

Adding A Co-Wife

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This article chronicles the author's own exploration journey of multiple partner sexuality through her very personal field research both at home in California as well as in East Africa.

Beginnings

I first heard about the practice of *polyamory* (consensual multiple partner relating) in 1991 when I met Eva, a member of the Kerista Commune, which was founded in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district in the mid-1970s. I invited her to discuss her lifestyle on my radio show, "Intimate Matters." When she told me that she loved each of the seven men in her B-FIC (best friend identity cluster) equally...and that they all offered her something special, I trembled in disbelief. If I could have the seven best lovers of my entire life visit me sequentially each week, I'd believed that I, too, could be exquisitely happy. Meanwhile, I couldn't figure out how the men would possibly agree to being just sub-primaries with no one assuming the big Kahuna primary-husband role.

When I searched deep into my personal history, I could only find one time and place I was truly willing to share a man equally with other women. I was a pubescent teen and the Beatles had several albums out in such wide release that my sister and I were able to afford them with our 50-cents-an-hour babysitting money. While visiting our best friend Liz we listened to "Michelle, My Belle" and longingly looked over Beatles pics in all the teen magazines we'd collected. Liz proclaimed that she'd take Paul because he was the cutest, her older sister had already dibbed John, I could have George and that my little sister would be left with Ringo. I rebelled. I, too, thought Paul was the cutest, as did my sister, so somehow we amicably agreed to share him. Of course we didn't have to jockey each other over visiting hours, sleeping nights, nor feel jealous over who got more of his time and attention. Being remote teen fans in mid-60s Palo Alto, cute-baby-faced Paul surely didn't know we existed!

Of course the reality of sharing a partner, or being shared by more than one partner, has little resemblance to a bunch of 14 year olds mooning over 20-something Paul McCartney. The challenges of being interested, willing, and agreeable to sharing are what ultimately returned me to deeply researching this topic. My 1990s radio show put me in conversation with swingers, with people who enjoyed sadomasochism (SM) in group settings and with people who dreamed of creating extended families of choice filled with all of their favorite sweethearts. While I thought they were all disturbingly weird, I couldn't keep myself away.

My initial repulsion so overwhelmed me that I felt driven to find out how these other people made it work. I wanted to find out how a woman could allow her husband to be sexual with others while she watched, how a man could tolerate his wife being seduced by another man, and why anyone would seek to share their lover with someone else. Were these people wired

differently than the rest of America? Where do these appetites come from and why for some people are they so compelling?

My quest took many forms. Initially, I'd get myself the anthropologist/writer invited over to the homes of swingers and people in poly/open relationships. I'd sit with them in their living rooms and ask them questions. I'd take one person at a time out to lunch and ask very private questions. I heard about what they said they did, how they said they'd gotten involved, and how they said it felt.

I Become a Participant

Something all anthropologists seek happened: I was offered the opportunity to participate. I got invited to their parties. Initially I was very cautious. I went to the parties of some swingers who had recently been harassed by the police and were terrified to host group eroticism in their home. The food was great, everyone was super friendly and I was at a loss to figure out what was missing. Then the SM crowd extended an invitation. I could not believe my eyes. I slipped into a world where people would walk around with gags in their mouths and hand you a whip or paddle and oblige you to give them a couple of whacks. Others, completely clad in leather except for their bare bottoms, were chained down to tables and begged to be mercilessly whipped. Groups of women were hung from the rafters while a sole male lavished them with a taut leather whip. The masochists turned beet red with joy as they basked in heated attention, while the sadists smugly enjoyed the pleasure they'd created. After that evening, I figured a "real" swing party would be a piece of cake.

From reading the work of another anthropologist (Bartell, 1971) I ascertained that watching would be permissible behavior at a swing party. And so I watched. I watched a woman, draped spread eagle over a massage table, be fondled by many men. I watched people who had never before seen each other engage in full sexual intercourse. I watched women orgasm repeatedly while men preserved their erections, saving themselves for more of the action. I saw women who were not particularly attractive by mainstream American standards get lots of attention, while men who played by *the rules* of swinging got their share of "strange ass." Those who might pursue a more standard seduction often sat by themselves.

As I got to know more *players*, more invitations arrived. No one seemed to notice how little I *played* and how much I watched. Soon I had more to say about polyamory, swinging, open relationships, and even SM than many of the "real" *players*. I was invited to give talks at their regional meetings and at national conferences. Eventually I absorbed so much about these worlds, that I'd give papers at professional meetings of anthropologists and evolutionary psychologists.

Despite my acceptance and avowed knowledge, I felt something was missing for me. I had grown increasingly numb to the behaviors that had once so seem so disturbing. With the startle and gross out factor missing, the poly and swinging world grew increasingly dull. I would proclaim that it was just another way of doing sex and relationship, not better, not worse, just another way. Being the supreme cultural relativist, wasn't enough. I sensed that I had to know this world from the inside, too. I didn't know how I would get there, but I knew I had to. This

project demanded I be more than an observant social scientist. I had to feel it, taste it, and have it rattle my bones. Unbeknownst to her, Angela became the messenger.

The Step I Never Planned On

Angela met my partner Ron and I through a mutual friend. Ron and I had met three years before, while I was in the throes of writing *Women Who May Never Marry* (Wolfe, 1993). At the time I hardly felt like a candidate for a serious relationship with a man, let alone a monogamous one. But contrary to my stated desires, that's how things unfolded. When I met Ron I had been researching poly life styles for several years and felt relieved that despite his monogamous engagement to me, he had previously explored multiple-adult relationships and swinging. I certainly wouldn't need to explain my professional pursuits to him. He readily accompanied me to swing parties and did much to help me gather stories and generate theories. With him I felt I had the best of both worlds, someone that was deeply committed to me, yet was highly conversant in my participant observation project.

About a year after we'd met Angela socially, I discovered that she'd become Ron's secret lover a couple months earlier. I went into a frenzied shock. I wanted to wring his neck and punch her lights out. Instead, I attempted to bring my years of research into practice. I tried to introduce a form of polyamory that would make us all "family" and transition her connection to Ron into a full out triad with both of us. Angela had never heard of polyamory, had never met anyone in a triad, and believed that I was trying to manipulate her into something creepy, strange, and unpalatable. Like many single women who have affairs with committed men, she believed that Ron was so unhappy with me that he and I would soon break up and that in a couple of months he'd be all hers. Ron, meanwhile, believed he had the energy, interest, and stamina to sustain two primary relationships. Despite Angela's awkward entry into my family, I was determined to see what I might learn, grow if I could, and at the least, make the best of it.

For the first year, I mostly learned about jealousy. I'd never before questioned my attractiveness, my femininity, and my value as a partner. Suddenly I felt dispensable, ungrounded, and out of control. My boundaries as an observant social scientist crumbled, as my rage drove me to seek help from my informants. My cool veneer transformed into that of a woman who desperately needed answers. While I had interviewed people that had reported that they didn't have a jealous bone in their bodies, witnessed behaviors that looked as if they could provoke anger and rage (but didn't), and studied ways that "evolved" poly people learn to communicate, my reptilian brain was barely in square one.

Angela was smitten with Ron. Ron told her that he loved us equally; to her that meant that he had to spend equal time with her. Angela and I were so intensely competitive that we couldn't comfortably socialize as a threesome, let alone consider group sex. This meant that Ron's time had to be divided between the two of us, severely limiting opportunities for group communication and decision making. The model that best fit our relationship was a "V triad," with Angela and I each focussed on Ron. Despite all of my interest and enthusiasm for polyamory, I realized I'd have to seek help from more traditional sources. I decided to go to East Africa, where polygyny has been practiced for many generations to find out more about how co-wives share a husband.

When I arrived in Nairobi, I had few contacts and a deep hunger for answers. I presented myself as a woman in need of cultural guidance. My culture had failed me and I was in search of wisdom from people who didn't read psychobabble, seek to be members of the New Age, or take advanced communication workshops. My search led me into conversations with urban professionals in Nairobi, Kisumu, Kampala, and Dar es Salaam, an extended stay in Rusinga, a largely polygynous fishing village in Western Kenya, and countless chats with everyone from safari drivers, museum docents, to market place vendors. I absorbed many answers—some helped immensely.... And some couldn't fit my culture, but were fascinating nonetheless.

While I was in Africa, zippergate began to unfold. It was an amazing place to witness reactions. My Nairobi hosts avidly commented that Bill Clinton should simply add Monica Lewinsky on as a second wife. After all he had only one daughter and a man with his wealth and power ought to have more wives...and more children. They could not understand the American press' preoccupation with behaviors that were so private and so ordinary.

What I Learned in Africa

The Africa I visited in 1998 was filled with people who had an intimate understanding of polygamy, either from being witness to their parents' polygynous unions, partaking in one themselves, or knowing many details about those of their siblings or friends. I presented myself to them as a "first wife" who needed help in understanding how to live with my new "co-wife." I was in a place where my dilemma was treated with consideration and respect, rather than in America where I was largely regarded me as a fool for tolerating my partner's dalliance. One first wife advised me that it would take about two years to adjust. She, too, found it very difficult to suddenly share all that had been hers alone. Sharing in the hinterland village that I visited in East Africa was quite different from sharing in urban America. There, tensions arose when a husband unfairly divided food and other material resources between his wives. To alleviate suspicions, husbands would divide new acquisitions out in the open. Any deviation from an equitable division would have to be explained (e.g. one wife who had houseguests, more children, etc.).

Resources are a major concern in polygynous African marriages. Men will marry additional wives because of the labor power these women can provide. Some men believe that it is more economical to marry another woman than to hire a worker. Women in Rusinga assisted in the fields, with the repair and use of fishing nets, and in a variety of family businesses. One of the hot marriage issues in East Africa is the problem wrought by men who marry wives they can ill afford. In Uganda legislation has been proposed to prevent a man from taking additional wives unless his current wives and their families plus the new wife and her family are apprised of the man's finances. In the past, men have tested fate in marrying wives with hopes their labor power would surpass their living expenses. The financial stress created by additional wives has caused some first wives to attempt to return to their natal families and try to collect on inheritances from their own fathers. Often times these monies have been dispersed to patrilineal sons and brothers, leaving divorcing women distraught and penniless.

Back at home, neither Angela nor I were dependent on Ron's earnings or wealth. Both

of us had been self-supporting all of our adult lives and moreover gained much satisfaction from our respective careers. The commodities that we struggled over were Ron's time, energy, and affection. In East Africa traditional polygynous husbands visit their wives on a three-day-rotation. I had no idea where this practice came from, but I know it would have driven Angela and I crazy to only be able to see Ron in three-day spurts. Initially, Ron was so focused on proving his love to each of us that all that seemed emotionally feasible was to do a nightly-rotation.

African co-wives had so many social obligations both to their children and to their extended families, that a husband's absence had little emotional impact. Back home, Angela and I felt virtually abandoned if Ron wasn't visiting. When I shared how different the social and emotional parameters of polygyny are for rural East Africans when compared to us professional urban Americans, we endeavored to spend our weekends all together. Sometimes it seemed like my nearly forgotten polyamorous fantasies would truly see the light of day and then other times, it seemed like we were still on ground zero.

Ron saw more of Angela than I did, would make agreements with her and neglect to inform me. Out of the blue he would announce that he was spending Saturday night and Sunday with her and was convinced he had told me. I'd sense that if I objected, she would be angry for weeks to come. To keep some semblance of peace, I'd say nothing, but then Ron would see this abandoned-puppy-look in my eyes and ask if I was okay. When my voice would crack and tears would start to well, he'd feel powerless.

In East Africa, the older, wealthier, and more powerful men are expected to take on the responsibility of additional wives (and their children). Adding additional wives becomes an expression of responsibility for men with prestige, power and resources. In fact a man is looked at askance when it's clear that he could marry a widowed sister-in-law and doesn't. Moreover, many young women marry men 15 or more years their senior because their abilities to provide are well established. At home, Ron often gets little more than grief for being polygynous. Attempting to meet the social, emotional, and sexual needs of two professional American women, while no easy task, is not something that our society commends. While men who donate to charities, create buildings with their own names on the fronts and otherwise dispense their wealth and services are admired in America; men with multiple women are seen as greedy, selfish, and deceptive. While some men may envy "the task" of satisfying two (or more) women, the emotional-time-energy-reality is hardly any man's fantasy.

Favoritism

When I first learned of Ron's interest in Angela, it was clear to me that I was no longer his favorite woman. Being new, I was convinced she was more exciting to him. While he would bend over backwards and do the splits to get together with her, I felt pretty easy to dismiss. In America, a wife knows that all is well when her husband assures her that she is his one-and-only. Any time that unique specialness is challenged, she fears the total dissolution of the marriage. If another woman is absorbing her husband's time and energy, there is no way her place in his life is secure. Being an American, I feared Angela could soon replace me.

The Africans had so much to teach me about the dynamics of favoritism! While African men say they do everything they can to make each wife be an equal, the wives clearly sense who the favorite is. But favorite wives have no more rights or resources than the others do. Women who knew they were the favorites didn't flaunt it in front of the others, while the non-favorites, simply shrugged it off. Being a favorite might be analogous to being Miss America: you could be it for a year, but then the next year you are surely replaced. It's not a permanent status and ultimately it has little meaning or value in terms of marital security. In Africa, a co-wife is typically "the favorite" until a subsequent one is added. The second wife would be the favorite until a third wife was added and so forth. During the heat of competition with Angela, I prayed that Ron would find a third woman. Part of me wanted to put an end to Angela's "favorite woman" status, hoping that finally she and I would become allies, thus reducing the tension between us.

When I attempted to raise my anxieties about favoritism with Ron, he told me that of course I was still his favorite. I didn't believe him. Nonetheless I knew that he was doing what every African polygynist does by keeping the peace through telling each wife just what she wants to hear. While I didn't dare ask him such questions in front of Angela, my presumption was that with both of us present, he'd say we were both his favorites. Moreover, I was certain that if she asked him in private, she'd be told that she was the favorite.

Now, I could wallow in jealous anxiety over how passionately he holds her, sensing deep inside that she's really the favorite or like the African co-wives advised, I could put it aside and realize I still had my place in the relationship and not fret about being displaced. A man I met in Nairobi told me a story that gave me hope for finding specialness in being the first wife. His brother grew close to a female co-worker and felt compelled to add her as his second wife. Initially his connection to her was very strong, though after several years, he realized that he really loved his first wife much more than the second. Now in retrospect he wishes that he'd never married the second—and if he hadn't already had a child with her, he'd readily dissolve their union!

Co-Wife Competition

Despite the latter wives' indifference to favoritism, husbands who believe that it keeps their wives on their toes often fuel co-wife competition. One husband explained that each of his wives brings him breakfast in the morning, competing to outdo the others with her culinary skills. Another husband reported that when he throws his soiled clothes on the floor, his wives compete to be the one to pick them up and launder them. Back at home, I had to admit that Angela's intensity over Ron did cause me to try to do better by him than I might have otherwise bothered.

Still, co-wife competition can be a serious problem amongst polygynous Africans. A regional newspaper in Kenya ran a story about two co-wives who had gotten into such a bad fight that they both ended up in the hospital. Apparently one had so dominated their husband's time that the other one had not seen him for four nights. In retribution she attacked her co-wife with kitchen pots. The fight escalated when the other wife attacked with a poultry knife, causing

both to need medical attention!

The Benefits of Having a Co-Wife

Ideally, a woman wants her co-wife to help with domestic chores and to be a loving mother to her children. Often co-wives provide “mothering insurance” for each other in that if one were to die, the other(s) would take responsibility for raising her children. When co-wives don’t have a positive relationship with each other, there is much anxiety about the fate of their children. I was told about one woman who had refused to marry one of her deceased husband’s brothers (a typical practice in Africa which anthropologists refer to as the *levirate*), but instead became the second wife to a man of her choosing. This man’s first wife was so angry that her husband had expanded their marriage that in retribution she refused to recognize her new co-wife. Ultimately, this new second wife had severed relations with her children’s father’s family *and* had failed to develop a positive relationship with her husband’s first wife. If anything were to happen to this second wife, her children would be doomed.

While many rural co-wives (and their husband) live cooperatively in the same compound and share everything from childcare, cooking, farming and fishing, many urban co-wives don’t. For them marriage may be more a *status* than an *experience*. Their fellow co-wives may live in distant cities and they may visit with their husbands very intermittently. While they may find value in the *status* of being a married woman, in terms of being a recipient of their husband’s wealth and being a member of his family, they may also enjoy the freedom of having a social life apart from his.

Initially, this was very difficult for me to understand in that so much of being in a relationship for me involves *relating* to my partner. If we can’t talk, share, cuddle, and adventure through life together, why call it a relationship? My African friends, meanwhile, could not understand our American need for such constant reassurance of love, commitment and intimacy. They would see it as odd that American husbands and wives show affection in public. In Africa a wife would be feel disrespected if her husband kissed or hugged her outside of their home!

When my plane back from Africa landed in Amsterdam, I burst into tears when I saw a couple embracing in the airport. It was the first time in months that I had seen such a public display of affection. I suddenly felt very alone. While in Africa I had very much taken on the status of being a co-wife in a polygynous marriage who happened to be apart from her husband. Now in the West, I was quickly triggered into a powerful need to feel a “real” connection to my partner.

My Return Home

When I returned home, much of what I had absorbed from the African co-wives, made life with Ron and Angela smoother. I no longer needed to be with Ron to feel connected to him. When he was with Angela, my *status* as his partner was not diminished. Upon my return, Angela accessed some of what I had felt as a first wife whose husband brings in another

wife. The time she had come to expect with Ron now had to be shared with me. I became new and special...and for a short while she feared displacement. My deep awareness of her pain caused us to find an empathy we had never before shared. We gradually forged a sister/close friend bond. Sometimes we have the best “girl talk” as we discuss our mutual challenges in relating to Ron. After all, she’s the one woman who truly knows.

Being an American, I’ve had to face that what matters most to me is the *experience* of relationship. Here at home, life isn’t good, rich, or real, if I don’t have the toss, tumble, and intimacy that I’ve grown to consider “real” relating. Adding a co-wife has afforded me emotional growth and reflection that I have very much come to value. I know the anger and torment of jealousy; and no longer feel so overwhelmed by its power. And I no longer require the reflection of a man who considers me his one-and-only to feel like a very special and beautiful woman. Having opened up my relationship by adding a co-wife, I now have time and space to independently explore connections with new people as well as to put renewed attention and value on my deep and loving partnership with Ron.

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