Renegotiating Identity in Unscripted Territory: The Predicament of Queer Men in Heterosexual Marriages

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Most queer men in mixed-orientation marriages initially expect to have a traditional, monogamous heterosexual marriage. When they later confront the conflict between their same-sex desires and their marriage, they reopen fundamental identity questions. These queer spouses share with other people who come out in adulthood the problems of renegotiating identity in adulthood and achieving a queer identity in a heteronormative culture. In addition, their attempt to reformulate adult identity is made problematic by the fact that they often cannot make sense of their experience in terms of dominant cultural scripts about love, desire, and commitment. Specifically, the essentialist script for understanding sexual desire and the monogamy script for understanding love and commitment put the queer man’s straight marriage and his same-sex desires in contradiction: to have a coherent identity, one or the other must be denied. Queer spouses can overcome this contradiction by entering “unscripted territory” and constructing new ways of understanding their desires and relations. Therapists can be of help to queer spouses by providing an “unscripted space,” giving emotional support for the difficulty of “not knowing,” and questioning assumptions derived from dominant scripts.

KEY WORDS mixed-orientation marriage, gay married men, straight spouse, adult identity

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INTRODUCTION

People who find themselves in a mixed-orientation marriage (MOM) rarely got there deliberately. Typically, both the straight and the queer\(^1\) spouses in a MOM entered the relationship desiring and expecting to be satisfied with a traditional, monogamous heterosexual marriage. Often (but not always), the queer spouse had experienced some same-sex desire and perhaps had same-sex encounters before the marriage but believed these experiences were a phase or expected to be able to put same-sex desires aside with marriage, just as two straight people entering marriage might expect to put aside their extramarital heterosexual attractions (Edser & Shea, 2002; Matteson, 1985; Ross, 1979). Frequently, it is only after many years of marriage that same-sex desires reach a level of intensity and significance that leads the heterosexually married queer husband\(^2\) to reexamine this life plan.

This article examines the predicament of a man confronting the conflict between his marriage and his same-sex desire. “Confronting” means that the person is actively considering how to resolve the difficulty of wanting sexual or romantic relations with men, while also wishing to remain married. This article does not address difficulties of the very large group of queer husbands (perhaps most, at least at some point) who avoid bringing these two desires into conflict, either by suppressing the same-sex desires or by pursuing sex with men in secret. The costs of these paths are considerable, as the large literature on living “in the closet” attests. The authors’ intent, rather, is to look at the problems that arise when a married man comes “out of the closet” about his same-sex desires, when he attempts to own them as more than a compartmentalized and hidden secret life and to integrate them in some way into the rest of his life.

The article first identifies two sources of difficulty for queer men that are familiar to those who study or work with the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) population: the difficulties of reopening fundamental identity issues in adulthood and the challenges of coming out as queer in a heterosexist culture. The main focus of the article, however, is a less familiar difficulty that is perhaps the most fundamental and perplexing problem faced by many queer spouses: their inability to make sense of their motives and experiences in terms of our dominant cultural narratives about desire, love, and fidelity. The authors examine the ways in which these narratives fail to describe the experience of queer spouses and the problems that these failures present for the queer spouse’s attempt to resolve the conflict. More genuine and less conflicted solutions become available if the queer spouse can put aside conventional wisdom on these matters but also recognize that this involves entering “uncharted territory,” which presents its own troubles. Finally, the article suggests some ways that therapists can be of help to queer spouses in coming to terms with their dilemma.
DIFFICULTIES OF RENEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN ADULTHOOD

When a queer man confronts the conflict between his marriage and his same-sex desire, he reopens fundamental identity issues supposedly left behind at the end of adolescence: *Who am I, sexually, romantically, morally? What do I want in my life? What do I value? What can I commit to? To what communities do I belong?* Finding oneself without answers to these questions as an adult in contemporary American culture can be frightening and demoralizing. The dominant social narrative on identity formation is essentially Eriksonian in nature: we expect and support identity crisis in adolescence but believe a coherent and stable identity should be formed by early adulthood to provide a basis for the lasting and stable commitments of adult life (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994; Westen, 1985). As a result, being unable as an adult to say what one wants or to tell others what they can count on can easily be experienced as a personal failure.

Moreover, adults facing identity crises do so without the social supports given to adolescents. Most postindustrial societies grant adolescents some period of social moratorium in which to do the work of identity formation, a period of time and a social niche in which they are relatively free of both the constraints of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood. In this protected social space, adolescents can experiment with temporary roles, values, and relationships with minimal lasting consequences to themselves or others (Erikson, 1968). In Western cultures especially, achieving personal authenticity by choosing whether or not to fulfill other people’s expectations is seen as a valid and important quest; subverting one’s “true self” to fulfill familial duties is often seen as a developmental failure, as foreclosure (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994). Temporary self-centeredness, self-absorption, and irresponsibility are not only expected and tolerated, but in many ways approved.

People renegotiating identity in adulthood, however, do not enjoy the luxury of these developmental supports and sanctions. They find themselves trying to resolve identity questions while embedded in adult relationships of economic and social interdependence and responsibility. Their spouses, children, family, friends, and colleagues share the costs of the process and have a stake in its outcome. The demands of adult life limit the time and degrees of freedom available for exploration and experimentation. They also pose moral issues: while contemporary Western cultures encourage freedom, tentativeness about commitment, and self-focus in adolescents, adults who exhibit these traits are often criticized as being selfish, immature, irresponsible, or even pathological.

In the gay community, this renegotiation of sexual identity in adulthood is sometimes referred to as a “gay adolescence” or “second adolescence” (Amico, 1997, p. 291) in which sexual exploration and experimentation
temporarily take precedence over relational commitments. Heterosexually married men who are out to their spouses, however, must try to balance their need for this kind of “gay” exploration with their “straight” relational commitment—often at a time when both gay identity development and the marriage feel urgently at risk.

DIFFICULTIES OF COMING OUT AS GAY IN A HETEROSEXIST CULTURE

The most common way of understanding queer spouses in both the scholarly and popular literature is to see them as essentially similar to other gay people who come out in adulthood with the added complication of having entered a heterosexual marriage. Indeed, most queer spouses do share with many gay men in recent generations the experience of first denying their same-sex attractions in adolescence and, then, as gay desire became more publicly acknowledged and accepted, coming out later in life. Two social changes in particular appear to have encouraged many queer spouses to reclaim their same-sex attraction. First, as representations of gay desire and gay lives became more common in mainstream culture, it became more difficult to deny their own desires. In addition, online social networks provided gay “public spaces” and communities in which married men could participate with little disruption of their straight lives.

Queer spouses who tell others about their same-sex desires face all the issues involved in coming out publicly (dealing with social stigma and one’s own internalized negative attitudes; conflicts with religious beliefs and one’s religious community; negative attitudes of family, friends, coworkers; possible loss of close relationships; etc.). In addition, the threat of losing the marriage and, for some, the difficulty of telling children, gives queer spouses an additional incentive to remain closeted. Once they have disclosed to their spouses, they face marital crisis, issues of infidelity (real or desired), and potential (and probable) divorce. At the same time, being heterosexually married typically makes it more difficult for these men to form friendships with other gay people or to participate in the gay community, thus depriving them of an important support in the coming-out process. Moreover, when a queer person chooses to come out, he is also outing his wife and, in a sense, his marriage, raising additional moral and relational issues (Buxton, 2006).

The Particular Problem for the Queer Spouse: Renegotiating Identity and Life Plan in “Uncharted Territory”

Questioning one’s identity in adulthood and coming out as gay in a heteronormative culture are daunting and difficult life challenges faced by the
queer spouse. However, these two crises do not capture what is the crux of the predicament for many queer spouses—even with the added problems of marital crisis, infidelity, and divorce. In fact, viewing queer married men as simply gay or bisexual men renegotiating their sexual identities in the context of a marriage misses what is the central difficulty: their situation, their feelings, motives, and experiences are not adequately described by the dominant cultural scripts about either marriage or sexual orientation. In the attempt to renegotiate an identity that can make sense of both the straight and the gay parts of his life, the queer spouse asks questions to which our cultural understandings of desire, love, and marriage provide no answers or multiple contradictory answers. In this sense, when the queer spouse confronts the conflict between his marriage and his same-sex desire, he enters uncharted—or at best poorly charted—territory. The remainder of this article examines what this difficulty means, how it creates specific problems for queer men in resolving issues about their sexuality and their marriage, and how clinicians can be of help to queer spouses in their struggles to fashion a coherent self and life in this “unscripted space.”

CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND PERSONAL LIFE NARRATIVES

To understand the import of being in unscripted space, consider the ways in which we normally rely on cultural narratives or scripts to create coherent identities and lives. Eriksonian identity theory, social constructivist theory, and narrative identity theory (Erikson, 1968; Gergen, 1994; McAdams, Josselson, & Leiblich, 2001) all point out that individual identity formation proceeds by interpreting one’s private experiences in terms of culturally shared meanings and taking on specified roles in one’s culture. We do not just become who we are; we become teachers, fathers, Buddhists, bikers, feminists, members of the gay community. Identity formation, then, is not only a matter of looking inside to discover who one truly is, but also a matter of looking outside, to the stories about human life and the range of social possibilities offered by one’s culture, and choosing how one will be identified within them. Without this assimilation of the private to the social, we literally cannot make sense to ourselves or to other people in our culture.

By interpreting our own feelings, experiences, and life histories in terms of the explicit and implicit narratives of our culture, we are able to create coherent identities and what McAdams (1990, 1993) called personal life narratives, stories we tell ourselves and others about our histories and ourselves. Identity for Erikson and personal narratives for McAdams serve functions crucial to psychological health, including: (1) creating a sense of being authentic, integrated, whole, and valued by relating important parts of the self in a way that affirms their reality and validity and integrates them into a whole that is relatively unconflicted; (2) establishing continuity and coherence of one’s
experience across time by creating a life story that connects one’s past, present, and future; and (3) being connected to a community, by defining who I am like and unlike and where I belong.

When the queer man in a straight marriage attempts to integrate his same-sex desire into his identity and life narrative, then, he must turn to current cultural discourse to find new scripts—new stories, beliefs, values, social roles—that could be used to create a full and coherent understanding of his experiences and his life. But what if important parts of the self or parts of one’s history resist being interpreted through the available cultural narratives? What if he looks outside and finds nothing in the culture that can recognize and make sense of what is on the inside?

To better understand this dilemma, it may help to consider the situation faced by many gay and bisexual people in the United States prior to the gay liberation movement as they struggled with forming a personal identity, while an important part of them was socially invisible. When the only widely available cultural narratives about sex, love, and family were based on heterosexual gender roles and heteronormative views of relationships, people who felt strong same-sex desires either had no way to understand the experience, or they identified with negative scripts centered on gender role inversion, sexual perversion, and moral condemnation.

By creating new positive social scripts for understanding same-sex desire, the gay liberation movement gave individuals a way to understand “who they were” and also to feel part of a larger community. With the growth of public gay culture in the United States, both in face-to-face communities and in virtual representations of gay life, people who experience dominant same-sex desire now can increasingly form their identities through identifying—with models, stories, vocabulary, values, jokes, and rituals depicting ways of being gay and living a gay life. Moreover, these GLBT scripts have become more varied and more positive in valence, so that a wider range of gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual and transgendered people can feel that their experience makes sense and has continuity, that they are good, that they are connected to similar others. The gay community also has developed social narratives for the process of identifying and revealing one’s same-sex desires and joining the community—i.e., the narratives of coming out and gay identity development. These narratives center on authenticity in the face of social repression and on becoming on the outside who one really is (on the inside). The moral value and pride attached to this narrative is enormously supportive to adults remaking their lives, often in the context of criticism and potential loss of important relationships. Gay-affirmative therapy has elucidated ways in which clinicians can be of help to people in reinterpreting themselves in terms of these positive narratives (Davies & Neal, 1996; Kort, 2008).

At this point, however, there is no general public discourse that gives social meaning to being heterosexually married and also feeling significant
same-sex desire. The only widely available scripts derive from gay-affirmative and heteronormative-marriage social narratives, and both are essentially negative toward the queer spouse. According to the “straight marriage” script, the queer spouse’s same-sex desire is fundamentally the same as desire for other-sex extramarital encounters; acting on it would be cheating, a violation of the marriage vow. The only acceptable resolution from this vantage point is to deny or control the same-sex desire. From the point of view of the gay-affirmative script, on the other hand, the same-sex desire is taken perhaps as an indication of the person’s “truer” nature, and the marriage is seen as a “mistake,” probably made because of internalized homophobia. The only acceptable resolution, from this vantage point, is to end the marriage or to continue it in name only, to allow full participation in gay life. The heteronormative narrative can make sense of aspects of the marriage and is usually shared by the queer spouse’s wife, family, and straight friends. The gay-affirmative narrative can make sense of aspects of the same-sex desire and is usually shared by gay men the queer spouse meets (online or in real life) for discussion, friendship, sexual encounters, or romance. However, regarding the problem of including both of these parts of the queer spouse’s experience in one person and one life, our cultural narratives are silent or, worse, condemning: 

*Why won’t you honor your vows? Don’t you love your wife enough? Don’t you care about our family and history? Why won’t you admit who you really are? Are you ashamed of being gay? Don’t you just want to hold onto your straight privilege?*

While the queer spouse can draw upon the positive narratives of the gay community to give shape to, legitimize, and support recognition and acceptance of same-sex desire, these same narratives often serve to delegitimize and problematize his marriage and his love and desire for his spouse. Conversely, the traditional heteronormative scripts of love and marriage delegitimize and problematize his same-sex desire. What both scripts seem to agree on is that the two do not or should not coexist—not in one person or in one life. In short, while our culture offers scripts for gay sex/love/identity and scripts for straight sex/love/marriage/identity, it offers no coherent and meaningful way to integrate love and commitment to an other-sex spouse with significant same-sex desire. There are no generally available and adequate descriptions of the sexual orientation of someone who simultaneously experiences love and desire for two differently sexed persons, nor models of lives in which both of these desires are lived out in meaningful, positive ways. (A later section discusses why the *bisexual script* does not solve this problem for most queer spouses.)

The reader might think: “But isn’t this just a matter of having multiple identities/desires? Why is it any different than, say, wanting to be a stockbroker and also wanting to be an artist? We all have to make choices. We can’t live out all of our wishes.” While it is true that choosing among desires can be difficult for a queer spouse, it is not fundamentally confusing in most
cases, and the difficulty experienced is not rooted in inadequacies of cultural scripts. The queer spouse’s dilemma is made more difficult—sometimes impossible—precisely because our cultural discourses do not view desire, love, and fidelity as matters of preference, but as matters of identity and reality. In short, the current dominant cultural stance is grounded in an essentialist view of sexual orientation and a romantic/monogamous view of love and fidelity. In the following section, these two cultural scripts are examined with a consideration of how the scripts render much of the queer spouse’s reality nonviable, for the most part unimaginable, and, therefore, invisible.

Social Scripts about Desire, Love, and Commitment

THE ORIENTATION SCRIPT: AN ESSENTIALIST VIEW OF SEXUAL DESIRE

The currently most widely held narrative about sexual desire, by both psychologists and the general public, is essentialism, the belief that people do not merely have differing sexual preferences and behaviors, but that they have different underlying orientations (Halperin, 1990; Foucault, 1990). (For an argument against the view that sexual orientation is a natural, not a socially constructed, category, see Stein, 1999.) The core assumptions of the essentialist view are as follow:

1. People have a sexual orientation, an inner nature that leads them to desire either men or women (or in more sophisticated versions of the script, sometimes both). People come in one of a few fundamental sexual kinds: gay or straight, or bisexual.
2. A person’s sexual orientation is present at birth, probably rooted in biology, and does not change across his or her lifetime, even if his or her sexual behavior changes.
3. All varieties of desire and romantic love reflect one’s sexual orientation. A person’s lust toward other bodies, romantic love, and sexual desire for a beloved will all be directed toward the gender of the other person.

The gay-affirmative version of essentialism sometimes adds: People should adopt a private and public identity that reflects their sexual orientation. They should be able to act on it by having sexual and romantic relations with the gender they are attracted to.

The orientation script assumes, then, that sexual preferences are not like, say, tastes in food or political beliefs. A person can find spaghetti his or her most preferred dish, but enjoy the variety of an occasional lobster dinner, or be liberal in one’s youth and become more conservative with age, without contradiction—not so with regards to love, sex, and marriage. In the
orientation script one’s orientation is taken to reflect a fundamental fact of one’s being, a core aspect of identity. It defines who we are and how we are socially situated. It also assumes that “the whole package”—lust toward strangers, sexual pleasure in relationships, romantic love, commitment and family—will all be directed at particular genders, providing a basis for a coherent sexual/affectional life that is either gay or straight.

Deviations from the gay/straight orientation script are viewed in our culture with suspicion and even resentment. Though bisexual is included as a category in many descriptions of sexual orientation, its meaning is much murkier than that of “gay” and “straight.” Do bisexual men desire and love women and men in the same way and to the same degree? Or do they feel straight toward women and gay toward men? People who identify as bisexual have not formed a community and strong public narratives as widely as have people who identify as gay. In fact, many gay people express doubt that bisexuality represents a real orientation, as opposed to a temporary label people adopt as they are coming to accept their gay identities (Malcolm, 2000). Furthermore, public discourse says little about how bisexual persons should live out their orientations—whether they need to express both orientations simultaneously or are living authentically if they choose to be with either a man or a woman. In part because of this ambiguity, bisexuality is often erroneously associated with a lack of fidelity, with “swinging” or with other forms of promiscuity. As with all nonscripted sexualities, desire toward partners of both genders is associated with greater stigma and shame, a sense of lewdness or hypersexuality and being countercultural. In short, while many queer spouses identify as bisexual, the category does not, at this point, provide a clear and positive script for a mixed-orientation marriage.

THE MONOGAMY SCRIPT: RELATIONS OF DESIRE, LOVE, COMMITMENT, AND FIDELITY

A second set of cultural scripts which frame the dilemma of queer persons in straight marriages is our constructions of desire, love, commitment, and fidelity—that is, the set of beliefs that support our culture’s privileging of monogamy as the preferred sexual and romantic pattern (Warner, 1999). The monogamy script includes the beliefs that:

1. When people are in love, they want to have sex only with their beloved, or (in the less romanticized version) it is natural to be attracted to many people, but when people are in love, it will be natural and easy to be faithful to one’s partner.
2. One can only feel romantic love for one person at a time.
3. Thus, in a good relationship, neither partner will want to cheat. Strong feelings of sexual desire or romantic love for someone other than one’s partner means that one’s love and commitment to the relationship is diminished.
For queer people in straight marriages, the assumptions of the essentialist and monogamy scripts simply do not hold true. The desire and love they find themselves feeling are not consistently directed toward one gender, nor do they always feel similar kinds of love and desire toward both men and women. And despite their love for their wives, it might not be possible for them to put aside love or desire for others. It is evidence of the power of socially defined scripts that queer spouses rarely simply conclude that the scripts are wrong. Instead, they struggle, often desperately, to find a way to make sense of their feelings in terms of these dominant cultural narratives. It is not surprising, then, that labels (for sexual orientation) and cheating (the moral prohibitions against non-monogamy) are topics of regular and heated discussion on electronic discussion lists for people in MOMs (Klein & Schwartz, 2001).

CASE EXAMPLES: JOHN AND HAL

To clarify the ways in which the essentialist and monogamy scripts fail to capture the experience of many queer spouses, consider the following two hypothetical cases. It is important to note that queer men in MOMs vary widely with respect to every detail contained in these stories. Some experience no same-sex attractions early in life, while others have long-term gay relationships and are active in the gay community before marriage. Some desire both sex and romantic love with a man; others are only interested in sexual encounters with men and reserve romantic feelings for women. Some have attractions to both men and women; some never have a satisfying sexual relationship with their wives or stop having sex early in the marriage. Some men never have sexual encounters outside the marriage; others (perhaps most) do, but do not disclose them to their wives. Some men have unhappy marriages and desire divorce, while others feel their marriages are the best thing in their lives and cannot imagine losing them. However, our survey of postings by queer spouses in 4 Internet groups over 15 years indicates that “John” and “Hal” represent 2 typical and common patterns, which will serve to illustrate some of the difficulties queer spouses encounter when they try to make sense of their experience in terms of the essentialist and monogamy scripts.

“One woman short of gay.” John was attracted to men from early adolescence and had several sexual encounters with men in high school and college. He also dated women, though did not generally find sex with them very satisfying. His sexual attraction to strangers and his masturbatory fantasies all were directed at men. In college, he met and fell in love with his wife, and their early relationship was passionate and intimate, emotionally and sexually. John felt he had met his soul mate. In this context, he no longer felt strong motives to pursue sexual encounters with men. He married and for 12 years
enjoyed a close, loving relationship with his wife, including a very enjoyable sexual relationship. They had two children, and he was very involved in being a father. In his mid-thirties, John began to experience stronger urges to seek sexual encounters with men; over time, he became increasingly depressed. Eventually, he sought out anonymous sexual encounters with several men, without his wife’s knowledge. These experiences convinced him that he wanted not just sex, but also an intimate relationship with a man. His love for his wife and children and his desire to remain married to her for life were undiminished, though he found himself less motivated to have sex with her. At the same time, not having a loving and sexual relationship with a man no longer seemed tolerable. Eventually, he told his wife about his encounters and desire for a “boyfriend.” They began a process of considering what to do about his desire for a male lover and whether or not to stay married.

“Just a good buddy with benefits.” Hal “fooled around” with his male friends in early adolescence. The other guys stopped being interested when they began dating women, but Hal never “grew out of” his desire to have sex with men. At the same time, he had several girlfriends and enjoyed sex with them. He was always looking for a chance for a male-male sexual encounter, however. When Hal married, he hoped that this desire would fade. Even though his sexual relationship with his wife was very enjoyable, he found himself exploring gay porn sites on the Web and eventually found Internet sites for arranging casual sex with men. He began a secret life of one-time encounters. What he really wished for, however, was a close male “buddy” with whom to share an ongoing friendship and also occasionally have sex. He did not think of this relationship as romantic, felt no desire for a romantic relationship with a man, and did not identify with men in gay relationships. He thought of himself as basically a straight man who also happened to enjoy sex with men. Hal was outed to his wife when she discovered e-mails arranging meetings with men. She concluded that he was gay and had been lying to her not only about his sexual activities, but also about his desire and love for her. She began to consider divorce. Hal was devastated at the possibility of losing his “real life” because of “meaningless encounters.”

Following the dominant orientation script, the first attempt of each of these men to understand his desires is likely to be to figure out “what he is.” Usually by the time the question becomes urgent, “straight” is no longer a viable option, so the culture offers two alternatives: Is he gay or bisexual? John has a lot of reasons to think that he is gay. He has been attracted to men for as long as he can remember and not, in general, to women. His sexual fantasies all have to do with men. But he fell in love with a woman and genuinely desires and enjoys a passionate sexual relationship with her. So is he bisexual? If so, why is he not attracted to other women, and why does he find himself, when watching straight pornography, paying attention to the men and fast-forwarding through the scenes that have only women in them?
This pattern of desire—feeling lust toward men in general, while also desiring the woman one is in love with—is common enough to have been given a label in the MOM community: “one woman short of gay.” Men of this type often feel that “gay” best describes their general sexual feelings, but “bi” best represents the fact that these general feelings coexist with genuine desire for one woman. Either label seems to minimize the importance and meaning of one part of their sexuality—or the choice of label often seems to depend on which side is most urgently in need of affirmation. Darryl Bem suggests that we can understand these men through Diamond’s (2003) explanation of a similar pattern of sexuality she observed in her longitudinal study of women:

Sexual desire is gender oriented—we sexually desire members of one sex or the other—but romantic attraction is person oriented: We fall in love with a particular person, not his or her gender. ... Many of the participants in Diamond’s ... study ... report romantic attractions to and relationships with members of the sex to whom they are not typically sexually attracted. When asked if the sexual desire that often accompanies these romantic attractions generalizes to other members of that sex, the answer is typically no. (Bem, 2005)

In short, lust and love can each provide a pathway to sexual desire. Sometimes people experience lust toward only one sex but feel love toward the other sex, and both feelings can lead to satisfying sexual relations. In John’s case, it may be that his lust for men leads him to identify as gay; his love for his wife and his loving sexuality toward her leads him to identify as bisexual. Both labels feel partial and uncomfortable.

Hal, on the other hand, has many reasons to think of himself as straight. He has had several satisfying romantic and sexual relationships with women, and, currently, he loves his wife, values his sexual relationship with her, and wants to remain married. He is completely uninterested in romance with a man and does not feel identified with gay men when they act lovey toward other men. How, then, does he understand the fact that he is unable to ignore his persistent desire for sex with men? This pattern of men who have primary romantic and family relationships with women but desire casual sexual relations with men is very common in many cultures. Skeptics who take an essentialist and gay-affirmative perspective might assume that these men are “really gay” and in denial about their wish for a romantic relationship with a man, perhaps reacting to fear of assuming a public gay identity or their internalized homophobia. We suggest that at least some of these men feel and want exactly what they say they do and that it is only our essentialist view of sexual orientation that leads us to doubt their pattern of desire.

It would be tempting to dismiss this struggle about labels as unimportant, merely a matter of semantics: Does it really matter what John or Hal calls
himself? Of course, we know that it matters a good deal, as the extensive literature on gay identity development reveals. The sexual orientation category a queer spouse decides to identify with will shape the way he interprets the meaning of his feelings and experiences; it will also affect his sense of belonging to various sexual communities and will tell others what to expect from him. Whether John sees himself as gay or bisexual, for example, will influence whether he sees his sexual relationship with his wife as “real” and “authentic,” or, instead, construes himself as “just going along,” because his wife expects it. When he and his wife try to figure out whether John’s desire for an intimate and sexual relationship with a man reflects a fundamental need (an essential part of who he is) or is just a want, the answer might well hang on whether he considers himself gay or bisexual. The label might affect how he feels about going to gay bars, marching in Pride parades, hanging out with groups of men who define themselves as gay—versus, for example, going to bisexual discussion groups at the local gay community center. Finally, the different sexual identities John might adopt will give different meanings to his love for his wife (is she really more like a close friend with benefits?), their past together (was the marriage a mistake?), and their future (should the marriage continue or would it be more honest for John to live “as a gay man” and for his wife to have a “truly heterosexual” relationship?). In fact, it is not uncommon for people in MOMs to be advised, “If he is bisexual, you can make the marriage work; if he is gay, you should divorce.”

Hal finds himself in a similar quandary. Does his strong desire for a sexual male buddy mean he is “really gay” and, thus, in denial about the fact that he does not want romance with a man? Is his romantic love for his wife not real, some kind of defense against his repressed homosexual feelings? Should he feel guilty about his inability to accept the truth about himself?

Moreover, John’s and Hal’s desires for extramarital relations do not seem to conform to the assumptions of the monogamy script. Both men love their wives—deeply, passionately, and no less than before their same-sex desires became so pressing. Yet, both men want so intensely to have sexual or romantic relations with people other than their wives that they cannot ignore these desires, despite the risk of losing the marriage. The monogamy script tells John and Hal that there is something wrong with their love for their wives, that if it were “true” or “fulfilling enough,” they would not be so motivated to look elsewhere. The script also convinces them they are harming their wives and their marriages and diminishing their love by seeking sex elsewhere—though neither man experiences this to be true.

If a queer man is out to his wife, odds are overwhelming that she, in accord with the monogamy script, will experience his same-sex desire as a loss of his love and a threat to the relationship. Acting on those desires will most likely cause her what seems to be unbearable pain, while not acting on them will cause him unbearable pain. Because the monogamy script leads
both partners to believe that the queer spouse’s desires for extramarital affairs are inconsistent with a close, loving, and secure marriage, they are put in the heart-wrenching situation where neither wants to hurt the other, but neither can avoid it without doing great harm to themselves. One straight spouse imagined this situation as like a torture machine in the *SAW* movies: The spouses are caught together in the apparatus, linked so that both are in excruciating pain. Either can escape their own pain, but only by setting off a mechanism that would dismember the other, or they can escape the torture machine, but only at the cost of ending the relationship (“Maureen,” electronic communication, April 28, 2002).

This excruciatingly difficult relational configuration raises a host of moral issues for the queer spouse. Each of these can be understood in terms of the values of the monogamy script (e.g., care for one’s lover, honoring vows) or the values of the gay-affirmative orientation script (e.g., living authentically, being who one really is). From one point of view, wanting to act on same-sex desires is selfish, dishonorable, uncaring. Queer spouses often feel enormous guilt over their spouse’s pain and can become acutely self-critical and depressed. Their guilt also can lead them to withdraw from their spouses, physically or emotionally, or to stop finding pleasure in the marriage. From the identity-affirmative point of view, however, the queer spouse has a right and perhaps a moral imperative to act on the same-sex desires, to be “true to himself” and “honest” in the world. Taking this perspective, both the queer spouse and his wife may feel that the she has an obligation to support the expression of his gay desire, that to do otherwise would be selfish and uncaring on her part.

It is not unusual, of course, for couples to negotiate choices when both parties have intense and conflicting interests at stake. The fidelity conflict in a MOM is different, however, precisely because the monogamy script offers no way to compromise, to respond to both needs, and still maintain the relationship. The options are often stark: stay married and do not act on the same-sex desires or act on the desires and lose the marriage. The queer spouse who cannot imagine accepting either loss finds nothing in our shared cultural meaning systems to support his finding a way to do both or even to understand how he can want such seemingly contradictory things.

Taken together, then, the orientation script and the monogamy script create a catch-22 for the queer husband and his wife, a problem that can have no sensible solution because the two frameworks contain inherent contradictions. Given the assumptions of the orientation and monogamy scripts, the queer spouse’s same-sex desire has to mean that he loves his wife less than he (and she) thought he did; his acting on that desire has to be a move away from the marriage. Conversely, his love for his wife and commitment to the marriage have to be a force that undermines the importance and validity of his same-sex desire. The scripts do not allow for even the possibility of a good resolution that includes all the parts, a
way of integrating all of these desires into one meaningful, understandable, harmonious life.

Forming Identity and a Personal Narrative in Uncharted Territory

The queer spouse, then, is stymied when he attempts to construct a new identity and make life choices in terms of the dominant cultural narratives about sexual desire, love, and fidelity. His patterns of desire are not in accord with dominant notions of sexual orientation, and his patterns of love and commitment do not fit traditional notions of monogamous fidelity. In this sense, queer people in heterosexual marriages find themselves in a situation much like that of a gay person a few decades ago: having experiences and desires that fall outside the culturally defined *normal*—in this case, a normal that includes gay and heterosexual monogamous desire and love. Like all stigmatized sexual minorities, they tend to question whether their forms of desire are *real* and valid or perhaps pathological, to denigrate themselves for their “abnormal” and difficult wishes, and to question whether their desires can be the basis of a coherent and valuable adult identity and life.

Also like other sexual minorities, queer spouses are under pressure (from their wives, others, and themselves) to conform to the “new normal” of the orientation script by choosing among the alternatives that view offers: to decide to stay married and monogamous and find a way to minimize the disruption of the gay desires or to take on a gay identity and dis-identify with the straight marriage. Both of these paths, alternate ways of fitting into a socially normal script, offer a coherent meaning system and an affirming community. The queer husband can decide that he was *really gay* all along, that he deceived himself to a degree about his love and desire for his wife because of his fear of living a public gay life. Viewed in this light, there will be a moral imperative for him to live authentically, as his “real self.” The gay community will offer support for this choice, provide opportunities for new relationships and a form of life that will give meaning to his same-sex desires. Alternately, taking the monogamy/marriage perspective, he can affirm the meaning in his choice to marry, his history with his wife and its place in a network of straight relationships (maybe children, extended family, straight friends, perhaps religious communities). From this perspective, the same-sex desires become a quirk, something that he needs to manage, like an addiction, to keep it from destroying his core identity, values, and commitments. There is some value in resolving the conflict among the competing and incoherent parts of being a queer spouse by adopting one or the other of these solutions and accepting an identity and social role as either gay or as straight and monogamously married. These solutions allow people to make the pressing choices—act on same-sex desires or not, stay married or divorce—with conviction and get on with life.
Yet, these solutions also exact a price in wholeness and genuineness. They rely on the queer spouse disowning and devaluing some part of his experience. They require him to conform to culturally defined forms of desire and to feel shame about the desires that are not culturally sanctioned.

The authors would like to suggest an alternative. If the queer spouse can recognize and accept the reality of his experience, including the parts that conflict with cultural scripts, if he stops construing the solution in terms of the categories they suggest and feeling that he has to fit into those categories, he can open the field of possibilities. In doing so, he makes available the possibility of forming an identity that integrates previously disparate parts of the self, bringing the parts into a more unconflicted configuration and finding life solutions that he can embrace more wholeheartedly. The queer spouse will be more able to become whole and unconflicted and create a life he can invest in unreservedly to the extent he can put aside the traditional narratives for both sexual identity and monogamous marriage. By recognizing and accepting that he is in unscripted territory, the queer spouse can acquire the freedom to examine more fully what he actually feels, actually wants, and actually cares about. Free of the restrictive assumptions of the cultural narratives, he is in a better position to consider a range of both normal and non-normal solutions to his life dilemmas.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THERAPISTS WORKING WITH QUEER SPOUSES

Queer spouses who seek psychotherapy are likely to be hurting in many and complex ways. They may suffer from shame about their same-sex desire, fear of coming out, guilt about their deceptions or hurting their wives, fear of losing their marriages, a crippling sense of uncertainty about what they want or what to do. In addition, they are likely to be suffering from a feeling of not making sense to themselves anymore and not fitting anywhere. They may perhaps feel a sense of personal failure at their puzzling inability to make choices and honor commitments. Our argument in this article is that the queer spouses’ feeling of not making sense reflects not only their inner turmoil, but also the reality that cultural scripts do not fit their experience or give guidance in resolving their dilemma. There is much that psychotherapists can offer these men struggling with what one spouse called “our vast search to find some solid ground between inappropriate labels and what seems to be no less than mass confusion” (HUGS_Couples2 Post, 2011a).

Provide a Safe, Nonjudgmental “Unscripted Social Space”

Psychotherapy can offer queer spouses precisely what is lacking in the wider social world: a space in which the many facets of their feelings and
identifications are met with acceptance and lack of judgment. In this situation, it is particularly important that the therapist not side with any particular way of understanding the queer spouse’s experiences but instead offer unconditional confirmation of all of his seemingly contradictory feelings, without asking for consistency or imposing an interpretive framework. In short, the therapist can offer a place in which the orientation script and the monogamy script are not assumed, so the client can be free to examine the ways in which he does not fit them. Instead, the therapeutic session can provide a place where unscriptedness, confusion, and contradiction can occur, temporarily free of the demand to make sense or make decisions that the queer spouse no doubt feels acutely in the rest of his life. In this way, the therapist can offer a small island of moratorium in the midst of an adult life of responsibility. The exploration and experimentation that are limited by the responsibilities of adult life can take place, to some degree, in fantasy in the therapy hour. Moreover, by being an empathic and understanding witness to all aspects of the queer spouse’s experience, the therapist can provide the critical social context needed for identity formation—hearing what others cannot hear, accepting the realities others cannot believe, and reassuring the client that even if most people in the wider culture cannot understand him, he is “knowable,” and, at least in this one context, known in the fullness of his desires.

While therapeutic neutrality is a commonly recognized value, we argue that it is particularly important in working with people whose experience is outside the cultural “normal”—in this case the “normal” of both the gay affirmative and the heteronormative monogamy perspectives. If therapists are not willing to step outside their own scripts and enter unscripted territory along with the queer spouse, they risk using their authority to endorse the queer spouse’s marginality. One queer husband, discussing what therapists need to understand about people in mixed-orientation marriages, focused on the inadequacy of what he called “social constructs”:

If I were to speak to a psychologist about our unique issues, I’d bring up the idea of social constructs. . . . I believe that is where we have our most difficult struggles, when we can no longer identify with... very powerful social constructs. While I am male, I do not truly fit the social construct of masculinity. My sexual expression is too broad. . . . I think it means that the social construct of masculinity tends to be too narrow. And here is the other difficult struggle, accepting yourself while knowing the discrepancy between your expression which you know to be genuine and the social construct which you feel to be constrictive. While I can repress my broader sexual expression in the hopes of better identifying with the masculine norms, it does not change the fact that construct is constrictive, and I will always feel that pressure. This is very hard and I have wells of compassion for anyone struggling in what I’ve come to call the In-Between. (HUGS_Couples2 Post, 2011b)
Offer Support for Being in a State of “Unknowing”

Queer spouses often feel pressure to “foreclose” their renegotiation of identity and to accept some interpretation of their dilemma and make life decisions before they have come to a satisfactory resolution for themselves. Their wives, understandably, want to know what they can count on and expect, so that they can begin to address their own pain. Sometimes male lovers and gay friends exert pressure as well. In addition, it can be enormously painful and stressful for the queer spouse to stay in a state of unknowing, to endure the conflicts, the guilt, the seeming hopelessness of his situation, not to mention the sense of not being whole or making sense to oneself. The therapist can assist the queer spouse in bearing the pain and uncertainty of staying in uncharted territory by offering the understanding that there is an important process going on and that it takes significant time—by validating the queer spouse’s need to suspend decision making and offering hope that it will, in the end, lead to a better solution. This practice follows a standard piece of advice given to new MOM couples in support groups: move very slowly and do not make quick decisions, in part, because of an implicit recognition of the need for unlearning cultural scripts. Therapists can also help queer spouses bear the pain of the process by suggesting strategies for pain management (e.g., medication where appropriate, taking breaks from dealing with MOM issues in the marriage, finding ways to express pain and get immediate support in particularly difficult times) and by offering a holding environment within the therapy, sharing the burden of the queer spouse’s pain when it overwhelms his ability to continue trying to understand his situation.

Reveal the Assumptions of the Cultural Scripts and Offer “Non-Normal” Possibilities

It can be helpful for a therapist to make explicit the assumptions of the cultural scripts that create contradictions and conflicts for the queer spouse. Making these assumptions explicit gives the person the possibility of reflecting on them and evaluating their truthfulness. For example, one might say in appropriate contexts: “It seems that your wife assumes that if you feel romantic toward a man, she will be less important to you. Do you think that’s true?” or “You seem to be assuming that someone who feels like they are “gay” shouldn’t ever want to have sex with a woman—is that right?”

Help Clients Connect with Other People in MOMs in Discourse and Community

As emphasized in this article, the task of identity formation cannot be done in a social vacuum. One of the strongest motives of many men in the early
stages of dealing with their MOM is to find other people who have been in this situation, both to overcome the shame and loneliness of being different and to have models of different ways to be a queer husband. At retreats for people in MOMs, we have witnessed the extraordinary relief people feel simply to no longer feel like “the only one who feels this way” and to see how “normal” most other queer spouses seem. Moreover, seeing other people who faced this seemingly impossible dilemma and went on to have good lives and good marriages can provide hope to sustain a queer spouse in bearing the pain involved in a period of exploration and uncertainty.

Two decades ago, there was no organized community of people in mixed orientation marriages, and very little scholarly or popular discussion of the topic. Since the publication of two seminal works, Jean Gochros’s *When Husbands Come Out of the Closet* (1989) and Amity Buxton’s *The Other Side of the Closet* (1994), a MOM community has developed, including several online support groups, organizations to serve queer spouses and their partners, as well as face-to-face support groups in many areas. In addition, the popular and scholarly literature has grown considerably. In all of these contexts, a public discourse has taken place that is beginning to create new social scripts for MOMs. Since the MOM community is still largely an isolated subculture, not integrated into mainstream conversations about sexuality and marriage, it is important for therapists to offer their queer heterosexually married clients access to this community.

**DISCUSSION**

The queer man struggling to come to terms with his same-sex desire while in a heterosexual marriage faces a particularly difficult challenge, not only because he must renegotiate identity in adulthood and come out in a heteronormative culture, but also because he experiences a pattern of desire, love, and commitment which is not recognized by our dominant cultural narratives. Queer spouses, then, must choose between the Scylla of taking on an identity which makes cultural sense but does not fit well, and the Charybdis of constructing an identity in one’s own terms, which can integrate more of one’s experiences, but does not offer the support of a community and its shared beliefs. This dilemma is not unique to the queer spouse; it describes the situation of members of any sexual minority whose patterns of desire are not recognized by prevailing sexual scripts.

Either choice involves opportunities for fulfillment and difficulties; which is a preferable path for a particular person depends on many factors, such as his desire for membership in and support from particular communities (sexual, religious, family, etc.), his tolerance for ambiguity and penchant for self-reflection, the response of his wife, and the opportunities for different forms of sexual and love fulfillment available in his life. For many people, living with an identity that does not encompass all of their desires,
but firmly places them in a community and makes sense of their lives through a shared narrative, is the best among compromised alternatives. Ultimately, the dilemma of the queer spouse will only be resolved by discovering a narrative that relates the experiences of this sexual minority with mainstream cultural narratives about love and desire.

For some portion of the estimated 2 million queer heterosexually married men (Buxton, 1994; Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), their best chance to achieve an adult identity that gives them a basis for a relatively unconflicted, fulfilling, and meaningful life will come from putting down the two faulty maps—the essentialist script and the monogamy script—that the culture has given them and exploring the territory of their loves and desires on their own. Therapists can be useful companions in this exploration, if they are willing to put down their own maps and venture with the queer spouse into unscripted territory.

NOTES

1. People who are in heterosexual marriages and experience same-sex desire use a variety of terms to describe themselves: gay, bisexual, gay/bi/whatever, not straight; some refuse labels altogether. We have chosen to use “queer,” albeit with some concern, since the term is sometimes used colloquially as a slur. We use “queer” to denote a person who experiences sexual desires that are not socially normative, without making assumptions about an underlying “orientation.”

2. While there are many queer women in heterosexual marriages, the research literature has focused almost exclusively on men and participants in online support groups for queer spouses are overwhelmingly male. Since these are the sources we rely on for our analysis, we will limit our comments to queer married men. Some, though clearly not all, of our observations here may also apply to heterosexually married queer women, as well.

REFERENCES


