

# The Oneida Community and its Impact on Human Sexuality

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The Oneida community was a 19th century utopian community founded by religious leader and free thinker, John Humphrey Noyes. Noyes' came from an upper class Vermont family; his mother, Polly Hayes, was a first cousin of Rutherford B. Hayes, the 19th president of the United States. In the early 1830s Noyes attended a religious revival and felt he'd found his calling in becoming preacher. Eventually he devised his own brand of Christian Perfectionism, preaching that given the proper environment, man could live a perfect sin-free life. In the 1840s he inspired a small community of followers in Putney, Vermont to create an alternative structure within which they might become self-actualized Perfectionists. In 1846, the group began to share spouses.

The Putney Perfectionists became an economic community and Noyes became known for his skills as an iconoclastic faith healer whose methods included sexual intercourse. As irate mob drove him out of town and in 1848 the group relocated to track of land along Oneida Creek in upstate New York. Beginning with less than 100 members, over the following 30 years, 500 people would join. The group attracted well-educated idealists who endeavored to live as communally as they could. All activities were designed to include group participation. Dancing was encouraged because it was a group activity while smoking and drinking coffee were not because they were considered to be individualistic.

The Oneida Community is probably best known for its unique sexual practices, many of which very much reflected Noyes personal views and experiences. Early on Noyes wrote a pamphlet, *Male Continence*, in which he set forth his pioneering practice, *coitus reservatus*. Here, a male might train himself to enjoy sexual intercourse without attaining an ejaculatory climax. Devastated by his own wife's suffering from having delivered five stillborn babies in six pregnancies; he endeavored to prevent so much suffering. Being that 19th century women were burdened by constant pregnancy, he viewed the practice as a way to better women's lives.

Another important practice was Noyes' notion of free love, which was practiced in what the Oneidans called *complex marriage*. He believed that it was natural for all men to love all women ...and all women to love all men. He viewed monogamous pair-bonded marriage to be harmful because it excluded others from sharing in connubial affection. In the Oneida community everyone had their own bedroom and members were expected to have conjugal visits with a number of partners. Initially, males would approach females, and if the females consented they would spend the night together. Eventually, "go-betweens" were established so that the women didn't have to reject the men to their faces. Many women found that a full-night visit was too much which led Noyes to shift the standard visit to about an hour after which the man retired to his own room.

*Complex Marriage* demanded an across-the-board ban on pair-bonds. While romantic feelings abounded in the community, having a special one-and-only love connection was seen as so detrimental that the offending couple would be physically separated. The goal was to celebrate the glowing attraction of new (pre-marital) love...in a non-possessive context. Men would be considered selfish if they were unable to joyfully witness a woman they loved be loved by others. This same concept was “rediscovered” over 100 years later by the Kerista commune of San Francisco and called *compersion* (Slomiak, 2002). The term has since found its way into the recently invented Western practice of polyamory. Certainly, the Oneidans may have had an easier time actualizing *compersion* in that their social identity and economic support came from a 500-person community rather than a single interdependent relationship.

Anthropologist Helen Fisher’s work on relationship cycles (Fisher, 1994) flies in the face of *Complex Marriage*. Fisher contends that romantic relationships that produce few or no offspring are quite likely to dissolve after two to four years. Drawing from divorce trends from hundreds of societies around the world, it seems that dissatisfied couples are wired to cut their losses by creating a new, ideally more reproductively successful pair bond. Ultimately, Fisher sees that serial monogamy, going from one potentially reproductive pair bond to another, is probably the most natural human mating practice. Certainly religions such as Christianity have imposed monogamy as being the right thing to do, while practices such as Noyes’ *Complex Marriage* were equally experienced as the best way to handle human sexuality.

In that pair bonding was so discouraged at Oneida, the community’s central council was able to devise a *Stirpicultural*-breeding program. Here, certain people were designated breeders because of their youth (women) and special qualities (older men). As far as the male breeders were concerned, the program adhered to the Oneidan practice of *Ascending Fellowship*. Older members were ranked as more perfect, placing them higher on the spiritual scale. Younger members were advised to have conjugal visits with elders to access their experiential wisdom. As an added bonus, all males of the community were allowed to have ejaculatory orgasms with the post-menopausal females.

Sexual initiation became the responsibility of the *Ascending Fellowship* and Noyes, especially, made it his responsibility to initiate many of the pubescent girls. Ultimately, fear of criminalization due to this practice was a prime reason that Noyes’ fled Oneida for Canada in the late 1870s. Noyes’ efforts to keep the *Ascending Fellowship* on center stage are also seen as the cause of a youth rebellion and the final collapse of the community. Many of the young men resented being told they could not be breeders and moreover that they could only have sex with the community’s older women. Having returned from college in the world beyond, they felt justified in challenging Noyes’ autocratic authority. While Noyes’ personal needs were certainly satisfied by *ascending fellowship* and the *Stirpicultural*-breeding program, there was virtually no room for the next generation to assert itself.

While the young men of Oneida may have had a hard time of things, in general the women prospered, probably more than most of their 19th century contemporaries. They weren’t burdened by an endless career of pregnancies and stillborns, they were involved in many of the leadership and business activities of the community, and their needs were listened to. Rather than the confining dresses of the day, they wore comfortable smocks and *pantelettes* and were free to bob their hair—many decades before it became a popular fashion statement. Moreover, the sexual practices of the community would not have worked unless the women

enjoyed them as well. Women initiated the use of go-betweens, the reduced visiting hours, and could have easily over-ridden whatever breeding program the men devised. Due to the lack of DNA tests, any young woman who was designated to be a breeder could have cajoled any man she wanted to father her children—and no one would have known the difference.

Perhaps Oneida's largest contribution to human sexuality was demonstrating that when men take responsibility for birth control, they liberate women socially and economically from an interdependent pair bond, and ultimately both sexes can wallow in the best parts of romance. This cultural invention was so successful that for upwards of 30 years, women joyfully took part. Certainly what made this 500 person group marriage viable was its' economic success. The groups' first successful enterprise was the manufacture of animal traps. These eventually gave rise to Oneida silverware, which remains a compelling international business today.

If we presume that serial monogamy is the most natural human mating strategy, then Oneida, Kerista, polygyny, polyamory, and even life-long monogamy become fascinating cultural inventions. Efforts to undercut dyadic romance and have all love be equal became central tenets of both Oneida and Kerista. Oneida couples did fall in love—some left voluntarily because they so wanted to have each other's babies; their passions were too strong for the Noyesian vision.

In East Africa, polygynous husbands, attempt to override accusations of favoritism by their senior wives by dividing new acquisitions in the presence of all their wives. Typically, though, the newest wives are the favorite wives and the senior wives know this. Ultimately, in East Africa, being a favorite wife has no particular perks in terms of resources or status, leaving senior wives to chuckle that this year's favorite wife won't remain favorite indefinitely!

The idea of *compersion* (enjoying being witness to ones' love be loved by others) which Noyes described and Keristans named more than 100 years later, has been a hard swallow for many who practice polyamory. Being that the “open couple” (more than the all-loving triad) is the basis of many polyamorous relationships, respect for hierarchy, rather than equal love for all, leaves the Noyes/Kerista notions of *compersion* in the dust. Amongst polyamorists, primary couples often report that their new loves feel much more compelling (and favorite), but in respect for poly ideology, they don't follow their innate serial monogamous drives and leave home, hearth and all that they entail in the dust.

### Bibliography

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