

MEET THE NEW SWINGERS

They're beautiful, urbane and possess multiple degrees—and multiple partners. How a group of young New Yorkers are reinventing sex in the city.
By Melissa Lafsky

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We spend a lot more time ensuring that we have a lot more sex than the average person," brags Joe, a man with sandy-blond hair and a perma-grin. "An average person has, say, 15 to 20 partners by the time he hits 30. The average poly person more likely has had in the hundreds."

Welcome to the Poly Hour, an invitation-only monthly mixer for polyamorous or "poly-curious" men and women in the five boroughs. Around 50 twenty- and thirtysomethings are mingling in a West Side bar, ordering drinks with names like "Yes You May" (a pinkish blend of vodka, melon liqueur and cranberry juice) and "The Hreesome" (Captain Morgan, Bacardi

and peach schnapps) and greeting each other like old friends. A lot of them are—in fact, some have slept together, sometimes in groups, or even traded wives or boyfriends.

Tonight women dominate the scene, outnumbering the men almost two to one. "The guys are more carefully curated," says Reid, a blond, tan surfer guy and professional sex educator who co-founded the party seven months

ago. "It's a bad scene when you get some horny jerk in a space where the women want to feel safe." Uninvited men have wandered in before, no doubt hoping to meet easy women or catch some proverbial girl-on-girl action; while they weren't explicitly kicked out, they were pointedly ignored.

At the center of the crowd is Diana, a curvy brunette with a sunny smile. A 28-year-old lawyer and another of Poly Hour's founders, she's been polyamorous for two years and currently is in two relationships. One is with Tom, a Sting look-alike with a Ph.D. in neuroscience, who sits beside her at the bar. He has met her second boyfriend,



Jason, a shy, doe-eyed nuclear physicist who just returned from a research trip to Asia; though friendly, they rarely interact. She describes both relationships as “serious,” but won’t rank one higher than the other. Time with them is divvied up according to a schedule. Since Jason lives outside the city, she spends every other weekend with him, plus one day in between. Meanwhile, she and Tom have sleepovers twice a week. “Sometimes we go on fancy dates, dinner and the theater. Other days we just lie around and take walks,” she says of her typical-on-the-surface dating life. Should she or either boyfriend want to date anyone else, each has to ask for permission first.

As the evening at Poly Hour progresses, a few couples move to secluded couches to continue their conversations. An athletic woman with a jet-black bob starts making out with another equally attractive woman with an identical haircut. The rest of the group ignores them—it wouldn’t be polite to stare. Tom looks on approvingly as new prospect Allen, a 6’4” former college baseball star, wraps a flirtatious arm around Diana’s waist. Tonight is Tom’s night to sleep over, but tomorrow may be a different story.

It’s an uncharted era for love. Women are waiting longer to marry, obtaining more divorces and even foregoing marriage all together. *Sex and the City*, Nerve.com and the erotic spectacle of Cake parties have transported formerly taboo issues of female sexuality right into New York City’s mainstream. Meanwhile, the shortfalls of monogamy are more hyped than ever. As the divorce rate creeps above 50 percent, a 2007 MSNBC survey indicates that nearly a quarter of adults in monogamous relationships cheat, with even higher rates for married men. Monogamy is taking hits from popular culture as well, with the success of HBO’s *Big Love* and the upcoming midseason premiere of the CBS drama *Swingtown*, depicting free-love couples in the 1970s. And let’s not



forget Kate Hudson and mom Goldie Hawn, who have both decried the practice of monogamy as unnatural.

The term *polyamory*, literally meaning “many loves,” is based on the idea that relationships can be conducted with multiple partners at the same time. Casual sex is allowed, but the focus is on bonds and feelings. And unlike the swinging culture of the ’70s, it’s not only about sex. “The point is to date more than one person with honesty, and give them the positive experiences and respect they deserve,” says Diana.

Beyond that, the rules—how many, how much, how often—are up to you. “Some people have hierarchical structures, with primary, secondary, tertiary, etc.,” says Tessa, a 34-year-old psychologist and New York native who is currently juggling four relationships, two of them long-distance. “I have multiple partners who are all equal—for now. One of my partners is in London and one is in L.A. It’s easier to see the one in L.A. than the one in London,” she says. “I also have two partners here in the

city. One has a hectic travel schedule, so there are times when I see him three times a week and times when I don’t see him for three weeks. The other one is here all the time and has a primary partner. Our time is more structured because we have other people’s calendars to negotiate as well.”

Poly has particularly picked up recently among younger women. “Each meeting is a record breaker. The last was almost 70 people,” says Birgitte Philipides, leader of Polyamorous NYC, the largest poly organization on the East Coast. Members meet once a month at bars and restaurants around the city and are planning an event for the seventh annual Poly Pride day in October. “More women in their 20s and 30s are joining.”

For some, the path to poly accompanies coming out as bisexual, though the bulk of the poly community is hetero, according to member estimates. Poly men are predominantly hetero—but, despite the stereotypical fantasy of dating unlimited women, not all men are as open-minded as they might imagine

Reid has one boyfriend, two girlfriends, four or five lovers and a double-digit number of friends he sleeps with.



they'd be. "I've tried to introduce boyfriends to it, and a few have said OK because they wanted to do anything they could to make me stay with them," says Diana. "After a few months, they felt it was time for me to belong to just them. I had one boyfriend who got upset when I would take him to parties and greet someone I'd slept with by kissing them on the lips. He didn't even want threesomes with other women unless he was getting most of the attention."

Simply having sex, however, isn't necessarily the goal. "The outside perception is that [poly] is about lots of partners. For me, it was about just having the option," says Marcia, who lives with Reid and considers him her primary. She has also had a long-distance girlfriend for about a year and has two "close friends" with whom she's sexually involved. Reid, meanwhile, has one boyfriend, one other girlfriend, four

or five regular lovers in the city and a "double-digit number of friends he sleeps with occasionally," as Marcia describes it. With so many people in the picture, the possibilities for non-stop sex sounds endless. But the reality is far more mundane: "I don't have that much sex, maybe a couple times a week," says Marcia. "My girlfriend lives out of state, or else it would probably be more. Reid's average is more like four or five times a week."

Communication is crucial, and she and Reid tell each other when they've hooked up or developed a new crush. Safety is a must: "Use latex with everybody," she explains, "and we get tested every six months." Beyond that, they have general guidelines for choosing partners: "Don't pick people who are high-maintenance or really needy. If you're afraid to say something, that means you should say it. The main rule is 'No drama'—if you have emotional stuff, it's yours. No blame allowed."

Unsurprisingly, some see the term "poly" as a "get out of jail free" card to avoid emotional responsibility. "[Poly] is trendy right now, and there are people doing it badly," says Marcia. "It's common to hear about people who cheated and got caught, and then said, 'Well, I'm poly, I need to do this.'"

As for the age-old question of marriage and children, poly women say their lifestyle lessens the anxieties surrounding the search for the One. "For me, it's about not wanting to reach my late 20s and suddenly be in a husband chase," says Diana. "I know I want to have a child eventually, but I don't want to spend all my time screening the perfect mate. Poly lets me try out more than one person at once."

Still, poly is hardly an escape from the work of relationships—and it's not for those seeking an easier alternative. "Jealousy is still there," says Sheila, a newlywed who shares a girlfriend with her husband. After starting to date nine years ago, the couple tried going to swingers' clubs and sex parties with each other and then having additional sexual arrangements on their own. "That wasn't bringing us happiness, so we closed the relationship back up. Now we date couples and single women. With poly you have the same problems a regular couple has. The hardest thing is letting go of ownership when it comes to love and sex."

So how do people combat the inevitable jealousy? By developing precise communication skills and a constant sense of self-awareness. "I was in the city yesterday and I stumbled upon Tom on a date with another woman," says Diana. "I knew her, and he had asked permission, and I'd said OK. They were sitting at an outdoor café, and I chatted with them for a minute, and then moved on. I thought I was fine, but a half-hour later I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. Later, she e-mailed me, 'Are you OK? I sensed something was going on.' She reassured me that she isn't a threat—she's not trying to steal him."

So does four times the number of relationships mean four times the stress? "If you have one, a second isn't double the work," Tessa says. "It's *more* work, but it doesn't feel like my relationships are a full-time job, because I chose ones that make sense for me." As for choosing between them, she says, "If you have more than one child, do you love one of them more? It's like that."