Models of Open Relationships

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SUMMARY. This article describes three categories of open relationships: the primary/secondary model, the multiple primary partners model, and the multiple non-primary relationships model. Examples of each type are given, and the advantages and drawbacks of each model are discussed. (Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-6978. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com)

The model of heterosexual, monogamous marriage is sanctioned by society, religion, and the law as the only acceptable type of sexual relationship. As a result, most people have not been exposed to other ways of life. In fact, we are so heavily socialized to believe in the ideals of monogamy and marriage that many people cannot even imagine any other option. While lesbians have traditionally tended towards a belief in monogamy, in reality, lesbian relationships are very diverse. Frequent responses to the idea of open relationships are: "But I've never seen one," "No one I know has ever tried that," and

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"There's no way it could possibly work out." People always ask, "But how does it work? What's it like?"

Many successful models do exist. This article gives an overview of the three types of non-monogamous, or polyamorous, relationships which currently exist, and variations on those models. To begin thinking about new ways of living, it can help to see some examples and to understand the advantages and drawbacks of each model. This may help you to decide whether an open relationship is right for you and, if so, which model may best fit your individual lifestyle. The possibilities are limitless and you can "customize" any of these models to accommodate your needs.

PRIMARY/SECONDARY MODEL

This is by far the most commonly practiced form of open relationship and it is the most similar to monogamous marriage. In this model, the "couple relationship" is considered primary, and any other relationships revolve around the couple. It is most frequently practiced by married people and other couples in long-term relationships. The couple decides that their relationship will have precedence over any outside relationships. The couple often lives together and forms the primary family unit, while other relationships receive less time and priority. No outside relationship is allowed to become equal in importance to the primary partnership. The couple makes the rules; secondary lovers have little power over decisions and are not allowed to negotiate for what they want.

Some couples together pick up a third (and fourth and fifth) person to have casual sex with. This may occur at a music festival, through personals ads, or at a sex club or S/M party. (Among bisexuals and heterosexuals, these couples are often called "swingers"). Both primary partners participate in the sexual encounter, and this can enhance the sex life of the couple. For example:

- Lori and Dianne had been together for nearly three years when they met Monika at a dance. They were both attracted to her. The next week, they invited Monika over for Sunday brunch. After a playful morning of feeding each other ripe fruit and croissants, Lori and Dianne invited Monika into their bedroom.
- Dorothy had long lusted after her friend Devi, but for professional reasons, never let romance enter into their encounters. Then

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one weekend Dorothy, Devi, and Dorothy's long-term girlfriend Loraine were out of town at a conference together. Knowing that Devi and Loraine were attracted to each other, Dorothy encouraged the two of them to have a private affair. All three had dinner together, and later that night, when Loraine came back from Devi's room and crawled into bed, Dorothy was hungry to hear every detail.

Some couples allow each partner to independently have outside sexual relationships, either casual or long-term. These outside relationships are still considered secondary, and if any conflict develops, the primary couple relationship takes precedence. Often the couple lives together, shares finances, and spends weekends, holidays, and vacations together. The outside lovers usually do not live with them, spend less time with them, and have very little voice in decisions and rule-making. Scheduling is arranged around the demands of the primary couple. Some couples have rules that each partner has veto power over any new lovers that her partner may choose. In other words, if a woman is interested in a new person, her girlfriend has the power to veto that relationship before it is told, for any reason. Other couples allow each person to sleep with whomever they choose, which makes rules about how much time they can spend with their other lovers, whether they can spend the night away from home, how far away a potential new lover must live, whether they can spend any weekend time together, and other restrictions. For example:

- Sarah and Jill are a lesbian couple with a 3-year-old child. Jill also has a long-term relationship with Megan. Jill spends most evenings and weekends with Sarah and their child. Jill sees Megan one or two evenings a week as her schedule permits.
- Lynette and JoEllen live together and have a primary relationship. Both have ex-lovers with whom they are very close, and both occasionally have sex with their ex-lovers.
- David and Lucy are a bisexual couple who are married and have two children. David has a long-term male lover whom he sees frequently, but he considers his marriage and children his first priority and devotes more time and commitment to them. Lucy has several female lovers but each one has left her because she insists that her husband comes first. So currently she has no outside relationship.
Denise and Tanisha live together and are committed to their partnership. Denise has a strong preference for S/M sexual activities, but Tanisha is lukewarm about bondage and other activities. Denise wants. Denise satisfies her S/M desires by attending S/M sex parties. She also meets S/M partners through personal ads.

* Luettia and Kim have been lovers for ten years, but don’t live together. They see each other on designated nights each week, but a few nights each week are their own for work, activities, or an occasional affair. They maintain a high degree of privacy, and rarely tell each other details of their outside sexual adventures.

The primary/secondary model is popular because it is most similar to traditional marriage and does not threaten the primary of the couple. For most couples, it is not such a stretch to have outside relationships as long as they know that the most important commitment is to the primary partner. They can live together, have children, be socially acceptable, and “live a normal life.” They may keep their outside relationships a secret from friends and family. This model doesn’t require making any radical changes in lifestyle or world view. One major benefit for many couples is that they feel secure that they won’t be abandoned, because their partner has agreed that outside relationships will be secondary. This is simpler and easier to organize logistically than other forms of open relationships. If there is any conflict over time, loyalty, or commitment, the primary partner always gets priority.

A major drawback of this model is that outside relationships are not so simple or easy to predict or control. Having a sexual relationship with someone else often leads to becoming emotionally involved and even falling in love, frequently causing a crisis in the primary relationship, possibly leading to a breakup. Initiating a sexual relationship means opening the door to many possibilities, and often secondary relationships grow into something else which does not fit neatly into the confines of this model. Many people who become “secondary” lovers become angry at being subjugated to the couple, and demand equality or end the relationship. For this model to be successful, couples must be very convinced that their relationship is strong enough to weather these ups and downs. Conversely; some couples who start with this model decide eventually to shift to some form of the Multiple

MULTIPLE PRIMARY PARTNERS MODEL

While there are many variations on this theme, the key factor is that all primary partner models include three or more people in a primary relationship in which all members are equal partners. Instead of a couple having priority and control in the relationship, all relationships are considered primary, or have the potential of becoming primary. Each partner has equal power to negotiate for what they want in the relationship, in terms of time, commitment, living situation, financial arrangements, sex, and other issues. Two variations of the Multiple Primary Partners Model follow.

Polyfidelity Model: Closed Multi-Adult Families

This is a “group marriage” model, essentially the same as being married, except that you’re married to more than one person. Usually consisting of three to six adults, all partners live together and share finances, children, and household responsibilities. The partners could be all women, all men, or both. Depending on the sexual orientation of the family members, some or all adults in the family may be sexual partners. This is a closed system, and sex is allowed only between family members—no outside sexual relationships are allowed. Some families are open to taking on new partners, but only if all members of the family agree to accept the new person as a partner. The new person then moves into the household and becomes an equal member of the family. The polyfidelity model was made famous during the 1970s and 1980s by the Kerista commune in San Francisco, which had several households living this model for many years. Currently the most common form of this model is a heterosexual or bisexal triad of two women and one man, or two men and one woman, but many lesbian triads exist. Here are some examples of polyfidelity:

* Ann, Rachel, and Nathan live together as a family: all three are bisexual. Rachel has sexual relationships with both Ann and Nathan. Ann and Nathan also have a sexual relationship. They have
a "sleeping schedule" so that each relationship receives equal time, each spending two nights a week with each partner.

- Debra and Holly were very close friends with another lesbian couple, Karen and Elena. After years of spending weekends together camping, bowling, going to the movies, and having potluck dinners, they bought a house and moved in together as a polyfidelous family. If a woman has sexual relationships with the other three women. Each has her own bedroom and negotiates time with each partner.

Polyfidelity can be a richly rewarding experience, creating an extended family and intentional community. Pooling resources is economically and ecologically, and can reduce the stress of child rearing by spreading the work and the responsibility among several adults rather than just one or two parents. However, polyfidelity requires a very high level of compatibility and affinity among all partners. Everyone must agree on where to live, what to cook for dinner, how clean the house should be, how much money to spend and on what, whether to have children and how to raise them. Most people find it difficult enough to locate one partner they can successfully live with for the "long haul," much less two, three, four or more. Living together as a group decreases privacy and autonomy, often leading to interpersonal conflicts and stress. Living in a group requires excellent interpersonal skills, clear communication, assertiveness, cooperation, and flexibility in order to accommodate everyone's needs. Picking compatible partners and being flexible are both essential for successful polyfidelity.

Multiple Primary Partners: Open Model

This model is very different from polyfidelity in that all partners are given much more autonomy and flexibility in developing any relationships they choose and defining those relationships on their own terms. In the Primary/Secondary Model the couple is the center of power, and in the Polyfidelity Model the entire family group makes decisions together and all must agree. In the Multiple Primary Partners Open Model, the individual is the basic unit of the family and is empowered to make her own rules and decisions. Partners may choose to live together, they may choose to live with one or more lovers, or they may live alone. This model is open, in that each partner has the right to choose other lovers at any time without the approval of any other partner. Each relationship evolves independently of partners’ other relationships, with rules and levels of commitment to be negotiated by each individual. No one can veto a potential partner, or "pul over rank," and insist on being the number one priority. Here are some examples:

- Jennifer and Andrea are a lesbian couple who live together. Andrea also has another primary partner, Julia, who does not live with them, but receives equal time and priority. Andrea spends one-half of the week with each woman.
- Ricardo and Maria are a bisexual married couple: they spend Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights together. Tom also lives with them, and has his own bedroom. Ricardo spends a few nights each week with Tom. Maria has two lovers, Erica and Jessica, who she sees frequently.
- Carmen is a "lesbian with two wives," as she calls herself. The three own a duplex and are on a rotational schedule. Carmen spends three nights each week upstairs with Tanya, and three nights downstairs with Katy. The seventh day of the week is "Carmen's time," and she can negotiate to spend that time with either wife or have time to herself.

There is much more fluidity in the Multiple Primary Partners Open Model, because relationships are allowed to evolve over time. Very few rules restrict how relationships grow; changing levels of commitment are possible. However, this model is much less predictable than the others, and may cause anxiety for people who like more structure and prefer a clear hierarchy.

Because all partners are considered equal, each partner can negotiate for what they want. This "processing" requires time, effort, and excellent communication skills. Some people find the potential for conflicting loyalties to be too threatening. For instance, which partner will spend holidays or vacations with you? Will they both go, will they alternate each year, or will you spend part of each holiday or vacation with each one? If one partner is going through a crisis, can they demand more of your time and commitment? If you are experiencing problems in one relationship or feel more drawn toward another partner, what behavior is appropriate? Weighing your own needs and the desires of each partner can be very stressful and confusing. Some people find this model requires too much thinking, problem-solving,
and "going with the flow," so they may prefer a more rigid structure such as the Primary/Secondary Model or the Polyfidelity Model.

**MULTIPLE NON-PRIMARY RELATIONSHIPS MODEL**

While the previous models stress commitment and primary relationships, some people prefer to remain essentially single but participate in more than one relationship. They are not looking for a committed relationship. For them, non-monogamy offers the intimacy, love, and sexual satisfaction they need without the constraints of a primary relationship. This model works best for people who have a serious, all-consuming commitment to something other than relationships: people who are very busy with their work, their art, raising children, or political involvements. Usually they prefer to be involved with people who, like themselves, want less commitment, or people who already have a primary relationship and are looking for a secondary relationship. People choosing this model usually don't make a lot of rules about their relationships, and retain a very high degree of personal freedom and autonomy. They usually live alone and make relationships a relatively low priority in their lives. These are some examples:

- Rosemary writes lesbian mystery novels. She lives alone and spends most of her time writing in her home office. She has two long-term lovers, Janet and Danielle. She sees each of them sporadically when her work permits. Both Janet and Danielle have primary relationships, so they are content to see Rosemary a few times each month.
- Jill is a civil rights attorney working 80-hour weeks at the ACLU. She doesn't have time for a primary relationship, but has two long-term affairs with Jasmine and Bezz, who are also lawyers. They see each other "between trials," when their workloads permit.

For the Multiple Non-Primary Relationships Model to work, it is crucial to carefully choose partners who will be satisfied with a less committed relationship, and to communicate that clearly to potential partners. This model often is successful if all parties are too busy or too committed elsewhere to want a primary relationship. However, conflict can arise when circumstances change and one person has more time or develops a desire for a primary relationship. For example, when Rosemary finishes her novel she may want to devote more time to a relationship, or she may even desire monogamy. Such a change can prove fatal to the existing relationship. However, sometimes people see this change as an opportunity for growth, and are able to alter their relationship to accommodate everyone's needs.

**Choosing the Right Relationship Model**

There are many different types of open relationships. Some models will fit your needs much better than others. To identify your preferred model, ask yourself some tough questions:

- How much security do you need to feel safe in a relationship?
- Do you need to feel that you are "number one," or can you share that priority with other lovers?
- How much privacy and personal freedom do you need to feel comfortable?
- Have you been happy living alone, living with one person, or with a group?
- What pushes your buttons or provokes jealousy or insecurity?
- How much time and energy do you have to devote to relationships?
- What are your expectations of love relationships?

To be happy in relationships of any kind, it helps to know what you want and which model will be most likely to work for you. You must be willing to communicate what you want to potential partners in an honest and clear way. It is best to pick partners who want the same type of relationship model you would choose. Knowing what you want, communicating your desires, and choosing partners who have similar preferences are all ways for maximizing your chances of developing successful relationships, whatever model you choose.