

Relationships as a Continuum

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I was recently interviewed for a documentary about polyamory, and the questions got me thinking again about some of the old chestnuts in poly discussion circles.

In particular, I have been thinking about the whole question of "can you call it a relationship if you don't have sex?" I have a boyfriend who is currently living overseas. We have had sex in the past, and I confidently expect we will have sex in the future, but we're not having sex currently (of course). I have no hesitation about referring to him as my boyfriend.

Then there is this other guy. I love him just as much as my boyfriend, and I see him every single week. We hug, kiss, sit in laps, walk along holding hands, say "I love you", but he's currently in a monogamous relationship with someone else. So we don't have sex. Fortunately the someone else is quite poly-friendly and realises that I am not a threat, otherwise we would already have been forced to limit ourselves to the things people normally do when they are "just friends".

I hesitate to call this second guy "boyfriend". I hesitate to call him "partner". And yet for five years we have met every single week, by phone if one of us is out of town - a level of commitment which has been missing in several sexual relationships along the way, I might add!

One of the problems I find with traditional monogamy is that it would force me to push this relationship into a category - are we lovers or are we just friends? And then, whichever we choose, we would have to make changes to our relationship to fit it into the rules in that category. If we are to be lovers, he would have to leave his current partner. And if we are to be just friends, we would have to stop all the lovey-dovey stuff.

When I think about it, there are quite a few people who I happily describe as "friends" with whom I am waaaaay more affectionate and sensual than I would allow myself to be with a non-lover in a monogamous context.

There are people who are clearly just friends, of course. And people who are clearly lovers. But there is quite a large grey area in between. When I stop and think, there is a range from my almost-boyfriend to a couple of people with whom there is just the occasional more-than-friends caress or eye gaze.

Taking away the need to push the relationship into one category or the other allows each relationship to float along and find its own level, often quite a stable level, out there in the grey area.

Some people call them "kissing friends", or "intimate friends" or "an intimate network". I

call this group of more-than-friends-but-not-quite-lovers my
flirtables.

It is one of the great joys of being polyamorous, and having a poly-friendly community around me, that I can accumulate such a wonderful, enriching, satisfying bunch of relationships in the flirtable zone.

I've never been one for black-or-white, all-or-nothing decisions anywhere in life. And when it comes to relationships, love, and sensuality, I think that kind of dichotomy is more ridiculously inappropriate than just about anywhere else.

Relationships are what they are. There's a lot of ground to cover between having sex and being totally non-sexual. I say, explore the ground, and don't let anyone else tell you how. Or when. Or where to stop. Or what to label it. Some of the best things in life just defy categorisation.