

Vince (top left), who only ever dates
polyamorous women, is Anna's current
boyfriend. Andrew (left) was her lover
for nine years, three of which overlapped
with her affair with Leif (right)

'It's a way
to be more
'honest'

'Leif and Andrew
shared me for
three years'





‘Grant’s always said, “It’s fine if you want someone in our room if I’m away,” but that option just felt really weird’



Right: Elizabeth Barner and Grant Denkinson, who have a ‘phenomenal relationship’. They each have a girlfriend, and they have a spare room at their home for other lovers

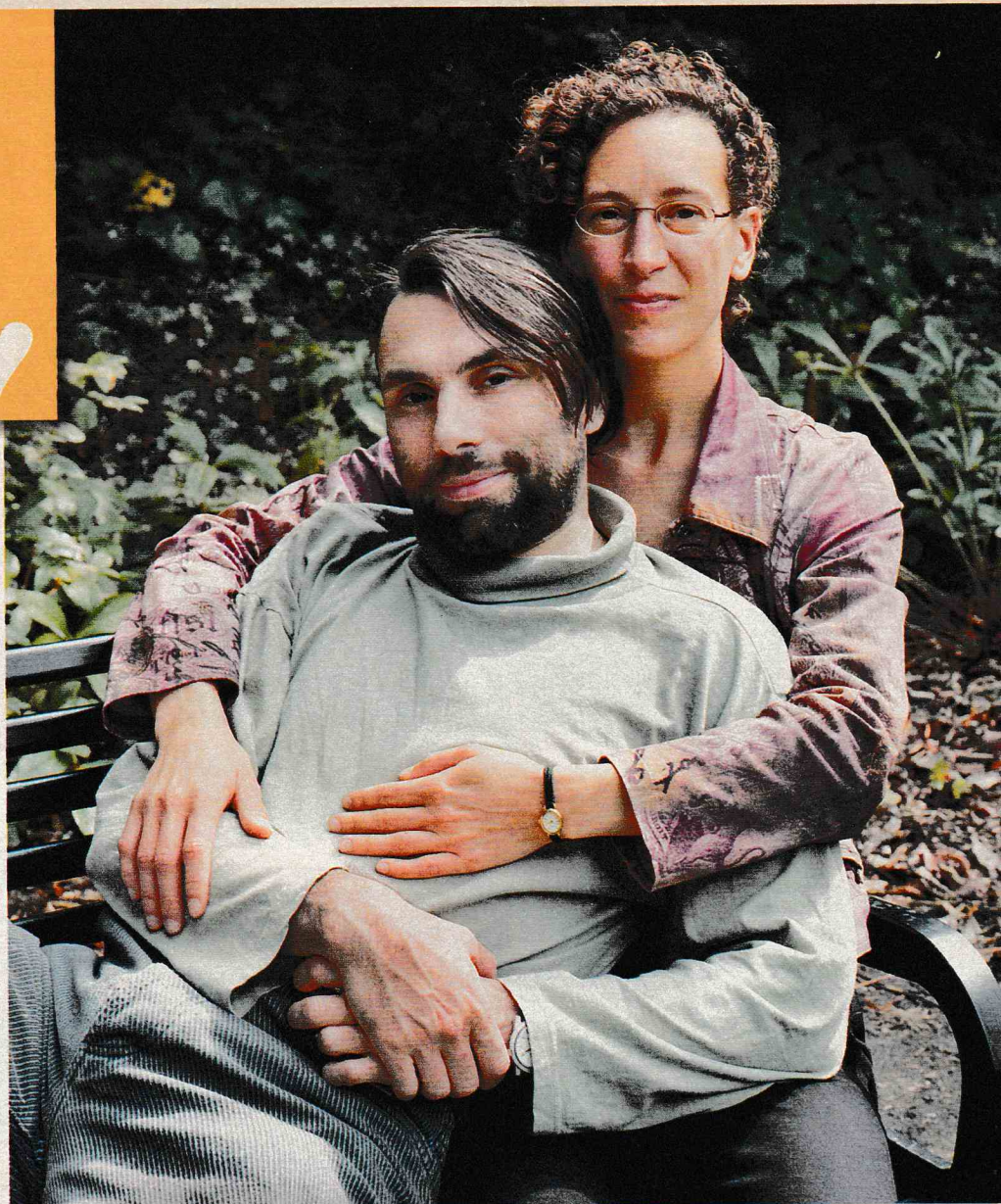
non-monogamists – who have become part of a burgeoning global phenomenon. “As a new relationship style, there’s that fantastic freedom of making your own map,” says Elizabeth Barner, 34, an academic researcher at De Montfort University in Leicester. “By the age of eight, I knew I was never going to grow up and get married. I also thought two people weren’t enough to raise a child. I had this very set idea that I would live in a family of five adults.” Similarly, her boyfriend Grant Denkinson, 35, has never considered monogamy. “Aside from the simplicity, I hadn’t really seen the advantage.”

Grant and Elizabeth have a girlfriend apiece and a second bedroom at their home for others, including the close friends and casual lovers Elizabeth shares “deep emotional connections with”. Grant and Elizabeth are the epitome of the liberated couple.

“Grant’s always said, ‘It’s fine if you want someone in our room when I’m away.’ But actually, when I’ve had that option, it just felt really weird,” she says, her nose crinkling up as she grins.

They met in Harvard at the International Bisexual Conference in 1998. Each had arrived with lovers of the same gender; neither of these had any qualms when Grant and Elizabeth consummated their relationship that night. Two years later, Elizabeth moved from San Francisco to Derby to live with Grant. “It’s a phenomenal relationship. All the time, I feel incredibly in love, incredibly lucky,” beams Elizabeth. When Grant isn’t working as a systems analyst, he is Britain’s foremost polyactivist. Last October he staged “Polyday”, attracting about 200 non-monogamists to a series of support groups, discussions and seminars, culminating in a party in London.

There is no way of knowing how many people are practising polyamorists in the UK, but 1,000 Britons are registered among the online polyamorous communities that Grant moderates. Many of those involved work in the computing field or have what could be viewed as



A POLYAMORY GLOSSARY

BIPOLY: someone who is bisexual and polyamorous

BIPOLY SWITCH: someone who is bisexual and polyamorous, and can take a submissive or dominant role

CLUSTER MARRIAGE: a relationship involving two or more couples living together

COMPERSION: the opposite of jealousy – joy derived from seeing one’s partner happy with another

DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL (DADT): frowned upon by more orthodox polyamorous people, as it is deemed a dishonest way of having an open relationship

FOUR-CORNERED MARRIAGE: a group marriage involving four adult members

QUAD: a polyamorous relationship that involves four people

TRIAD: a polyamorous

relationship that involves three people

HOT BI BABE (HBB): a bisexual woman who becomes involved with a couple – she is not normally seen as a threat to the primary relationship
INTENTIONAL FAMILY: a family made up of people who have chosen to be involved with each other; a community who re-form themselves as a family with shared beliefs

tribal affiliations – they might be goths or neo-pagans, or come from strict religious backgrounds. My own research indicates that there are upwards of 5,000 people practising polyamory in the UK.

“It’s threatening, it’s exciting, it’s complicated, and it always is,” says Andrew Smith, 39. He met 36-year-old Anna Sharman – an unpretentious woman with a wry northern wit – at a house

party in 1995. After graduating from Cambridge she started studying for a PhD in genetics. He had recently come down from Oxford. At the time, neither had heard of the word polyamory, but both were aware from the beginning of their nine-year relationship that they did not want monogamy.

That said, at first she found it difficult to cope with the thought of him seeing other ➤➤➤



'I knew she was seeing other people, and it was a part of our relationship we hadn't fully explored or communicated'

women. "The first couple of times when we were out and he was flirting with other people, I felt quite iffy; jealous isn't the right word..."

"Certainly, initially she really struggled with it," says Andrew. So they came to an agreement that she would find a lover first. She found Leif Burrough, a 40-year-old nanny from Gloucester.

The seeds of Anna's new book, *Open Fidelity* – an A-Z Guide, were sown as a teenager. "I saw several family friends in very unhappy marriages blossom when they left their partners. Often, when I spoke to people who had affairs, I found myself sympathising – not just with those discovering passion after years of boredom, but with their partners who'd been lied to."

Anna and Leif were both born, raised and remain practising Quakers, starting their relationship at a Quaker event in the summer of 1995. "And then I called Andy and said, 'I kissed Leif,' and he said, 'Cool, well enjoy yourself.'" A week later, a swim in a stream led to a second clinch; they slept together that evening. Leif had known about Andrew. "We have this agreement, this arrangement," she'd said. Leif and Andrew would share Anna for the next three years.

The concept of sharing lovers is not without precedent. In George P Murdock's seminal *Ethnographic Atlas*, a database of research on world cultures between 1962 and '80, the marital composition of 1,167 global societies was charted. One-sixth were monogamous, close to one-third had occasional polygyny (one husband sharing multiple wives), and half had frequent polygyny, while four had polyandry



Top: members of the Findhorn community in Scotland, now an eco-village encouraging visitors, with its own holiday resort nearby (above)

(one woman enjoying multiple husbands).

Relationships are often governed by socio-economic factors. Despite Christianity (and, later, Judaism) renouncing non-monogamy, 17th-century German Christians were permitted to take up to 10 wives, to rebuild the country's diminished population in the aftermath of the Thirty Years war.

"This movement amounts to an increasing recognition of the fact that humans aren't cut out for monogamy," says Dr Glenn Wilson of King's College London, citing the animal kingdom – where any species in which the male is larger than the female is non-monogamous – as proof.

"There's no such thing as a sexuality that is not informed by the culture and society in

which we live," says Dr Christian Klesse of Manchester Metropolitan University, who has a PhD in UK non-monogamy.

The phenomenon of polyamory is gaining increasing attention in the academic field, and Dr Klesse, who is polyamorous himself, has co-edited the first academic journal on polyamory. Klesse has interviewed around 50 British polyamorists, among them septuagenarians who have practised polyamory since the 1960s and young people who are living in mutually involved households of three. "People come to polyamory at very different stages of their lives. Some might only practise in particular relationships, or when the attraction is fading. Or they adopt it out of a crisis, marriage as an alternative to divorce. Others have very particular sexual tastes. Some might just realise they're in love with two people. Others just identify themselves as non-monogamous, that is who they are. There are those who don't want to make an exclusive commitment, those who can't, and those who don't want to be in a relationship at all. You've got lots of reasons for why."

The concept first came to prominence with the free-love movement of the 1960s, although its origins lie in the utopian ideals of the Oneida community in New York, which existed from 1848 to '81. Perhaps its most outspoken modern-day proponents were the Kerista community, who, between 1971 and '91, grew from a four- or five-person collective in the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco to become 30 or so strong. Members had a rotation of sleeping with each other. At the same time, Scotland's Findhorn community – formed in 1962 and now a sizeable eco-village attracting around 14,000 visitors annually – openly extolled free love. I spoke to a receptionist at Findhorn, posing as a prospective member searching for free love. He told me that Findhorn no longer advocated it, but I should call around the communes and "take your chances. No one advertises it, but it's still going on in some pockets in the UK".

Polyamory truly gained momentum in the 1980s, when the free love of the previous decades became harnessed by the threat of AIDS. It continued to proliferate during the internet boom of the 1990s. Today there are ➡

Right: the Oneida community, one of America's earliest polyamorous sects, in 1876. Below: a member of San Francisco's Kerista community

♥ 'I get envious and insecure. What are you afraid of? That your lover will like the other person more than you?' ♥

polyamorous movements in every western country. The most developed is in the United States, where polyactivists regularly lobby government to formally recognise the polyamorous union.

Today, open communication, rules and honesty are seen as fundamental to polyamory's success. "It fits the man's lifestyle but with women's rules," says Elizabeth, Grant's girlfriend. They negotiate rules as their relationship progresses, though have a couple of unchanging safe-sex arrangements.

"You have agreements that everyone sticks to, and one of those might be a veto if you really think that someone might be destructive," says Anna's current boyfriend, 33-year-old Vince Scott, an IT consultant. He, Anna and Leif stipulate the importance of meeting their metamours – people they share a lover in common with – during the initial stages of a relationship, while Grant, Elizabeth and Andrew don't. "I had established that Leif was essentially a decent bloke; I didn't have an emotional need to meet him," Andrew says.

Leif's affair with Anna broke down after another of his relationships collapsed, and Anna found it hard to cope with the fallout. "There is a difficulty in general when your lover has more than one lover – they can get hurt by that person and you have to deal with it as well," says Anna. She remained with Andrew for another six years, with each maintaining additional relationships – hers longer lasting, his always brief – before splitting in 2003. Two years later, Anna met Vince via an online dating site on which each specified a preference for non-monogamy, and subsequently discovered that they lived on the same London street. Vince – an existentialist with an idle poshness about him and a slow, clipped public-school drawl – only dates polyamorous women, despite never having desired an additional lover for himself.

He'd been introduced to the concept in his early twenties by his first girlfriend, a nurse called Alice, with whom he maintained a relationship for five years. "To begin with, I think I probably handled the situation quite badly, somewhat

head-in-the-sand," he says, with an unapologetic honesty. "I knew that she was seeing other people, and I knew that it was a part of our relationship we hadn't fully communicated or explored. But I knew that I loved her, and I knew she loved me. We had this polyamorous relationship, but it was mostly that she always had one or two other people she was interested in, and I was quite happy and content with her, you know."

Andrew, the managing director of a company advising local and regional European governments, including our own, on transport and energy strategy, is rather more open. He lives in central London and I meet him at the Institute of Directors in Pall Mall. Within 15 minutes, he reveals that fantasising about additional lovers is a frequent component of his bedroom repartee. "The things you talk about in bed aren't necessarily going to happen, but sometimes when you're outside the bedroom you think, 'Well, actually, that might be quite interesting, let's talk this through.'" Six years into their relationship, he and his girlfriend Anna turned the fantasy into reality. "There were times when Anna and I shared lovers, and that's a wonderful thing. We negotiated our separate lovers individually before that, so then to share one was all right, it was fine." They introduced a third lover into their dynamic for a short while. "Emotionally, it was very new and complicated, but it didn't work as a structure for us."

After our interview, I join Andrew for a bellini and tell him that I rarely drink because I can't handle the sensation of losing control any more. A look passes his face, the kind that's trying to gauge a reaction, then he wraps a fist around my



hair and pulls it hard. "Sometimes it's good to surrender control," he whispers, then tries to kiss me before inviting me for supper sometime soon.

Grant and Elizabeth, meanwhile, prefer to keep their affairs to themselves. "It's happened with a couple of my lovers," states Grant, "that they seem to be getting to know one another, I get out of the way." Elizabeth agrees: "That's a complex situation that I'd rather not be involved in. My sense is, it could be very, very difficult, and the question of loyalties can really be brought into play. If I didn't trust one of Grant's lovers because of something that had happened between us, then I'd really start questioning his relationship with that person."

Dr Lyndsey Moon, a chartered counselling psychologist and research fellow in sexuality and emotion at Warwick University, says: "People are no longer feeling so restricted in what they can do sexually, and this enables the language we use during sex to be talked about more beyond the bedroom. As a species, we need to generate new ideas on gender and sexuality in order to survive."

"In the aftermath of marriage, sexual and gender reappraisal, we are experiencing a crisis. Everything is in place for a relationship revolution of some kind." Moon is ➤➤➤



ambivalent about polyamory, however. "In theory, I think the concept is great, but I'm not sure whether, as humans, we've evolved enough to deal with it."

Complications can arise when children are born, or if a relationship runs its course. Some children thrive in such setups, but they can be picked on at school. And splitting up with more than one lover has the potential for near-nuclear fallout.

I have four friends who have, separately, lived in triads – a group of three people simultaneously involved with each other. One disbanded mutually; the second when two of the lovers abandoned the third; another lasted six years; and the fourth is still going strong today.

I met a handful of triads in the polyamorous community and a quad – four people involved with each other – from south London, which had evolved through a married professional couple expanding their home and hearts to encompass a male lover, then some years later a female, who all cohabit together today.

Over the years, polyamory has developed its own language. The term "metamour" was coined in 2000 by a British man during an online discussion about what to call a lover's lover; it has now passed into common parlance among polyamorists. What most people term the "honeymoon period" is now called NRE, or New Relationship Energy.

"I suppose this happened with Leif," says Anna. "Perhaps it enhanced my relationship with Andy, as I was feeling more passionate generally. They call it New Relationship Energy for a reason."

There are primaries (as Andrew was and Vince now is), secondaries (Leif), and tertiaries (Elizabeth's casual lovers). The elusive HBB (or "Hot Bi Babe", a disparaging term coined by poly-veterans for what many couples seek in their fledgling stages) is easily understood through the following e-mail message I received via a mailing list I subscribed to during my time surveying the scene: "We are a professional couple in our late 20's (together 2 years) looking to add someone to our relationship on a possible long term basis for friendship and fun. We are both really easy going and open minded and in no hurry to rush anyone into anything. We would just like to know more about you and what you are looking for." I didn't reply.

"The cultural ideal is the egalitarian coupling, and polyamory seems egalitarian," says Klesse. "In practice, I do think that things are far more complicated." I came to interview Anna, Andrew, Leif and Vince after a number of false starts. First were the trio from Bournemouth: John and Jenni Tappin and their girlfriend. While John was very happy for his wife to see women, he found it difficult to cope with



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her relationships with other men.

Then there were Jason, the attractive young university professor, his wife, Jen, and his girlfriend, Steph, who nearly appeared on these pages. I joined them for dinner after Polyday and was alarmed when Jason escorted me to the cloakroom and tried to kiss me, then later repeatedly tried to stroke my legs under the table as his girlfriend sat on his lap and his wife sat opposite. I spent the rest of the evening consoling Jen, who was both doubting her own polyamorous inclinations and distressed that her husband's secondary relationship was taking increasing precedence over her own.

"Polyamorists promote the ideal to negotiate relationship choices, to work through these on an emotional level, and yet at the same time th

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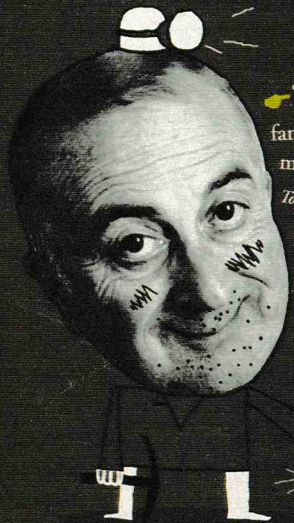


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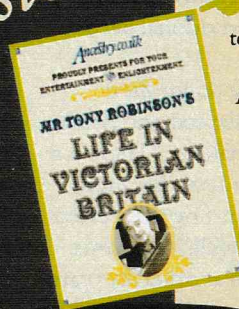
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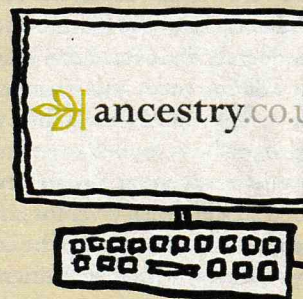


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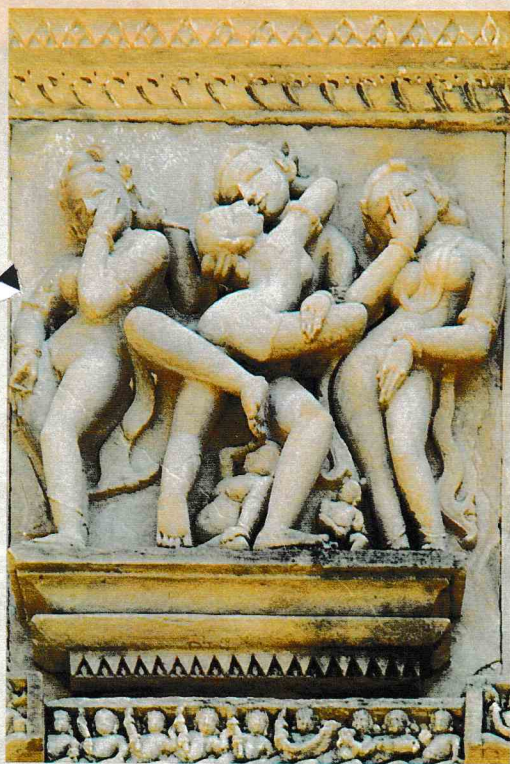
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Above: a communal sex scene in a detail from an 11th-century stone carving at the Kandariya Mahadev Temple, Khajuraho, India

struggle with the same shit," says Klesse. "It's based on honesty, honesty, honesty, and yet polyamorous people cheat too. They have difficulties with confession and betrayal, as well as issues around trust. It only ever works when you work on jealousy."

"For some people there's a deep-down feeling that if your lover's having sex with someone else, then it's not rational at all, and they call that sexual jealousy," proclaims Anna. "I'm not jealous. I get envious, I get insecure. What are you really afraid of? It's about fear, isn't it? Are you afraid that your lover's going to leave you, or that they'll like the other person more than you? People are different. It's not going to be better or worse; it's going to be different."

Elizabeth experiences jealousy perhaps twice a year. "If it were more frequent it would be horrible," she says. "Some of it is knowledge that it's okay not to be perfect all the time, it's okay not to feel happy all the time, and during those periods I'm careful to ensure that my time is spent well."

"It's a learning experience for a lot of men to conduct this level of communication," says Grant. "If Elizabeth asks what I'm feeling or how I am, I can't start negotiating with her until I know what I want myself." His influence is having a positive effect on his monogamous friends. "It's opening up the communication channels. They're starting to say things like,

'Is it okay if I have a massage from a friend? Is it okay if we sleep in the same bed but don't do anything? Is a hug okay?' They're starting to talk about what's comfortable and what's not, and what that means."

Leif states: "It's a way to be more honest, more straightforward, in the ways that lots of us relate. Academic research estimates marital infidelity falls anywhere between 20% and 60%. One of the most resounding similarities between the polyamorists Anna has interviewed is their ability to maintain friendships after separation. Oh yes, and that the sex never seems to tail off."

At the time of writing, Leif is single, Vince with Anna, Anna has taken a second lover, Grant and Elizabeth are Grant and Elizabeth, and Andrew has been seeing his girlfriend for four months. "Before Anna, I'd had open relationships and relationships that were monogamous. It's not that I can't be monogamous. You structure a relationship by who you're with; you make it work."

Meanwhile, the Southwark arrangement that began as a utopian idyll serves as a cautionary tale. Charles eventually decamped from Southwark to Paris to find solace in the arms of a model; he's hesitant about encouraging his girlfriends to embrace their sapphic sides, these days. Anouschka "married" Funny Girl last year but humour became strained once more when she was discovered in bed with two others. ■



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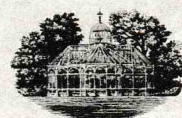
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