committed couples mentioned monogamy or fidelity as an important aspect of their commitment. How many of them will remain sexually exclusive at time goes on, even with the accountability of the public union ceremony helping them, given the values of the gay community around them?

In recent years I have become aware of Anabaptist gay men who publicly state that they have been with their partner many more than 5 years. When I gingerly approached them with my concerns about the lack of monogamy in the gay community in general and lack of standards for monogamy in the Christian gay community, they did not seize the opportunity to lay my concerns at rest, either decisively or with vague words. Instead they blew up. Perhaps it was all the fault of insensitivity on my part, though God knows I tried to be affirming, and to give them many "outs" for not continuing the conversation. At any rate, it further lowered my expectations that Anabaptist gay partnerships of many years include commitment to sexual exclusivity.

2. There is a second consideration that might also mute the statistics seeming to imply that a huge percentage of highly committed gay couples practice monogamy. It's clear that gay couples often use "monogamy" to mean "emotional monogamy." For instance, the buddybuddy.com survey differentiated between "monogamy" and "monogamy with agreed exceptions." But such differentiation illustrates that "monogamy" in male same-sex "marriages" is not what it means in heterosexual marriages. The article on monogamy in the online "Encyclopedia of AIDS" (seen at <http://www.thebody.com/encyclo/monogamy.html>) talks about gay male relationships that have a policy of sexual exclusivity. But it says that it is more common for there to be an agreement of "emotional monogamy" in which the partners give each other permission to have sex outside the relationship provided the extra-relational contact does not threaten the emotional integrity of the partnership. Indeed, McWhirter and Mattison wrote in 1984 that "ninety-five percent of the couples have an arrangement whereby the partners may have sexual activity with others."

In the 1994 Advocate study, the huge majority of gay couples say that sex outside the relationship is the most difficult problem they face -- 85% of the respondents in the study reported that this topic had caused their biggest fights. So even though 52% of the gay male couples were "monogamous," somehow 85% of gay male couples found sex outside of the relationship as a source of conflict. If this is right [I haven't yet been able to read the entire copy of this Advocate study, so perhaps I'm misunderstanding something as I am piecing together what I read], then again the gay community is using the term "monogamy" much differently than larger society does.

Another anecdote along these lines is something John Rankin stated in a dialogue on homosexual rights with Nadine Strossen: "I was doing a forum with Bishop John

Spong, the first Episcopal bishop in the country to ordain homosexuals. And he was talking about a homosexual male couple, one of whom was a priest. He talked about their loving, monogamous, committed relationship. I responded to him and pointed out a recent study, this is about two or three years ago, of 152 men who had been united in domestic partnership ordinances in San Francisco and some other cities. They were asked the definition of domestic partnership. Did it include sexual fidelity? Out of 152, they all said it did not include sexual fidelity. They were free to have sex with other partners." (http://www.bridges-across.org/ba/rankin_strossen_part4.htm; Mars Hill Forum #39)

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