



Mixed-Orientation Marriages

by Joe Kort

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Mixed-orientation marriages--in which one partner is straight and the other is gay or lesbian--are becoming more visible. Ang Lee's Academy Award-nominated movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), which depicted gay men who fall in love with each other though they are heterosexually married, gave a human face to what the media referred to as "Brokeback Marriages."

As homosexuality becomes more accepted by our society, more gay men and lesbians feel comfortable coming out in their heterosexual marriages, though the exact number of mixed-orientation marriages is unknown. Data on these marriages is unreliable because of the inconsistent ways of defining "gay" or "lesbian" in demographic research.

Statistics from the Straight Spouse Network contend that up to two million gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals in the United States are or have been heterosexually married. Demographer Gary Gates recently found that of the 27 million American men currently married, 1.6 percent, or 436,000, identify themselves as gay or bisexual.

Research shows that more than 80% of mixed-orientation marriages end in divorce. But divorce is not necessarily inevitable for these marriages.

When a gay spouse steps out of the closet, the straight partner usually goes immediately in. Each partner has a "coming-out" process to undergo, but they can negotiate this process together, as a couple.

Often, the dilemma of partners in mixed-orientation marriages is centered not around sex, but around love. Some of these couples have been married for decades; many have children, and have built good lives together; they feel a deep and abiding love for one another. Neither has fallen out of love, yet their lives have changed by virtue of one of the spouses's discovery of his or her authentic identity.

The prospect of separating and divorcing is devastating, not only for them but for their children as well. These couples usually do not want to divorce. Just because one partner comes out does not mean that they stop loving each other.

Keeping a Straight Face: Why Do Gays Heterosexually Marry?

Two popular questions are "Why do gay spouses marry in the first place?" and "Why do straight spouses--consciously and unconsciously--marry gay spouses?"

Part of the answer to the first question is that our society does not grant permission for young people to explore alternative sexualities. Moreover, our culture places enormous pressure on individuals to conform, especially sexually. Heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage are privileged in all sorts of ways. It is much easier for young people to marry heterosexually than to discover their authentic selves.

Some of the gay men and lesbians who marry heterosexually hope that their gay urges will go away. More often, especially among lesbians, they are not even fully aware of their urges or at least have not labeled them when they marry.

Gay men and lesbians marry heterosexually for a variety of reasons, ranging from the need to conform to familial and societal expectations to a desire, founded on a genuine love for their partner, to create a shared life with their potential spouse. Some marry in order to have children, or to be taken care of, to bond with a mother or father figure, to establish a cover or "beard" for their gay activities, or in hopes that straight sex will "cure" their desire for homosexual relations or, at least, keep that desire strictly sexual.

Why Straight Spouses Marry Gay Men and Lesbians

Most straight spouses marry gay men or lesbians without knowing that their partners are gay or lesbian. But some suspect it and others know it for a fact. Those who know of their spouse's homosexuality often think that their partners will grow out of their same-sex desires or that a good marriage will cause the desires to dissipate.

Some heterosexual men and women who marry gay spouses are enablers, people who display an approving and supportive attitude toward someone else's self-destructive behavior or make it possible for them to avoid the consequences of such behavior. Some straight spouses allow their gay and lesbian spouses to "act out" their same-sex desires without really acknowledging them, while neither of the spouses accepts the consequences of such behavior.

Some straight spouses may be unconsciously drawn to partners who might betray them. Perhaps while growing up, they experienced lies and witnessed emotional boundary violations that remained unresolved and left them traumatized. This kind of background can make the straight spouse unconsciously seek a "familiar" spouse who will violate trust.

Some women think of men with homosexual tendencies as challenges. They may believe that they are attractive enough to "convert" gay spouses or "rescue" them from a life of misery.

Other women are drawn to men who are not anything like their macho, patriarchal, abusive fathers in the hope that their partners will not sexually or otherwise overpower them.

Still other men and women marry gay or lesbian spouses out of unconscious interest in controlling or micromanaging a "flawed" partner.

Less is known about straight men who consciously or unconsciously marry lesbians, perhaps because these men usually do not talk about the subject and their reactions. They may find it humiliating to admit that their spouse prefers sexual relations with other women.

"The Seven Year Switch": The Gradually Gay Spouse

Women repress their homosexuality more than do gay men. Though they may engage in homosexual activity, gay men often do not label themselves as gay until they fall in love with another man, whereas women tend to discover their lesbianism when they experience sexual desire for another woman. The crisis of identity felt by gay men in heterosexual marriages usually occurs when they become emotionally involved with another man as opposed to merely engaging in homosexual sex.

Some gay spouses act out in addictive ways to *avoid* dealing with their sexual identity. They use drinking, drugs, and sex to evade the issue. Often, gay spouses have no one to confide in, not even a priest, minister,

or rabbi. They find it hard to seek comfort in organized religion and support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Without anyone to help them articulate their innermost feelings, they bottle up their inchoate emotions and fears, thereby slowing the coming-out process.

Before they consider being honest with themselves and their wives, gay husbands typically want to have their cake and eat it too, believing they can keep a wife *and* a boyfriend while not being honest about the latter. They may rationalize that having anonymous sex with other men is not really adultery or they may alter the definition of what they are doing from "cheating" to "protecting" or "not wanting to hurt" their wife.

Going on the "down low" --i. e., secretly engaging in homosexual activities--can lead to such psychological fallout as depression and low self-esteem, plus many other dysfunctional behaviors such as chemical dependency, sexual addiction, suicide attempts, affairs, and unprotected sex that may result in STDs, including HIV infection.

From Being on the Down Low to Straight Spouses Being in the Know

Few revelations are as dramatic and potentially traumatic as revealing one's homosexuality to an unknowing spouse. How straight spouses react depends largely on their personalities and experiences within the marriage. However, anyone who is confronted with such a revelation needs to examine their marriage and their role in it.

Some straight spouses go into the very closet their gay spouses are in the process of leaving when they learn that their partner is gay or lesbian. Once they acknowledge that they knew or suspected, on some level, that their spouse is gay, they then have to deal with their own denial and, in some cases, their homophobia, and the homophobia of others as well.

Some straight spouses feel humiliated, cheated, and fooled. They believe that they have been victimized by their gay or lesbian spouse, who has ruined their marriage and disrupted their comfortable lives. Most often, they particularly resent their spouse's deception.

Some straight spouses grow so enraged that they refuse to examine themselves and the situation from any perspective other than their own anger and pain. These spouses typically make no attempt to reconcile or to understand their partner's dilemma. They usually insist on a divorce and often attempt to turn their children against their spouse.

Feeling a sense of betrayal in such circumstances is understandable, but *staying* betrayed and embittered only perpetuates a bad situation. Those straight spouses who cling to their negative feelings unwittingly betray their loyalty to the gay or lesbian spouse who has inflicted pain.

If they decide to stay married, their motives may simply be their underlying need to be attached to any spouse no matter what. Frozen in time and unable to move forward in life, these women may cultivate their humiliation because they enjoy the sympathy they receive as a victim.

Some straight spouses, however, feel relieved by the knowledge that their husband or wife is gay or lesbian, which they often find explains things about their marriage that they had found perplexing. They may have blamed themselves for the problems in their marriage--especially sexual problems--only to realize now that they were not at fault.

Others are happy to feel released from the obligation of having a sexual relationship with their spouse and grateful to enjoy a continuing emotional, non-sexual relationship.

Infidelity: From Blame to Accountability--for Both Partners

Most extramarital affairs, whether straight or gay, result from one or both partners' inability to achieve and sustain intimacy. While these factors affect many heterosexual marriages, the gay spouse's predominant motive for "straying" is to find and make authentic his true identity.

Gay and lesbian partners in heterosexual marriages typically cheat or act out because they are living a lie and concealing a secret. Their conflict is about their identity, not about their ability to love and bond with their partner.

Typically, the straight spouse feels as though she or he did something to cause the gay or lesbian spouse to seek out affairs with same-sex partners. The gay partner is sometimes also willing to blame the straight spouse, claiming that he or she was not responsive to their needs.

But both partners should realize that blaming the other is a futile exercise. They should attempt to go beyond retribution to achieve an honest relationship, whether or not they ultimately decide to divorce.

Coming Out as a Couple: Becoming Separate but Equal as a Couple

Both the gay and straight spouse have individual "coming-out" processes to undergo. What is often overlooked, however, is the fact that the couple also has to go through this process as well if they are to stay together. The husband and the wife both need to explore--without blame or defensiveness--their individual motives and options as they assess their marriage and contemplate the future.

For their love to prevail, a couple must honor each other's hurts and goals and, in the process, help each other to explore and express the meaning of their life together.

The four stages of this complex "coming-out" process in mixed-orientation marriages, as developed by Dr. William Wedin, director of Bisexual Psychological Services in New York City, are Humiliation, Honeymoon, Rage, and Resolution.

The Humiliation stage occurs when the gay partner finally reveals his or her secret and both spouses begin to agonize over the news. Typically, the straight spouse blames herself or himself for not being "woman enough" or "man enough" to keep their mate interested. Straight spouses may question whether they ever really participated in the marriage and whether the marriage was ever authentic.

The Honeymoon stage occurs when the partners agree to remain in their mixed-orientation marriage. Typically, gay spouses who want to remain in the marriage do so for one good reason: they love their straight spouses. With both partners feeling loved unconditionally, they renew their marriage vows on an emotional level.

The Rage stage occurs when both partners reach the limits of what is tolerable. The straight spouse may have felt satisfied with the way things were and wants to maintain the marriage as it was, but both partners realize that they cannot retreat back into the closet. At this point, they often feel the same sense of heaviness that descended upon them before the disclosure.

During the Resolution phase, couples consider again whether to stay together or separate. This is a question each partner should ask individually, and the couple should broach it together. They need to express to themselves and to their partner the type of marriage they want. They also need to weigh what they have invested so far against what is at risk if they break up. Other considerations to weigh include the loss of heterosexual privileges for both of them.

Does Coming Out Have to Mean Getting Out? Deciding Whether to Stay Married

Professional therapists rarely present couples in mixed-orientation marriages the option of staying together, even though this is often a workable scenario. Most therapists consider divorce the only option for these couples, and indeed it is believed that more than 80 per cent of these marriages end in divorce.

However, before deciding on any course of action, a couple should clarify what is important to *each* of them personally and also what they most value jointly, as they negotiate whether it is possible to integrate the gay spouse's homosexuality into their relationship.

Even more so than individual gay men or lesbians who come out, the mixed-orientation couple feels pressured to adopt what for them seems to be an alternative lifestyle. Making the process of adjusting to a new relationship even more complicated, they have precious few role models of what a healthy mixed-orientation marriage should be.

Many factors influence a couple's decision to stay together or separate: their ages; personalities; their level of sexual openness; the degree to which they are invested in each other financially, emotionally, and psychologically; and their belief systems or religious views.

Mixed-orientation couples must learn to understand the special circumstances that arise when a person comes out and identifies as a homosexual. The gay or lesbian partner must also evaluate his or her relationship to the larger glbtq community.

Many of the thousands of heterosexually married individuals who identify as homosexual do not want to lead what they think of (sometimes based on stereotypes) as a gay or lesbian lifestyle.

Many of these people are *hetero-emotional*. Although they are attracted sexually to members of their same sex, they are romantically oriented toward the opposite sex and cannot imagine themselves in a deeply romantic homosexual relationship. Moreover, many of them delight in the domestic pleasures of married life and the partnerships they have formed with their spouses, and cannot bear the thought of losing the companionship and nurturance of their partners.

Options

Many couples in mixed-orientation marriages decide to stay together and make their marriage work. They frequently make various kinds of accommodations for the gay or lesbian spouse.

They may allow the gay spouse to be sexually open but emotionally closed to others, feeling that the real danger to their marriage comes from a possible emotional commitment to someone else. They may experiment with "open" relationships for both partners.

Some couples become part of the glbtq community as a couple. More often, the gay or lesbian partner participates in the community on a limited basis, permitted, for example, a night out each week.

Some couples agree to a so-called "Closed-Loop Relationship" in which the gay husband or lesbian wife agrees to have a monogamous relationship with one same-sex partner, thus avoiding the risks of promiscuous sex.

Sometimes, if the gay or lesbian partner is functionally bisexual, the married couple continues their own sexual relationship. Other couples live together as friends rather than lovers.

Often, however, despite their deep friendship for each other, couples in mixed-orientation marriages eventually divorce.

A Family Affair: How--and When--Is It Best to Tell the Children?

Once the issues of staying together or divorcing are considered and a decision reached, the couple has to decide how, when, and what to tell others, including children, friends, therapists, clergy, and extended family members. Resolving the situation is truly a family affair.

Studies show that most children of gay or lesbian parents do not regard having a gay parent, by itself, as a negative factor in their lives. In fact, divorce is often much harder on children than discovering that a parent is gay or lesbian. (Still, couples in mixed-orientation marriages should not stay together *because* of the children; such a choice puts undue pressure on the children.)

The decision whether to reveal the nature of the mixed-orientation marriage (or the reason for a divorce) to children is very personal. What to say, and when to say it, depends on many factors including the children's ages and personalities. Many children can handle the truth if it is presented sensitively.

Homophobia and prejudice often pose real difficulties for children of openly gay parents. In addition, children who have a gay or lesbian parent often feel pressured to question their own orientation more than they would ordinarily, especially if the parent is of the same gender. Such questioning will not, however, induce them to become gay or lesbian.

Moving Forward: The Marriage that Never Really Ends

Even after a marriage ends, the love between ex-spouses in a mixed-orientation union often remains unconditional, especially if they are able to avoid a bitter divorce.

In many cases, the ties of the ex-spouses to each other continue, sometimes in touching ways. For example, one lesbian with three children came out of the closet and amicably divorced her husband. After some years, she and her lesbian partner wanted to have a child together. She asked her ex-husband to be the sperm donor so that their child would be a full sibling to their other three children and he agreed.

A gay man I know divorced his wife and married his male partner but insisted on wearing his wedding band on his right hand to honor his first marriage to his wife.

Resources

Only recently has the topic of mixed-orientation marriages attracted much attention in the therapeutic community. Many therapists are unfamiliar with the particular dynamics of such marriages.

While a number of resources are available to the gay or lesbian spouse who comes out, until recently the straight spouse could find little help in dealing with the feelings of shock, hurt, anger, powerlessness, grief, and self-blame that are typical reactions to learning that one's partner is gay or lesbian.

In 1986, however, PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) formed a task force for straight spouses of gay men and lesbians. Jane Vennard, former wife of a gay man, organized a cluster of regional contacts and a handful of support groups for wives and husbands whose mates had come out as gay or lesbian. Since then the Straight Spouse Network has grown to become an international organization devoted to supporting the heterosexual spouses of glbtq partners and mixed-orientation couples.

In addition to facilitating support groups, SSN also provides information about family issues and mixed-orientation marriages to professionals, community organizations, and the media.

The English website, www.marriedgay.org, also provides information for married men who are gay or bisexual, as well as for their wives and partners.

Bibliography

Ball, Aimee Lee. "When Gay Men Happen to Straight Women." *O, The Oprah Magazine* (December 2004): 236-39, 259-63.

Butler, Katy. "Many Couples Must Negotiate Terms of 'Brokeback' Marriages." *New York Times* (March 7, 2006): Section F, 5.

Fleisher, Joanne. *Living Two Lives: Married to a Man and in Love with a Woman*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 2005.

Gochros, Jean Schaar. *When Husbands Come Out of the Closet*. Binghamton, N. Y.: Harrington Park Press, 1989.

Grever, Carol. *My Husband is Gay: A Woman's Guide to Surviving the Crisis*. Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 2001.

Gross, Jane. "When the Beard Is Too Painful to Remove." *New York Times* (August 3, 2006): http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/03/fashion/03marriage_bg.html?ex=1154836800&en=c18780d5fa634c82&ei=5087%0A

Married Gay Website. www.marriedgay.org

Pierce, Amity Buxton. *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming-Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families*. Rev. ed. Indianapolis: John Wiley & Sons, 1994.

Straight Spouse Network. www.ssnetwk.org

About the Author

Joe Kort is an author, psychotherapist, and teacher in the Detroit area. His books include *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Improve Their Lives* (2003) and *10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do To Find Real Love* (2006). His *Gay Affirmative Therapy for the Straight Clinician: The Essential Guide* is forthcoming in 2007. He not only conducts workshops and retreats for singles and couples, but also provides training to straight clinicians about Gay Affirmative Therapy. He teaches Gay and Lesbian Identity Development and Treatment in Wayne State University's School of Social Work.