

Sexual Exclusivity versus Openness in Gay Male Couples

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Forty gay male couples participated in a questionnaire study comparing relationships that partners agreed were sexually open (N = 23) and relationships that partners agreed were sexually closed (N = 17). No significant differences were found in the quality of open versus closed relationships. Almost all men (93%) said they were in love with their partner. On scales assessing degree of love and liking for the partner, men in open and closed relationships were indistinguishable. Nor did the two types of relationships differ in measures of satisfaction and commitment. It appears that sexually open and closed relationships can be equally satisfying.

It has been suggested that gay male relationships typically go through predictable stages in which an initial "honeymoon" of sexual exclusivity is inevitably followed by a change to openness. Only 20% of our couples followed this pattern, however. The remaining 80% showed diverse patterns such as continued exclusivity throughout the relationship or a change from initial openness to sexual exclusivity.

Men's reasons for having an open or closed relationship were diverse. Personal attitudes and values about the merits of exclusivity were an important factor. Men in open relationships also emphasized the benefits of sexual variety and personal independence. Men in closed relationships stressed their desire to avoid jealousy.

Although partners' agreements about whether their relationship should be open or closed had a significant effect on their actual sexual behavior, some discrepancies were found. Most men in closed relationships

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had had at least one outside sexual liaison, although they reported having many fewer sex partners than men in open relationships.

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INTRODUCTION

Americans are of two minds about sexual exclusivity in love relationships. Traditionalists believe that committed lovers should ideally be sexually faithful to each other. From this perspective, sexual liaisons with others are seen as a sign of problems within the primary relationship or as evidence of unfortunate human weaknesses. A contrasting view depicts sexual exclusivity as an outmoded, unnecessary restriction on relationships. Advocates of "open marriage" (O'Neill and O'Neill, 1972), for instance, propose that relationships may actually benefit when partners are free to pursue sex with others.

Although decisions about sexual exclusivity versus openness affect all contemporary couples, this issue may be especially salient in gay men's relationships. Indeed, Silverstein (1981) suggests that "there is no more universal conflict to be found among gay lovers than the question of whether or not to maintain an exclusive sexual relationship" (p. 40).

Available research indicates that sexual exclusivity might be the exception rather than the rule in most gay male relationships (Peplau and Gordon, 1983). A decade ago, for example, Saghir and Robins (1973) reported that most of their gay male respondents who were in long-term relationships had had outside sexual partners. More recently, Bell and Weinberg (1978) placed almost twice as many gay men in their "open-coupled" category as in their "closed-coupled" category, and these researchers suggested that most gay men's relationships "involve the pursuit of sexual contacts with persons other than one's partner" (p. 138). Mendola (1980) found that among the gay men she studied who were in a steady relationship, only 37% had sex exclusively with their primary partner; 49% had occasional outside affairs, and 14% had sex with other partners more than occasionally. Similarly, more than 70% of the gay men studied by Peplau and Cochran (1981) reported having had sex with someone other than their primary partner at least once since their primary relationship began. Many gay male couples may come to the understanding that sex outside their primary relationship is permissible (Harry and DeVall, 1978).

Several factors might encourage sexual openness rather than exclusivity in gay male relationships. First, male sex-role socialization often emphasizes

the importance of frequent and varied sexual activity. According to Berzon (1979), cultural messages about sex for men are "to get all they can, that they should want it, that it is their right to have it" (p. 38). Thus, men, both heterosexual and homosexual, might place less value on sexual exclusivity than women. Consequently, two men could be less motivated to maintain sexual exclusivity in a relationship than would either a heterosexual or lesbian couple.

Second, in some relationships, the presence of children may foster sexual exclusivity. Brown (1976) argued that, in traditional heterosexual marriage, monogamy has served the function of keeping the family together primarily to protect the children. Therefore, he reasoned, childless gay male couples could feel less compelled to be strictly monogamous. Brown also suggested that since the gay man's sex life is already regarded by society as illicit, no clear barrier is crossed when engaging in sex outside a "legally unauthorized union with another man" (p. 133).

A further factor influencing sexual openness is the easy availability of casual sex in the bars and baths of the gay men's community (Harry and DeVall, 1978; Jay and Young, 1977; Spada, 1979). For some time, the norms of many segments of the gay community have encouraged sexual openness rather than exclusivity and have defined casual sexual affairs as a complement to a steady relationship. As one gay man explained,

I still feel that a commitment to a relationship . . . has very little to do with what I choose to do with my body. My commitment is more intellectual and in the heart. I differentiate between sex and making love. (cited in Silverstein, 1981, p. 143)

Given that gay male couples must deal with the issue of sexual exclusivity, an important question is how decisions in favor of sexual openness versus exclusivity affect the quality of gay men's relationships. A common idea in discussions of this matter has been that sexual openness is usually essential to the survival of gay male partnerships. According to Harry and DeVall (1978), for example, "the adaptation of the open gay marriage seems the most workable accommodation by [gay male couples] to the mentality of the sexual marketplace" (p. 94). Warren (1974) proposed that sexual exclusivity, when it does occur, is typically part of the initial honeymoon stage of a gay male relationship and that it is usually followed in long-term relationships by a shift toward sexual openness. Indeed, Warren suggested that this change toward sexual openness may be essential to the long-term stability of gay male relationships. Similarly, Harry and Lovely (1979) proposed that gay male couples go through a "deromanticization process" over time that is "accompanied by a transformation of relationships from sexually closed to open ones" (pp. 193-194). The theme in these discussions is that sexual openness is often necessary (although perhaps not ideal) for the survival of relationships given pressures in the social world of gay men.

The more specific issue of whether sexual exclusivity is linked to relationship satisfaction has received less attention. Saghir and Robins (1973) suggested that after a few years men in gay couples seek sex outside their relationship because of a decrease in sexual activity and satisfaction within the relationship. Bell and Weinberg (1978) reported that men in "open-coupled" relationships were "not happy with their circumstances and tended (despite spending a fair amount of time at home) to seek satisfactions with people outside their partnership" (p. 221). Men in "closed-coupled" relationships seemed to be happier. Unfortunately, for present purposes, the criteria Bell and Weinberg used to differentiate gays from one another assigned men to the open-coupled category who also had a high score on the number of sexual problems. Thus, the interpretation of these results in the present context is uncertain.

The present questionnaire study was designed to compare the quality of sexually open and closed relationships among gay men. We defined a *closed relationship* as one in which sexual exclusivity was expected of both partners. We defined an *open relationship* as one in which both partners were free to engage in sexual encounters with other people. It must be emphasized that these definitions refer to *agreements* between partners.

A central goal of our research was to examine the nature of the sexual agreements developed by gay men, and the reasons men gave for having an open or closed relationship. A second goal was to determine whether these two types of relationships differed in satisfaction, love, and commitment. A final goal was to determine what, if any, background characteristics distinguished men in open versus closed relationships. Since the general approach of the study was descriptive and exploratory rather than hypothesis testing, detailed predictions were not made in advance.

METHOD

Recruitment and Procedures

Couples were recruited in 1980 (prior to the outbreak of AIDS) for a study of gay male relationships. Participants were recruited through gay organizations and personal contacts in the Los Angeles area and were encouraged to recommend the study to eligible friends. The study required that participants be self-identified gay men currently in a "romantic/sexual relationship" lasting 10 months or longer and that both partners be willing to take part. All respondents individually completed a detailed questionnaire, numbered so that partners' responses could be matched for data analyses. In most cases, materials were mailed to respondents with instructions to complete the questionnaires separately and to refrain from discussing answers

with their partners until all materials were returned to the researchers. In other cases, individuals were given questionnaires at community activities (e.g., a gay men's chorus rehearsal) and were asked to return the completed materials in the stamped, addressed envelope provided.

Questionnaire

Participants completed an 18-page questionnaire. Initial questions concerned the men's background, attitudes about relationships, and characteristics of the current relationship. Later, men were asked to indicate whether their current relationship was sexually "open" or "closed." The questionnaire explained these terms as follows:

We define a closed relationship as one in which sexual fidelity is expected of both partners, and an open relationship as one in which both partners are free to engage in sexual encounters with other people.

Men who indicated that they were in an open relationship then answered questions about their decision to have an open relationship and their satisfaction with this type of relationship. Men in closed relationships answered similar questions about their decision to be sexually exclusive and about their satisfaction with this arrangement.

Participants

The sample consisted of both partners in 40 gay male couples. The inclusion of both partners provided a reliability check for several variables, such as the length of a relationship and the type of agreement that the partners had about sexual exclusivity. Only couples in which both partners agreed about whether their relationship was currently sexually open or closed were included in the study. Although members of 45 couples completed the questionnaire, five couples disagreed about current exclusivity and so were excluded from data analyses.

Relationships ranged in length from 11 months to 29 years, with a median of 3.3 years. Over a third (37.5%) of the couples had relationships lasting 5 years or longer. Although cohabitation was not a requirement for participation, 95% of couples in the sample lived together. Those couples living separately reported seeing each other at least three times a week.

The 80 men in our sample ranged in age from 21 to 70 years, with a median of 31 years. The majority of men were white (81%), with 7% Hispanic, 5% Asian-American, 3% Black, 3% American-Indian, and 1% other. Over half (58%) the men held a bachelor's degree or had some graduate training; 16% had a master's degree, and 15% had a doctorate. Yearly income from

jobs, investments, and other resources ranged from \$5,000 to \$230,000, with a median of \$20,000.

Participants had diverse religious backgrounds: 49% reported being raised as Protestants, 32% as Catholics, 9% as Jews, 5% as "other," and 5% answered "none." The majority reported that they were currently not very religious (mean of approximately 4.0 on a 9-point scale of religiosity). Only 6% attended religious services weekly; 58% attended services less than once a year.

Two-thirds (65%) of the respondents identified themselves as Democrats, 10% as Republicans, 11% as Independents, 4% as "other," and 10% had no political affiliation. Most said they were politically liberal (mean of 6.3 on a 9-point scale of political conservatism-liberalism). The majority of men also reported having very liberal moral and social standards (mean of 7.0 on a 9-point scale).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analyses examined three major issues. A first goal was to describe the nature of couples' agreements about sexual exclusivity. Then we compared the degree of love and commitment experienced in open versus closed relationships. Finally, we examined the background characteristics of men in these two types of relationships.

Sexual Agreements: Open versus Closed

Respondents were asked if they and their partner had discussed sexual exclusivity in their relationship. Most men (60%) said they had discussed the issue a "good deal," and another 30% had discussed the issue "somewhat." Only 10% indicated that they had discussed sexual exclusivity "a little" or not at all. Another question asked respondents if their relationship was currently open or closed, as defined in the questionnaire. Slightly over half the couples (57.5%) reported having an open relationship in which both partners were free to have sexual encounters with other people; 42.5% reported having a closed relationship in which sexual fidelity was expected of both partners. We do not know how representative this ratio of open to closed couples is among gay couples generally. For our purposes, however, it was useful to have relatively equal proportions of couples in both categories. Most men said they were moderately to extremely satisfied with the type of sexual agreement they and their partner had (means of 7.0 and 6.7 on a 9-point satisfaction scale for men in open and closed relationships, respectively).

Table I. Percentage of Men Rating Each Reason as a Major Influence in Their Decision to Have an Open Relationship

Reason checklist for open relationships	Percentage (N = 46)
(——)'s and/or my attitudes about open and closed relationships in general	64
My need for sexual variety	58
(——)'s need for sexual variety	58
My desire to maintain my independence	40
My desire to continue engaging in "anonymous socializing"	38
(——)'s desire to maintain his independence	36
(——)'s desire to continue engaging in "anonymous socializing"	36
A previous closed relationship of (——)'s or mine was unsuccessful/unsatisfying	27
A previous open relationship of (——)'s or mine was successful/satisfying	16

Reasons for Having Open versus Closed Relationships

A central goal of the study was to identify factors that gay men considered in choosing and evaluating an open or closed relationship. The questionnaire provided three types of information. First, men rated whether each of a list of possible reasons had been a major, minor, or noninfluential factor in their decision to have an open or closed relationship. The items on this reason checklist are given in Tables I and II. Second, men completed a 4-item scale assessing their beliefs about the value and necessity of sexual exclusivity in a relationship. Finally, men wrote open-ended descriptions of the "best things" and "worst things" about having an open or closed relationship.

Results indicated that personal attitudes and values about exclusivity were a central theme in both types of relationship. Specifically, in answering the reason checklist, 64% of men in open relationships and 79% of men in closed relationships cited "personal attitudes about sexual exclusivity" as a major influential factor in their decision to have that type of relationship. Further corroboration for the importance of attitudes came from responses to the 4-item sexual exclusivity scale (see Table III.) Analyses compared the mean scores of men in open and closed relationships on each item and on the total scale. As expected, men in closed relationships had significantly more conservative attitudes, believing that exclusivity is essential to a successful relationship. As shown in Table III, these differences were large and statistically significant.³ Interestingly, more general measures of conservatism, such

³In making these statistical comparisons, it was important that responses of partners in a given relationship not be treated as independent. The attitudes of one partner could be strongly de-

Table II. Percentage of Men Rating Each Reason as a Major Influence in their Decision to Have a Closed Relationship

Reason checklist for closed relationships	Percentage (<i>N</i> = 34)
(——)'s or my attitudes about open and closed relationships in general	79
(——)'s jealousy of my relationships with others	52
(——)'s dependence on me	32
My jealousy of (——)'s relationships with others	30
(——) and I wouldn't spend as much time together as he or I would like to if we had an open relationship	29
My fear that (——) would fall in love with someone else	26
A previous open relationship of (——)'s or mine was unsuccessful/unsatisfying	24
(——) or I may contract a sexual disease and transmit it to the other	18
My dependence on (——)	16
(——)'s shyness and reluctance to seek outside relationships	15
A previous closed relationship of (——)'s or mine was successful/satisfying	6
Others may not approve of an open relationship (parents, friends, etc.)	3
My shyness and reluctance to seek outside relationships	3

as degree of religiousness and political liberalism versus conservatism, did not distinguish men in open versus closed relationship.

These results suggest a clear association between specific personal attitudes about sexual exclusivity and couple agreements about being open versus closed. It should be emphasized, however, that the direction of causality here is not known. It is possible that pre-existing personal attitudes influence the selection of a partner and the decision to have a certain type of relationship. However, it is also possible that certain attitudes develop as a consequence of being in an open or closed relationship, or that the experience of being in one or another type of relationship promotes attitude change. It seems likely that both processes can and do occur.

In addition to personal attitudes about sexual exclusivity, other reasons were also endorsed as having influenced the decision to have an open or a closed relationship. For men in open relationships, sexual variety and personal independence were important reasons. On the reason checklist, 58% of men in open relationships cited the desire for sexual variety as a major reason, and 38% cited their own or their partner's desire to maintain inde-

pendent on, influenced by, or related to those of the other partner. To deal with this potential problem, the Hotelling T^2 statistic (Harris, 1975) was used to compare mean scores.

Table III. A Comparison of Mean Scores on the Sexual Exclusivity Attitude Scale for Individuals in Open versus Closed Relationships^a

Item	Open couples (<i>N</i> = 46)	Closed couples (<i>N</i> = 34)	<i>F</i> ^b	<i>p</i>
Sexual fidelity is essential to a long-lasting relationship	1.88	4.06	24.83	0.001
A sexually open relationship increases partners' appreciation of each other (reverse scoring)	2.60	3.94	7.50	0.002
Sexually open relationships are against my religious and/or moral principles	1.74	2.86	4.90	0.013
If two people are truly in love, they should be willing to commit themselves to a monogamous relationship	1.99	3.97	17.32	0.001

^aHigh scores indicate giving greater importance to sexual exclusivity.

^b*df* = 2/36.

pendence as major reasons. These themes were also evident in responses to open-ended questions about the best things in having an open relationship. For example, four respondents commented as follows:

It lets out frustrations from just being with the same partner. It makes you realize the difference between having sex and making love.

I meet lots of new people. I learn a lot about my sexual self. I get fantasy material so when I have sex with my lover, it is better than it would otherwise be.

It enables us to be mostly monogamous by *choice*, to preserve feelings of autonomy and personal freedom along with commitment. It maintains perspective—e.g., I just love him, I don't own him!

It gives us both freedom and variety. He is apt to be less possessive. He is *not* my property nor I, his.

These findings are consistent with those of Silverstein (1981), who reported that the need for greater variety of sexual experience than one lover can provide and the desire to avoid possessiveness and the jealousy of property ownership were the most frequent reasons given by gay men for wanting sexual contact outside their primary relationship.

For men in closed relationships, the most important reason cited after personal attitudes was jealousy. Over half of the men in closed relationships (52%) cited their partner's jealousy as a major factor, and 30% cited their own potential jealousy about their partner as a reason for having a closed relationship. Similar findings were reported by Silverstein (1981). He noted that jealousy was a primary motivation for wanting monogamy in a relationship and suggested that this jealousy stems from a fear of potential loneliness and insecurity about losing one's partner. Open-ended responses from some of the men in our sample who had closed relationships reflected these issues of jealousy and insecurity. The following responses identify some

of the best things about having a closed relationship:

Sense of security and commitment. Familiarity, history of shared experiences.

Peace of mind.

Above all, the sense of security. The feeling that my partner's sexual encounter might lead to an emotional relationship thus leaving you out in the cold is hard to deal with over a long period. In a closed relationship, the pressure is a great deal less.

When our questionnaire was administered in 1980, only 18% of the men in closed relationships indicated that the possibility of their partner contracting and transmitting a venereal disease to themselves was an influential reason in their decision to have a closed relationship. It is likely that with the growing threat of AIDS this is becoming a more important reason for men to maintain a closed relationship.

It might have been expected that men in open and closed relationships would focus on different issues in thinking about their types of relationships. However, we found surprising similarity in the issues discussed by all men, regardless of relationship type. This pattern was perhaps clearest in responses to open-ended questions about the advantages and disadvantages of open and closed relationships. Men in both types of relationship discussed sexual variety. As discussed earlier, the ability to satisfy needs for sexual variety was frequently cited as one of the best things in open relationships. Conversely, the lack of sexual variety was cited as one of the worst things about closed relationships. Typical are these responses concerning the worst things about closed relationships:

I still feel that the opportunity to be with other sexual partners from time to time is valuable for my own satisfaction as well as for the relationship.

At times we all, and I think this also applies to heterosexual couples, have a mutual sexual attraction with someone other than your lover. It is nice to have the attention, to have a conquest to boost one's self-esteem and just have sex with someone new.

I miss the excitement of being with a stranger.

Similarly, the issues of jealousy and security were salient for men in both types of relationships. The lack of jealousy and the feeling of security were commonly cited as some of the best things about a closed relationship. In contrast, the threat of jealousy and fear of insecurity were commonly cited as some of the worst things in open relationships, as reflected in these responses:

The jealousy that poisons the relationship periodically. Wondering what my partner is doing and with whom.

Possibility of becoming jealous of finding a new lover thereby destroying the relationship.

Mild fear that another will be found with whom my partner would rather be.

In deciding about sexual exclusivity in their relationships, men in both open and closed relationships may have engaged in a sort of "personal calculus" in which similar issues or needs were weighed against each other. For some, the desire for sexual variety outweighed problems related to jealousy, and for others, the fear of losing their partner and the need for security outweighed the need for sexual variety. Of course, variety and security were not the only motivating forces determining whether a relationship was sexually open or closed. As shown in Tables I and II, other factors were also important for many men and could have been the only important factors for some.

A Stage Model of Sexual Exclusivity

Some researchers (e.g., Saghir and Robins, 1973; Warren, 1974) have suggested that there is a typical developmental sequence for sexual exclusivity versus openness in long-term gay male relationships. According to this model, initial sexual exclusivity is followed eventually by a change to sexual openness. It is not clear whether these authors are referring to changes in actual sexual behavior or to changes in explicit agreements about sexual exclusivity. We examined only possible changes in explicit sexual agreements. Our data provided little support for the generality of a stage model in which initially agreed upon sexual exclusivity is followed by an agreed upon change to sexual openness.

Of the 40 couples in our sample, only 20% indicated that their relationship was initially closed and later became open. The remaining 80% of couples differed from the stage model in one of several ways. A number of couples (20% of the total) reported that their relationship had always been open and had not had an initial stage of sexual exclusivity. Another 17.5% of couples agreed that their relationship was currently open but disagreed about whether or not there had been an initial period of sexual exclusivity. Other couples (30% of the total) reported that their relationship had always been closed. Since many of these couples had been together for less than 3 years, they could have been in the first stage of their relationship. The stage model would predict that, if they remained together, they would eventually agree to become open. However, it should be noted that three couples in long-term relationships of 6, 10, and 29 years reported that they had always identified their relationships as closed. Two couples (5%) said that they once had a sexually open relationship but had decided to close the relationship because of problems resulting from sexual openness. Finally, three couples (7.5%) reported other stage patterns (e.g., open, closed, open). In sum, a pattern of initially agreed upon exclusivity followed by openness was not characteristic of most of the relationships we studied. Rather, like

Harry (1977), we found a much more varied set of relationship patterns or careers.

Sexual Expectations and Behaviors

We defined open versus closed relationships solely in terms of partners' understandings about *expected* sexual behavior. Analyses examined links between these agreements and the actual sexual behavior of participants. The majority of men (90%) in our sample reported having had sex with at least one or two men since their current relationship began, and a sizeable minority (39%) reported having had sex with 20 or more men since their current relationship began.

As anticipated, the sexual behavior of men in open and closed relationships differed significantly (see Table IV). Men in closed relationships typically had sex with considerably fewer partners than did men in open relationships. The 8 men in our sample who had sex only with their primary partner since that relationship began were all in closed relationships. The median number of outside sexual partners for men in closed relationships was 3-5. In contrast, all men in open relationships had sex with at least one other person, and the median number of other partners was 20 or more. To test the statistical significance of this, chi square tests were used. However, we could not treat the data from all 80 respondents as independent, since men were paired as members of 40 couples. Consequently, it was necessary for statistical analyses to assign members of each couple randomly to be either partner A or partner B. Separate chi square analyses were then computed to compare partners A in open relationships with partners A in closed relationships, and then to compare partners B in open versus closed relationships. Both analyses were statistically significant: $\chi^2(5) = 20.97$, $p < 0.001$ and $\chi^2(5) = 13.49$, $p = 0.019$ for partners A and B, respectively.

Table IV. Comparison of Percentage of Men in Open versus Closed Relationships Reporting Various Numbers of Outside Sex Partners

Number of partners	Relationship type	
	Open (<i>N</i> = 46)	Closed (<i>N</i> = 34)
None	0.0%	23.5%
1-2	4.3%	17.6%
3-5	4.3%	20.6%
6-10	13.0%	17.6%
11-19	19.6%	8.8%
20 or more	58.7%	11.8%

Our results clearly show that there is a consistency between partners' agreements about sexual exclusivity and their actual behavior.

We also found, as did Harry (1977) in a study using one rather than both partners, some discrepancies between men's sexual agreements and their actual behavior. This is perhaps most obvious in our finding that 74% of men whose relationships had always been closed had nonetheless had sex with at least one other person. We also found that some men in open relationships seldom exercised their option for sex with others. As one man noted, "although our relationship is 'open' in principle, we are almost entirely monogamous in fact."

Identifying factors that contribute to these attitude-behavior inconsistencies might shed light on the general nature of sexual exclusivity in gay male relationships. Perhaps most important, it appears that sexual exclusivity in gay male relationships is actually a continuum rather than a dichotomy. The couple that strives for monogamy but tolerates occasional lapses into openness differs from both the explicitly open couple and the strictly exclusive one. As Reece (1979) observed, "Most gay men in couples do have sex with people outside the relationship and the question might not so much be an either/or matter but how a couple makes such behavior fit their particular individual and relationship needs" (p. 106). Since our questionnaire required men to categorize their relationship either as open or closed, this range of variation was not fully explored.

Further, as noted earlier, some couples had changed their agreement about sexual exclusivity since their relationship had begun. Because our questions about outside partners asked for the total number since the relationship began, we do not know whether men who changed their agreements also changed their behavior. Another factor influencing the agreement-behavior link was the duration of the relationship, with behavioral exclusivity becoming less likely in longer relationships. All men in relationships identified as having always been closed and lasting 3 years or longer had engaged in sex with at least one person other than their primary partner. All 8 men who had not had sex with someone other than their partner were in closed relationships of less than 3 years. Another finding was that men in closed relationships were less likely than men in open relationships to tell their partner about their outside sexual encounters, $\chi^2(4) = 18.60, p < 0.001$ for partners A and $\chi^2(4) = 9.58, p < 0.05$ for partners B.

Finally, some discrepancies between expectations and behavior could arise because men have difficulty identifying the precise point at which their primary "relationship" began or when a particular agreement about sexual exclusivity versus openness was made. Although many couples engaged in explicit decision making about exclusivity, others appear to have reached more implicit understandings. Future research might profitably investigate the processes by which couples negotiate agreements in their relationships.

Sex with the Primary Partner

The questionnaire asked how often men had sex with their primary partner during the past 2 months. Although it has been suggested (Saghir and Robins, 1973) that men in open relationships have sex less frequently with their primary partner than do men in closed relationships, our results contradicted this view. About 39% of the men said they and their partner had sex 2–3 times per week, 21% reported having sex more often, and 40% reported having sex less often. Statistical analyses found no significant differences between the sexual activity of partners in open and closed couples. Nor were there differences between men in open and closed relationships in the desired frequency of sexual activity with the primary partner. In both types of relationships, one-third of men said they would like to have sex with their partner 2–3 times per week, 33% reported wanting sex more often, and 33% reported wanting sex less often. Thus, having sex with outside partners was not consistently linked to less frequent sex or to less desire to have sex with a primary partner.

Limits to Sexual Openness

Respondents in open relationships were asked if they and their partner had agreed to certain rules or limitations on the permissible number or types of outside sexual activities. Considerable variation was found on this topic. Over a quarter of the open couples had placed explicit restrictions on outside sexual behavior. Common restrictions were that partners never bring outside sexual partners home and that they never stay out all night. Some couples restricted outside sex to encounters in which both partners were involved (e.g., threesomes). Common limitations, such as allowing sex only with strangers or prohibiting emotional involvement with outside sexual partners, reflect the strong distinction many gay men seem to make between casual or “impersonal” sex and sex accompanied by affective commitment (cf. Harry, 1977). Some couples viewed outside sexual relations as a threat to their primary relationship only if the partner showed affection and caring for the outsider. This diversity among open couples further emphasizes the importance of considering sexual openness versus exclusivity as a range rather than a dichotomy.

Comparing the Quality of Open and Closed Relationships

A central goal of this study was to examine the quality of open and closed relationships as reflected in personal feelings of satisfaction and love and in measures of commitment. Both standardized measures and self-

rating scales were used to assess these qualitative aspects of the relationships. In addition, open-ended questions provided participants with an opportunity to describe the satisfying and dissatisfying features of their relationship in their own words.

Love and Satisfaction

Participants completed Rubin's (1973) Love Scale assessing feelings of attachment, intimacy, and caring for one's partner. Also included were several items from Rubin's (1973) Liking Scale, a measure of respect and affection for one's partner. Most men in the sample reported strong feelings of love and liking for their partner, and no significant differences were found between men in open versus closed relationships. Men were asked to indicate if they were "in love" with their partner. Almost all respondents (92.5%) said they were in love, and the remaining 7.5% said they were undecided. Men in open and closed relationships were equally likely to say they were in love. Participants also rated how personally "satisfying" and "close" they felt their relationship to be. Most men rated their relationship as highly satisfying (mean of 7.2 on a 9-point scale) and very close (mean of 7.5 on a 9-point scale). Again, no differences were found between men in open and closed relationships on these measures. Taken together, these findings provide clear evidence that both open and closed relationships can be experienced as very positive and rewarding. Having sex with others is not necessarily a sign of dissatisfaction with the primary relationship.

Commitment

One indication of partners' commitment to each other is the ability of their relationship to stand the test of time (Kelley, 1983). In our sample, couples had been together for periods as short as 11 months and as long as 29 years, with a median of 3.3 years. No significant difference was found in duration between open and closed relationships. As noted earlier, however, the likelihood that men in closed relationships would have an outside sexual liaison was greater in longer relationships.

Participants were also asked to estimate the likelihood that their current relationship would continue to exist in 1 year and in 5 years. The majority of men were certain that their relationship would exist in 1 year (80% scored 7 or higher on a 9-point certainty scale). About 60% were certain (score of 7 or higher on a 9-point scale) that their relationship would continue for the next 5 years. Future expectations did not differ significantly for open and closed relationships.

Another sign of commitment to a relationship is the willingness to make personal sacrifices to preserve the partnership. Respondents were asked how likely it was that they would move if their partner were offered an attractive job or educational opportunity in another city. About half the men said they would definitely or probably move, 22% were uncertain, and 23% said they would probably or definitely not move. No significant differences were found for men in open versus closed relationships. Thus, on measures of duration and commitment, open and closed relationships were indistinguishable.

Background Characteristics

Although one might imagine that men in open and closed relationships would differ in their backgrounds, we found no such differences. Men in open and closed partnerships did not differ significantly in age, ethnic background, level of education, income, political affiliation, or religious affiliation. To some extent, the relative homogeneity of our sample may have contributed to this finding. Sample bias, however, does not seem to offer a complete explanation. We suggest that men who prefer open relationships and men who prefer closed relationships can be found in diverse segments of the gay community. In other words, demographic factors may not be strong predictors of preferences for sexual exclusivity. Other factors, such as one's own attitudes and the opinions of friends and peers, might be more important.

CONCLUSIONS

Several findings from this study deserve comment. First, most men in our sample had devoted a good deal of thought to the issue of sexual exclusivity. Several basic themes were considered by both open and closed couples in reaching agreements about sexual exclusivity and in evaluating their relationships. Most important were personal attitudes about exclusivity, needs for sexual variety, concerns about independence, and jealousy. We do not know, of course, how representative these findings are of gay couples in general. As Morin (1977) has observed, there is no such thing as a representative sample of a partially hidden community. It is possible that different issues are considered in the sexual decision making of couples in other settings. Further, since volunteers might differ significantly from nonrespondents, our sample probably overrepresents men who have

thought more about their relationships or who are more interested in psychological research than other gay men. Our sample excluded couples in which partners disagreed about whether their relationship was open or closed and so might also underrepresent couples for whom our open versus closed dichotomy seemed inappropriate.

A second finding was that men in both open and closed relationships were equally likely to have strong feelings of love, satisfaction, and commitment. Openness was not necessarily a sign of relationship problems. It could be, of course, that in particular social environments one type of relationship is more adaptive and satisfying than another. Future research will be needed to test the generalizability of our finding that open and closed relationships did not differ significantly in quality.

Third, our results do not support stage models proposing that initial sexual exclusivity is inevitably followed by sexual openness in gay male relationships. Instead, a variety of developmental sequences characterized our sample. It appears that gay male couples experiment with and modify sexual agreements as their needs or circumstances change. As Harry and DeVall (1978) suggested, the lack of structural and cultural guidelines for gay male relationships may encourage a trial-and-error approach to the creation of relationship rules.

Fourth, this study suggests that sexual exclusivity in gay male relationships can be better conceptualized as a continuum than as a dichotomy (or perhaps even as a multidimensional phenomenon). For example, distinctions between couples who are totally exclusive sexually and couples who are primarily exclusive but tolerate occasional sex outside the relationship seem to be important. It appears that relationship patterns at many points along the continuum from strictly closed to explicitly open exist and can be successful. Future research is needed to explore the complexity of sexual exclusivity and openness in greater detail.

Finally, our study found no differences in the background characteristics of men involved in sexually open and closed relationships. It may be that our sample was too homogeneous in backgrounds to provide an adequate examination of the link between demographic factors and sexual exclusivity. Men in our sample were predominantly young, well-educated, and white. It is also possible that the demographic measures included in this study were too limited in scope or sensitivity to detect real differences that might exist between men in open and men in closed relationships. Additional research will be needed to evaluate these possibilities and, more generally, to shed light on the determinants of gay men's decision making about sexual exclusivity in relationships.

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