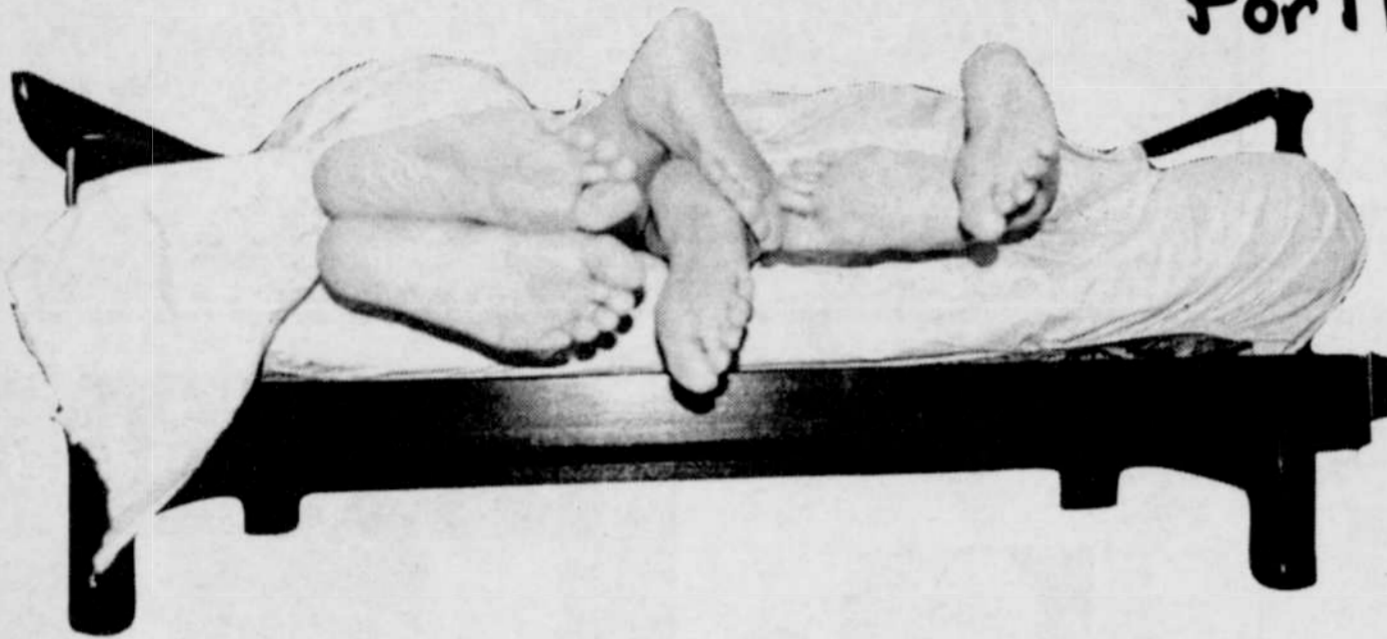


# Three's Company

Portland couples abandon fidelity  
for a brave new world  
of multiple relationships.  
Why?

by Lisa Bradshaw  
Photos by Marty Davis



Editor's note: In some cases, first names only are used in this article in order to protect the privacy of those interviewed. Some first names have been changed.

**W**hen *Just Out* decided to tackle polyamory, I thought I'd have to coax Portland families out of the woodwork; I thought I'd have to explain to friends about what the term even means and contend with their raised eyebrows. How foolish I was.

"Oh, yeah," was a common response. "You know Jill who was at our party the other night? She has two husbands." Or, "My girlfriend and I were at this club last weekend, and we both got dates!"

Why are more and more couples and individuals choosing to enter into relationships that appear (at least to the traditionally monogamous) to be emotionally difficult or, at the very least, more challenging than the status quo of one plus one equals true love?

According to Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt's runaway hit book *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*, the meaning of the term "polyamory" is "a bit vague." While some use it to refer only to multiple committed relationships, others may use it to describe what is popularly known as an "open relationship"—couples who are committed to each other but enjoy casual sex and dating outside that commitment.

OK, a working definition. But as quickly becomes evident, polyamory can be as fluid as, well, sex and gender.

"If you look at the poly community," says Amy, perched at a table in Pete's Coffee, "there are as many different ways of doing polyamory as there are people, practically."

She and her partner, Tony, have been together on and off since meeting in Portland at college 10 years ago. They were long-distance lovers during graduate school, then lived together in the Bay Area before moving back to Portland in 2000. Both identify as bisexual, and from the beginning, they've been polyamorous.

"For me, polyamory always seemed like the reasonable way to go," says Tony, 32. "Monogamy always seemed like kind of a weird thing to do."

Although they're a long-term couple, they refuse to get legally married. "If same-sex partners can't be married, then it's not very reasonable for opposite-sex partners to be married,"

Tony asserts. "It's taking advantage of something that not everyone can do."

This kind of pragmatism creates the basis for the couple's successful polyamorous relationship. "I usually say 'negotiated non-monogamy,'" Amy notes, "because it is such a process."

After coming out as bisexual years ago, she became more interested in women and less interested in men. "But, then, part of that is I also have this...long-standing commitment. Him being a man didn't seem like a good enough reason for us to not be together," she laughs.

Tony laughs back. "I lucked out."

Having "negotiated nonmonogamy" allows Amy to see women while keeping her primary partnership intact. "It's just nice," the 30-year-old remarks, for both of them "to be able to go to a party and flirt with someone and maybe kiss someone and not have to worry [about the other] finding out."

But that doesn't mean they just mess around willy-nilly. "We've got some ground rules in place," she continues, "where if either of us meets somebody we can go up to a certain point without checking in."

Then if he or she wants to see someone again, "We end up talking," Amy explains. "I want to know more about this person. What's this person's situation? Also, it would be really important for me to meet anyone."

Although they both come to consensus on their ground rules, they didn't come to polyamory in the same way. Tony is more nature, and Amy is more nurture. "I feel it's been more of a choice," she says, "and a conscious choice, to explore this particular way of doing a relationship."

Whether monogamous couples are naturally doing what's right for them or are affect-

ed by culture is an ongoing poly debate. "I think that people who are monogamous just out of it being society's expectation miss a lot," insists Tony, saying he's "very much interested in not assuming anything about our relationship...or ignoring difficulties because they're all polished over by thinking, 'This is my girlfriend, this is my relationship.'"

Polyamory, he continues, "is a way to not be able to take those shortcuts. It's a way to force yourself to talk about this stuff on an ongoing basis...to make sure everyone is given the things they need."

Regardless of where you stand, though, "I don't think monogamy is better for society or polyamory is better for society," says Amy. "I think choices are better for society."

Success at nonmonogamy, they both agree, is firmly rooted in excellent and honest communication. "Communication and be brave," advises Tony. "Talk about the things that you want, not about the things you think people will want you to talk about...you have to be

brave enough to talk about your real needs and ask for them."

Amy concurs. "Just keeping the lines of communication about what's going on. I mean, jealousy does happen."

She grins at her partner across the table. "I have to tell the olive story."

As the legend goes, Amy was seeing a woman when she and Tony lived in California.

"The olive story," says Amy, "is a wonderful illustration of how strange jealousy is."

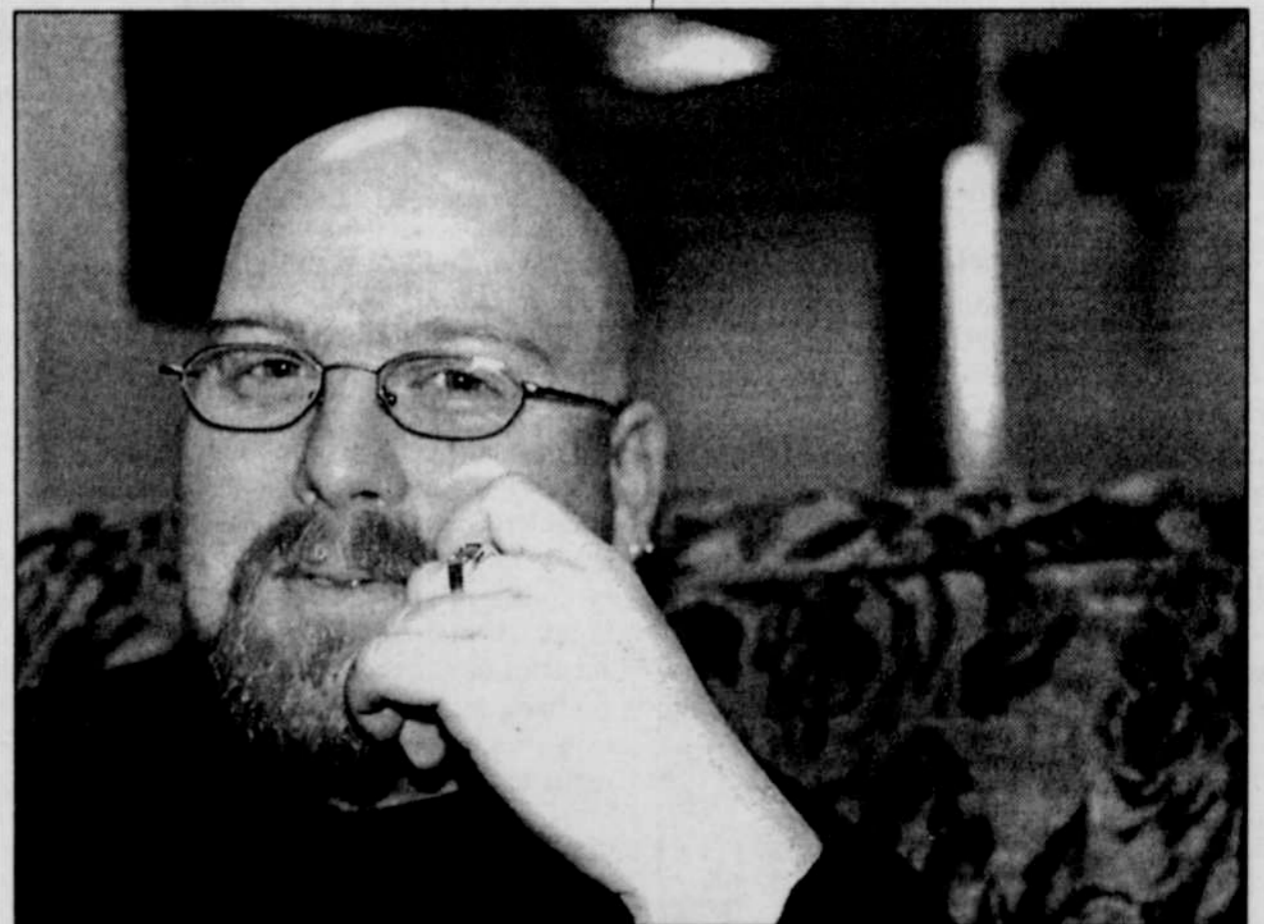
One evening Amy's girlfriend cooked dinner for her. "She bought all kinds of olives. Usually I'm not a big fan of olives. Tony gets

them a lot, and he was always, 'Do you want some olives?' and I said, 'Nah, I don't really like olives.' But for whatever reason...all these olives...they were great, and I ate a bunch."

The next day she was telling Tony about her date and casually mentioned she had olives. "Olives?" she recalls Tony saying. "But you don't like olives."

**"I don't think monogamy is better for society or polyamory is better for society. I think choices are better for society."**

—Amy, nonmonogamous for 10 years



Tony is going on 10 years of "negotiated nonmonogamy" with his partner, Amy