

Pleasure Principles

A Roundtable Discussion

Sexual relationships are the focus of some of our most intense emotions. Here a group of people with different experiences and expectations explore the question of sexual fidelity

The participants in the roundtable are: Bekah, aged 23, who doesn't live with her partner. Antonio, aged 34, who lives with his partner. James, aged 27, who recently ended an open relationship. Louisa, aged 31, has been with her partner for seven years and recently married him. Vivien, aged 75, was divorced from her husband 50 years ago. Graham, aged 75, has been married twice. David, aged 69, is divorced. He is now in a relationship but not living with his partner. Chris, aged 25, lives with his partner. Morika, aged 23, is in a relationship but not living with her partner. The discussion was chaired by Chris Granlund.

Bekah, what does fidelity mean to you?

Bekah I don't think it's just a question of sex. Being unfaithful could be just talking to someone, it could be to do with revealing really intimate things.

But if you were to find out that your partner had slept with someone else, wouldn't that have a greater impact?

Bekah Yes, but I'd be really upset about both.

Antonio I can't get rid of some sexual connotation because for me it is the sexual relationship with my partner which I see as the most private aspect of our relationship.

James The fact that somebody is sleeping with somebody outside the relationship is like a symbol of their independence. It means that there are things about them which you do not know, which you do not understand, which aren't completely yours. This applies equally in an open relationship.

Louisa, you asked your husband last night whether he had ever been unfaithful to you. Did you have this kind of complexity in mind when you asked the question?

Louisa I was thinking sexually, but I think there's an awful lot more involved. Going out for dinner with a colleague and not telling your partner, that sort of thing.

Vivien I can't quite envisage what James calls an 'open relationship', but

people who get married commit themselves to live together and to support one another through good times and bad to the exclusion of other people. The C of E marriage service puts it clearly whether one accepts it or not. That includes everything to me.

Antonio I agree, but it doesn't include everybody.

Vivien No, but it includes all aspects of life.

Antonio But not all aspects of people.

Vivien Of course, and I wouldn't say it does. But for people who marry, they know quite clearly what they are letting themselves in for...

That sounds ominous...

Vivien It's not ominous at all, but any relationship is a risk, and if one is entrusting one's future life to some other person, one wants to have some assurance that the other person is equally committed. It didn't turn out like that for me because my spouse didn't have the same idea at all about commitment.

Could you tell us about that?

Vivien In the first year of our marriage, he was having affairs with various women, and I had to pay for a couple of abortions which at that time were absolutely illegal, and then he left and then he came back. Then he left me again with two small children and never paid

a penny. But there you are, if you marry, you take a risk.

Was he unfaithful before you married?

Vivien How should I know?

You didn't discuss that with him?

Vivien No. He asked me to marry him and I didn't say, well are you going to be unfaithful before we marry? Believe me, during the war you didn't waste time on such niceties.

Graham, was it assumed at the start of your marriage that you would be faithful?

Graham There was a tacit assumption and she kept to that, she was faithful. In my first marriage, I was faithful except for two occasions. I had a prolonged affair that involved one of the people who I was working with. Apart from that I have been faithful. My wife in fact knew something of what was going on. I had no infidelity of any kind during my second marriage.

Did you tell your first wife about the infidelity?

Graham Yes, though she didn't know the extent of it.

Chris Did you feel guilty?

Graham To some extent, yes.

Chris I think the most powerful allies, or weapons if you like, of exclusive lovers, are jealousy and guilt. I've experimented with infidelity, but I've never been able to overcome either jealousy or guilt, and therefore faithful relationships are the only ones that I can be in.

David There is an expectation that we should go through life and be faithful to just one partner. I envy those who manage to do that, but sex drive and all the factors being variable, I would suggest that it's an expectation which is met by few. There have been polls carried out and in fact they do reveal that a high proportion of extra-marital relations do exist.

Vivien If people have in mind the possibility of relationships outside their marriage it seems to me that this gets in the way of developing a relationship. But there are all kinds of relationships, I know of several where both the husband and wife have had relationships outside the marriage, they knew about it and accepted it. But the marriage nevertheless lasted, this is unusual, but it happens.

David It is the idea of a majority of people to have a life-long union. The fact that statistics show clearly that in the end this is an unreal expectation seems to point to certain factors which intervene which cut across the possibilities of sustained relationships.

Antonio Through the first three years of my current relationship, I had to change my idea about what I wanted this relationship to be. At first I had expectations of fidelity that were related to my Spanish working-class background. For me to be with my partner means that I need to trust her, and I need to know to what extent I can



count on that intimacy. Of course, I need to restrain my sexual drive, although I know those things are completely arbitrary and culturally created. I still don't want to have an open relationship, but I now accept that at some point, one of us might be unfaithful.

Bekah, have you experienced infidelity?

Bekah My parents split up when I was about 17 in a really horrible way. My dad was unfaithful with a friend of my mum. That changed my attitude a lot towards fidelity. I've never felt the need to be unfaithful. But when I split up with my boyfriend, he said that he was nearly unfaithful to me once, he said it was because he was missing me so much, which I thought was a bit odd. So I felt insecure, especially because of

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all this business with my dad, so I'm very wary, I don't trust many people.

Vivien Nobody can guarantee security.

Antonio No matter what your expectations of a relationship may be, it's natural, logical and healthy that things will sometimes go wrong. I've known my partner for five years and I've changed a great deal and she too has changed a great deal. I have to accept, whether I like it or not, that the relationship is going to keep changing.

Chris, can you describe the feelings you had when you were having an affair outside of your relationship?

Chris At the time I didn't think I loved the person I was with and therefore I quite easily got into having a relation-

ship with somebody else. While I was having that relationship, I realised that I actually did love the woman that I was with and I was consumed by guilt. Intellectually perhaps, I still like the idea of an open relationship, but I feel that I would always be either jealous or guilty. That's not to say that other people cannot have these types of relationships. Love is a very exclusive thing and I think it can be damagingly exclusive. It is good to be able to question it.

David In the end the pain is just the same. That's perhaps the most important issue. The pain of a relationship breakdown.

Antonio But you're never told in advance what a relationship is going to be. The borders and the rhythms in which a relationship moves keep being planned again everyday.

James There can be discussions and agreements. For instance, I was recently in an open relationship, where it was fine by mutual consent to have sex outside the relationship. Now I think there are certainly problems there because asking people not to be jealous, is asking them not to be human. The point where I felt quite capable of doing murder was when I discovered that he had been seeing other people without telling me, which was breaking our particular set of rules.

Graham, in your first marriage after you'd been unfaithful and you'd discussed this to some degree with your wife, how long did your marriage continue?

Graham Until her death. And one of the things is that the commitment to family and home never wavered at all during that period. Certainly to family and children.

Do you think it was threatened by the other relationship?

Graham I think so, yes. Most of all it was during the war years and I was away from home and I wouldn't have done it in normal circumstances, but I was away for very long periods of time which made a great deal of difference.

Vivien, how did you feel when you discovered that your husband had been unfaithful to you?

Vivien Well, this was about six months after we'd got married and it was humiliating to be betrayed by somebody in whom I had reposed complete trust. The crux of the matter seems to me how far each person considers the other person's feelings before their own. I assume that nobody can go through life without being tempted away from one's partner, the point is what one does about it.

Louisa I don't understand why you tolerated his infidelities.

Vivien I loved him very deeply. I could not imagine life without him and it never occurred to me that he would spend the next 50 years running after women.

Morika, do you have an idea of what you

expect from a relationship?

Morika I've been with the bloke I'm with now for about three years, which seems like really ages although the relationship has changed a lot. At the moment I feel that I need a lot more than he can give me. Sometimes I get a bit anxious about the idea that our relationship might be unable to survive a momentary infidelity. I feel I'd hassle him a lot less if I could get out on the town with condoms in my back pocket! I can't help thinking that too much emphasis on the sexual aspect of fidelity is really limiting.

Antonio We seem to be making the assumption that if you're faithful to a person, you're going to get bored sexually in the long term and then you start finding other people attractive. I think it's more complex than that. Sometimes I feel bored with my partner and sometimes I don't. Living with her hasn't stopped me from considering how attractive other women are, or even men. It's something that I've always done. So it's not just a question of sexual pride. She is not just my sexual partner, she is also the person I trust most.

How would you handle a minor sexual infidelity that didn't threaten the existence of your relationship?

Antonio I would suffer and cry. I know how I would like to behave, but again I think it's very important to see a relationship and unfaithfulness as something that you deal with on a daily basis, because you just don't know when you are going to be hit and how you will react.

Louisa, you asked Vivien how she tolerated her husband's infidelity, how would you respond to a situation like that?

Louisa I'm not being judgmental, but I don't think I could stand it. Not because of jealousy, but just because of the complete disappointment and let down. And I would be forever thinking, he says that he's going there, but is he really? I wouldn't accept that and I have actually said to him that if he ever sleeps with anyone else, I just won't see him again.

Vivien If my husband had not gone off with this woman, it would have destroyed me.

Louisa That's because you felt that you would rather have him on his terms than not at all.

Vivien I'm not sure that is the conclusion I would have reached, but he left when our second child was a baby anyway, and I was in no fit state to think very clearly about any of these things. I would have gone round the bend if he had stayed.

James, these are heterosexual relationships involving marriage or people living together. What was your experience in a more openly defined relationship?

James There was a stage when say for two months, I was quite definitely having a good time. It was after that

when I had become far too involved, far too emotional about him, that the trouble started. Part of me was saying, 'What a darling!', and the other part was saying, 'What a bastard!'. And it's such hard work that in the end you think I really can't be bothered. That sounds very sane and very unproblematic, but there were certainly times when I couldn't have been trusted near him with a Sabatier knife. I think infidelity was neither here nor there. It was simply a question of a balance of commitment, me feeling almost absurdly committed in comparison to him.

Morika So neither unfaithfulness nor open relationships work?

Vivien It depends what you want from life. If you're always looking for a fresh thrill round the corner, you'll have them as long as you're attractive or until you get fed up with it.

David Sexuality is essentially all about the body and its pleasure. One of the reasons unfaithfulness occurs is because the partners do not talk through the problems they have in the sexual sphere in terms of giving each other pleasure. Many marriages are not founded on that basis - they are sexually superficial.

Antonio No matter how committed you are, when you've been with someone for 15 or 20 years it is very difficult for that person to provide you with the feeling that they are not just the same old person you think they are. That is something you have to deal with.

David What I am saying is that as a relationship continues the dynamism and sensuality of a relationship weakens. It comes adrift because it has not been discussed.

Chris, can we come back to your experience of infidelity. How has it affected you?

Chris The longest time I was in a relationship is three years, but it seems to be true for many people that they realise that the relationship they have is very valuable. They realise that the attractions of multiple relationships are perhaps illusory if they want to hold on to the deep valuable thing that they have. But I think people also sacrifice a lot through marriage. I know people who have lost a lot of friends, they are not two people anymore in many respects, and that is very limiting. There's no harm when you're looking for your future relationships in trying hard to resist that, trying to have your cake and eat it.

Antonio You want to have everything and that's hard because as soon as you become an adult you realise that everything has a price.

Bekah I think that in a couple you've got to keep your own individuality. I hate couples who talk in 'we's' even when they're apart. It's important to have your own separate identity, even if you're really in love with somebody. That's why I don't believe in marriage. It's an off-putting thing to see somebody and think, I'm going to be with that

person for the rest of my life.

Is a more open relationship that allows other sexual relationships a possible solution to that dilemma?

Bekah Yes, it could be as long as you and your partner agree on the terms whatever they are. That's fine as long as there's no deception, like my first boyfriend saying that he was *nearly* unfaithful. I thought that was unfaithful because he hadn't told me about it at the time.

Is it better not to tell your partner if you have been unfaithful?

David Yes, I would say it's probably better not to disclose.

Would that be easier for you or for the relationship? What does it protect?

David It tends to protect the other person rather than myself.

Chris You can't hide something because you're pretending you're protecting someone, truthfulness is absolutely vital.

Bekah If you're that close to somebody, and that's really an important thing, then you should tell them.

Antonio If it's something important to your relationship, then you should be open and it should be discussed. On the other hand if it's something quite trivial, then you have to take into account what your partner will feel about it.

Vivien It's deception that murders trust because you never know when the next deception is going to turn up.

James I agree that it murders trust because it means that you can't ever be certain that someone is telling the truth. The relationship isn't in a position to deal with problems.

Morika I resent the idea that having sex with someone is the great act of unfaithfulness, that it has such dominance. I would like to find a way of negotiating a one-off fling while maintaining the relationship that I have put loads of work into and that I wouldn't give up for the sake of a good bit of nookie.

James In an open relationship, theoretically, you could do exactly what you want to. But what about deception?

Morika It would hurt him a lot so I wouldn't do it. Although I really do feel that it shouldn't matter.

Louisa It's wrong to say I wouldn't tell my partner because it would hurt them. A lot of infidelity is about self, it's about whether you put your own urges before the heartache that you will cause others.

Is it as easy to be honest to your partner in practice as you feel you should be in theory?

Vivien These things are never easy. Life isn't easy. Life is unfair, unjust and never easy. Anybody who thinks that is going to be rudely surprised. But if you start off with principles, at least you know what your principles are, you may break them, but at least you know what you are doing.

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