

RESEARCH NOTE

Friendship and Adultery

Philip E. Lampe, *Incarnate Word College*

The objective of this paper is to identify and explain a generally unidentified source of problems which affects married people. Whereas friendship is, in most cases, a socially accepted and highly valued relationship, there is a form of friendship which appears to be, if not unacceptable, at least discouraged and ignored—opposite-sex friendship with a married person. Because it is discouraged, the role remains undefined. The reason for the lack of a socially accepted and defined role of friend of the opposite sex to a married person seems to be related to society's negative evaluation of adultery and its fear that this type of close relationship may become adulterous. It is ironic, however, that society's lack of definition of this role may actually be causally related to at least some adultery.

Friendship has been viewed as socially accepted and valued behavior throughout history. Not only has it been encouraged by society, but our Judeo-Christian religious traditions have also endorsed and promoted close, friendly relationships.¹ This is in marked contrast to the historical reaction to adultery. Adultery has long been viewed with concern and disapproval in both the Jewish and Christian religions. It is referred to approximately thirty-three times in the Old Testament and twenty-nine times in the New Testament (Adams, Irwin, and Waters, 1949). Furthermore, the "Chosen People" who were unfaithful to God were likened to an adulterous wife, and it is one of the few sins specifically included and singled out to be avoided in the Ten Commandments.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the explanation of adultery has focused on the offending individuals. The behavior has been commonly explained and understood in terms of the offenders with the imputation of guilt or recognition of culpability the primary concern. Social scientists, who generally avoid the term adultery because of its close religious connection, have likewise been interested in what they call "extramarital relationships" (EMR), which may be understood to refer to some illicit form of intimate sexual behavior (especially coitus) between a married person and someone other than the spouse.

However, the primary concern of scientists has been understanding and explanation of this form of deviant behavior. The scientific study of adultery is relatively recent. Previously it was dealt with in a theological, philosophical, or speculative manner. In the United States such scientific investigation began around the time of World War I. Research increased with the interest generated by the widespread dissemination of the landmark studies of Alfred Kinsey and associates in the 1940s and 1950s. Over the years data have consistently revealed that husbands engage in more EMR than wives; however, evidence also indicates that the incidence of EMR among wives has been affected by the Sexual Revolution to a greater degree than that of husbands (San Antonio News, 1983; Bell, Turner, and Rosen, 1975).

Certain kinds of adultery, or EMR, sometimes called "consensual adultery" because the extramarital sexual relationships are known and approved of by the other spouse, and "comarital adultery," which is approved and expected sexual behavior by both partners (includes "swinging" or "swapping"), have been widely publicized in recent years in print and on film. This publicity may lead people to believe in the widespread popularity of such practices, although studies indicate that relatively few people actually do engage in them (Hunt, 1974; Cole and Spanier, 1972).

It is unclear exactly how much EMR actually occurs, although the mass media, especially afternoon soap operas, would lead one to believe that it is virtually as common as marriage (and possibly as accepted) (Bean, 1981). Relatively recent studies have generally revealed that great variations exist throughout the United States. A study of a large midwestern city found that 20 percent of the husbands had committed adultery (Johnson, 1970), and a national survey of approximately twenty thousand readers of *Psychology Today* revealed that 40 percent of the husbands had had an adulterous relationship (Athanasίου, Shaver, and Tavris, 1970). Other studies, however, have reported higher incidences. The most commonly accepted figures, beginning with the Kinsey studies and continuing to the 1980s, appear to indicate that approximately 50 percent of the husbands and 35 to 40 percent of the wives have at some time experienced an adulterous relationship (Kinsey et al., 1953; Hunt, 1974; Yablonsky, 1979).

The question of causation is of particular interest to the social scientist. Religious explanations have usually centered on man's "fallen nature" or an individual's personal moral character. Scientific explanations are concerned with identifying the situational, social, and/or psychological factors involved. It is generally recognized that EMR as a type of social behavior has no single cause. Nevertheless, certain causes are often emphasized, and many social scientists have explained EMR in terms of the individual and his/her particular needs, attitudes, values, etc. (see Thomas, 1956; Bell, 1972; Womble,

1966; Flugel, 1970). It appears, however, that some EMR may be best explained primarily in terms of society's normative system.

An Anomic Situation

Since the time of Durkheim the concept of anomie (a condition in which the social system fails to provide clear-cut guidelines for action) has been fruitfully employed to help explain a number of social problems. Problems appear to be endemic to situations where there is a lack of clear guidelines or norms to give direction and definition to the interaction. A nationwide survey conducted for *Time* found that 61 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement that "it's getting harder and harder to know what's right and wrong these days" (Time, 1977). Accordingly, lack of social norms concerning opposite-sex friendships where at least one of the participants is married can result in a general uncertainty or confusion. Such a situation can not only create stress for participants in the interaction, but can also be a source of difficulty for nonparticipants who are merely observers. These latter individuals may be unable to properly identify what it is they are observing, consequently their responses or reactions may be inappropriate.

There are at least two types of inappropriate reactions: the first is treating a relationship as adulterous when it is not, and the second is not treating a relationship as adulterous when, in fact, it is. Only the first type is a consequence of an anomic situation. Observers are unable to properly identify the true nature of the relationship (that is, friendship) because of the absence of the necessary social guidelines. The second type is usually a result of deliberate deception on the part of the participants in order to avoid social sanctions.

Diagram 1

Observer's Perception	Identification of the Relationship Nature of the Relationship	
	Adulterous	Not Adulterous
Adultery	correct	incorrect
Friendship	incorrect	correct

In the United States it appears that society has not generally accepted and clearly recognized and defined the role of opposite-sex friend to a married person that excludes the spouse. Booth and Hess state "the norms seem to encourage

nonmarried persons to develop cross-sex friendship ties more so than married individuals" (1974:39). It has been noted that, in fact, "traditional monogamy as practiced has meant not only one spouse and sex partner at a time but essentially only one heterosexual *relationship*, of any depth at all, at a time" (Roy and Roy, 1970). There are many possible reasons for this traditionally neglected or calculated lack of recognition (Lampe, 1976; Booth and Hess, 1974). An exception involves the human service professions, which prescribe a spiritually, physically, and/or emotionally supportive role to others; that is, ministers, doctors, psychiatrists, welfare workers, counselors. Since close, friendly, personal contact is a socially recognized and accepted aspect of such professions it is to be expected that both the professional person as well as the spouse will, because of the job-related attitudes and values held, be more open to what would otherwise be prohibited relationships. In addition, the profession itself usually provides a definition of and guidelines for such roles.

One result of the apparent absence of a generally recognized and accepted role may be an increase in EMR. This is because people are largely players of roles (Goffman, 1967). As such, they tend to act and react in accordance with social expectations which have been internalized. A recent study found that three-quarters of the respondents engaged in an EMR defined their partners as merely "friends." Less than one-quarter mentioned feelings of love (Atwater, 1979). In the absence of a socially defined role (i.e., opposite-sex friend to a married person), participants may consciously or unconsciously gravitate and/or be pushed by others toward the closest role which is socially recognized and defined (whether socially accepted or not). In the United States this heterosexual role appears to be that of lovers.

The preceding leads to the formulation of three propositions: first, there is a lack of a clear, generally recognized, defined role of friend of the opposite sex to a married person which excludes the spouse; second, this results in social anomie which in turn leaves participants in such a relationship uncertain as to what is socially accepted behavior; and third, observers are unable to clearly identify the relationship and consequently tend to label it as adulterous. This incorrect definition, together with the reaction it elicits, increases the chances that the relationship, if continued, will become adulterous.

An Empirical Test

A preliminary test of the basic premise (i.e., the absence of societal norms regulating cross-sex friendships which include a married person) was made by means of an anonymously answered questionnaire which was administered to 247 respondents from four different schools of higher education. Respondents were from two private schools, a Catholic college and a Presbyterian university, and two public schools, a state university and a large junior college. Entire

classes were utilized. Classes were selected in courses which were required of all majors. An instrument had previously been formulated and pretested on 158 students and necessary revisions made. The final instrument requested the sex, religious affiliation, and marital status of respondents. In addition, they were instructed to indicate their reaction, usually in the form of agreement or disagreement, to the following statements:

1. Married women should be able to have a nonsexual friendship with men if they want to.
2. Married men should be able to have a nonsexual friendship with women if they want to.
3. Would you (encourage) (allow) (discourage) *your* spouse to/from having a close personal friendship with someone of the opposite sex.
4. The above types of "nonsexual" friendship with a married person are *not* really possible to maintain.
5. It is hard to know just what you can do and what is socially accepted behavior if you or your friend of the opposite sex are married.
6. Do you feel comfortable having a close personal friendship with a person of the opposite sex which excludes the spouse.
7. If I frequently see a married person alone with the same person of the opposite sex within the same general age range, I usually assume there is some sort of romantic involvement.

Results indicate that while over nine out of ten respondents believe both husbands and wives should be able to have cross-sex friendships, only seven out of ten would encourage or allow their own spouse to have one. An obvious reason for this discrepancy is the belief expressed by more than 20 percent of the respondents that cross-sex friendships with a married person cannot remain nonsexual. Others may have some doubts or feel they may become jealous of such a relationship.

More relevant to the stated premises are the final three statements. Responses reveal that approximately half of the respondents are unsure of what is socially accepted behavior regarding cross-sex friendships involving a married person, feel uncomfortable with such a friendship if the spouse is not included, and commonly interpret such a relationship as a romantic involvement. These can all be seen as consequences of a lack of clearly defined social norms.²

Reasons for the Anomic Situation

There are several possible reasons for the lack of a socially approved and clearly defined role of opposite-sex friend to a married person. First, traditional marriage in the United States, ideally, has meant the exclusivity of the mates. Spouses are expected to devote themselves both physically and emotionally to their marriage partners. An intimate friendship with someone of

Table 1
Percent of Agreement to Each Statement by Sex, Religion, Marital Status, and School

Statement	Sex		Religion		Marital Status			School	
	N = 177	N = 70	N = 137	N = 110	N = 165	N = 82	N = 126	N = 121	
	F	M	Catholic	non-Catholic	Single	MWD	Public	Private	
1.	94	89	92	.94	95	90	91	.57	93
2.	94	87	90	1.43	91	93	93	.57	91
3. ^b	30	30	37	2.31 ^a	39	26	30	.17	31
4.	20	23	27	2.50 ^a	26	19	18	1.15	24
5.	48	43	50	1.25	47	44	49	.78	44
6.	51	53	46	1.88	49	50	56	1.59	46
7.	51	41	57	2.50 ^a	60	42	46	1.25	54

^aSignificant at .05.

^bPercentages compared were "discourage."

the opposite sex can be viewed as a threat to the physical exclusivity expected of a mate and an encroachment, if not a violation, of the emotional exclusivity. It has been pointed out that monogamy began in societies with strong religious injunctions against infidelity and which used every possible device to limit the temptations (Sapirstein, 1948:173). Apparently one of the devices used in the United States has been the limitation of unnecessary, close heterosexual relationships, such as friendships. The historian Westermarck (1922) was of the opinion that monogamy was based on male jealousy, while the sociologist Davis (1949) held the opposing view that it was monogamy which gives rise to jealousy. In either case, the result of the union between monogamy and jealousy would be the discouragement of adult heterosexual friendships involving married people.

Second, women have been looked upon as sex objects rather than as individuals. Consequently, interest in them may be interpreted as a sexual interest. The widespread popularity of Freud and his emphasis on sex and sexual motivation may have been a contributing factor to this phenomenon. The Women's Liberation movement has opposed beauty contests and other social practices which it feels lead to general sexual exploitation of women, so that eventually women may be seen as persons rather than as sex objects.

Third, and closely related to the above, is the practice of looking upon women as part of a man's property. This practice is compatible with the mentality of a male-dominated, capitalistic society which stresses material possessions and personal property. It can readily be seen in the practices of not only changing the wife's last name to that of her husband, but also assigning to her his socioeconomic status and even his credit rating. Another clear articulation of this view of the wife as a possession of her husband is to be found in a Texas law which has only recently been repealed. The law allowed a husband who caught his wife and her lover in adultery to kill the lover with impunity. However, as would be expected, a wife did not have the corresponding right to kill her husband's lover if she caught them in the act. Given such a social and psychological perspective, society could be expected to balk at the idea of accepting a situation wherein one of man's important possessions, i.e. his wife, may be "used" or stolen by another.

Fourth, our Judeo-Christian tradition has generally viewed adultery as a greater evil than fornication. Furthermore, followers of this tradition are admonished not only to avoid sin, but also the occasion and appearance of sin. Hence, it is considered wrong to place oneself, or someone else, in temptation or to give possible scandal to others. Therefore, married persons especially should be careful about developing a close relationship with someone of the opposite sex which, because of our "fallen nature," may lead to an adulterous relationship or to give others reason to believe it was adulterous. Whereas

fornication between single people may lead to an accepted state of marriage, adultery can only lead to a further unaccepted state of divorce. Reflective of this feeling was the finding of the 1974 National Opinion Research Center's nationwide survey which indicated that while 73 percent of the adults consider extramarital sex to be "always wrong" only 32 percent consider premarital sex to be "always wrong." Relevant to this discrepancy is a statement by the sociologist Nass that "it is widely felt that marriage provides an approved sexual partner, so that married people are not altogether sexually deprived and that outside involvement threatens the marital relationship" (1978:420). From the perspective of public acceptance, it is interesting to note that over the years studies have found that a direct relationship exists between premarital and extramarital sexual experiences. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, a type of sexual behavior appears to be widely approved which may lead to, or at least is related to, a type of sexual behavior which is widely disapproved. Based on the Judeo-Christian perspective adultery can be interpreted as a violation of three of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Thou shalt not steal," and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." In addition, it may also be seen as a violation of justice, wherein a spouse spends time, money, and energy which properly belongs to the family on someone else.

A final reason is related to the religio-social ideal that marriage is forever and that the family is the cornerstone of society. There is fear that in close male-female relationships outside of marriage one of the partners may find someone more attractive or desirable and as a result the marriage will end. This is particularly true in societies such as the United States where an individual is considered a potential spouse regardless of his/her current marital status. Not only do we live in a society where men and women are, in the words of Bernard Farber, "permanently available," but one which has, according to Robert Francoeur and his wife Anna, a "hot sex culture." A "hot sex culture" is defined as one that is male-dominated, double-standard, intercourse-obsessed, and property-oriented. They state that "for a hot sex culture such as America has had for decades, every sexually mature single person is a threat. The unmarried, the widowed, the divorced—all are obviously sex starved. Intimacy of any kind with them must lead to a divorce and remarriage, so all single persons are a threat to married couples" (Francoeur and Francoeur, 1977:306).

Consequences of the Anomic Situation

Given this lack of a socially accepted and defined role of friend of the opposite sex to a married person, it may be expected that the incidence of adultery would be affected. Not only may individuals who attempt to pursue such

a nebulous role become lovers because of the lack of guidelines as to what is accepted behavior in such circumstances, but also they may be unwittingly led to an adulterous relationship by family and friends. This could be by way of the self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby the attitudes and actions of spouse, family, and friends to such a relationship would provoke the participants in the unacceptable friendship because of resentment, mutual comfort, desire for revenge, or even the clandestine setting of the environment into which they may have retreated. Today the theme of extramarital sexual relationships is common, not only in the entertainment media but also in research. These relationships are often looked upon and presented as a positive experience, as something to be sought and encouraged. Clearly this is a break with the traditional social and religious response to such behavior. Some individuals, scientists and nonscientists, even see the possibility of adultery as helping or reinforcing a marriage (see the book of readings by Libby and Whitehurst, 1977). The most obvious enunciation of this belief is expressed in the saying "the family that swings together clings together." Advocates of "open marriages" often emphasize the advantages of adultery for the individual and his or her personal growth and development rather than that of the marriage.

There is a wide divergence of opinion between social scientists as to the effects of adultery on marriage. Discussing the possibility that there would be some effect, Reiss commented that "it is difficult to believe that an important source of gratification can occur without some impact on the marital dyad" (1976:300). As to the nature of the effect, Beltz believed it would be negative and concluded that "it does not appear possible, within our cultural setting to maintain a marriage where extramarital sex is condoned and permitted" (1969:188). On the other hand, in a study of swingers it was found that most couples indicated the marital relationship, including the sexual aspect, was enhanced by comarital sexual relationships with others (Ziskin and Ziskin, 1973:244). Cuber, however, is of the opinion that there is no one inevitable effect. He believes the effects of adultery depend on several factors: (a) ". . . whether the adultery is carried on furtively or is known by the spouse; (b) whether the married partners agree to the propriety or expediency of such behavior; (c) whether one or both participate, and (d) whether the condonement is genuine and based on principle or is simply the result of an ultimatum by one of the two parties" (1969:193).

Concomitant with the noted change in the social interpretation and reaction to adultery has been a change in the moral perception and evaluation of it by some. One husband and wife team has expressed the opinion that in some cases it may be possible to engage in a moral, responsible, even Christian, form of adultery (Roy and Roy, 1968). Another writer has recommended that ". . . each extramarital act ought to be judged as morally evil, morally

neutral, or morally good, according to the totality of the circumstances and the effects on all concerned" (Hunt, 1969:xv). Such a recommendation may be acceptable to those who embrace situational ethics, but it would not be compatible with the traditionalists' view in either the Jewish or Christian religions. Traditional Judeo-Christian morality stresses obedience to the law, as embodied in the Ten Commandments and the Old and/or New Testament, and is based on intention combined with knowledge rather than on consequences. Apparently the traditional evaluation is still most commonly accepted, as a study revealed that approximately 85 percent of the women and 75 percent of the men indicated that adultery is morally wrong (Lampe, 1979).

Possible Resolutions

Several resolutions to the problem of lack of norms for cross-sex friendships which include a married person are possible. These can be examined within a framework which focuses on the norms regarding such friendships, together with society's reaction to adultery. The resulting framework yields six cells, each of which represents a different approach.

Diagram 2
Possible Approaches to the Problem

Reaction to Adultery	Friendship Norms	
	No Change	Change
Discourage	Traditional anomic situation	Nonsexual open marriage
Ignore	Personal-choice anomic situation	Personal-choice open marriage
Encourage	Permissive anomic situation	Sexually open marriage

There are three possibilities noted in which the norms regarding such cross-sex friendships are not changed; that is, remain virtually nonexistent. First, if the norms remain the same and society continues to discourage extra-marital sex as it has in the past, the result can be referred to as the "traditional anomic situation." The approach which is consistent with this situation is one of disapproving and obstructing any attempts at friendships. Underlying this approach is the belief that maintaining a platonic relationship is impossible.

Data presented in the table indicate that approximately 25 percent of the respondents believe that it really is not possible to maintain a close nonsexual friendship with a married person of the opposite sex.

Second, when norms remain unchanged but society does not condemn and/or concern itself with extramarital sexual behavior, the situation which results can be called "personal-choice anomic." This refers to the fact that in such a situation each individual would have greater freedom based on personal preference and/or moral beliefs to allow the friendship, if undertaken, to become sexual. The approach consistent with this situation is one of nondirective tolerance. Over a decade ago Bernard (1972:24) wrote that "a conception of marriage which tolerates, if it is not actually sympathetic with, extramarital relations is on its way, and . . . provisions for sexual varietism is almost standard in male blueprints for the future." Currently, it appears that the United States is somewhere between the "traditional" and the "personal-choice" anomic situations.

Third, in the case where the friendship norms are not changed but society encourages extramarital sex, the resulting situation can be termed "permissive anomic." Consistent with this situation is the approach of advocating extramarital sexual relations, with or without a close friendship. As previously mentioned, some writers have spoken favorably of EMR, declaring that extramarital sexual relationships can be growth-producing. Such relationships are seen as of benefit to the individual involved and/or his/her marriage (see Myers, 1977).

There are also three possibilities noted in which the norms of cross-sex friendships involving a married person are changed; that is, norms are established so as to give acceptance and guidance to such friendships. First, if the norms are changed but society discourages extramarital sex the result would be to encourage what is called "non-sexual open marriage." This approach has been advocated by some who believe such a situation, while avoiding the problems related to adultery, would ease some of the pressures of married life, wherein a spouse has to meet all the needs of the mate (see O'Neill and O'Neill, 1972). At present, however, it appears that many Americans are not in favor of extramarital friendships for their mates, even if nonsexual. According to the data which appear in the table, although nine out of ten respondents expressed the belief that married men and women should be able to have close friends of the opposite sex, 30 percent indicated they would discourage their own spouse from engaging in a cross-sex friendship.

Second, in the case where the friendship norms change and society tends to ignore or be unconcerned with extramarital sexual behavior, the resulting situation is one of encouraging friendships but giving no direction, pro or con, regarding the development of a sexual relationship. This would result in what

may be termed "personal-choice open marriage." This situation may be thought or felt by some as remaining somewhat anomic.

Third, when norms regarding friendship develop and society encourages extramarital sex, the result can be a "sexually open marriage." Some writers, as previously noted, have advocated this approach. Results of the previously cited study (Lampe, 1979) reveal that over 50 percent of the respondents believe extramarital sexual relations can benefit a marriage at least in some cases.

As previously discussed, the United States does not have clearly defined norms regarding cross-sex friendships which include a married person. Furthermore, the normative system in this society has never explicitly encouraged widespread extramarital sexual relations, although there are indications that EMR is somewhat more common and acceptable than before. The preceding six approaches to adultery and friendships are all logically possible, but the consequences of each are not all equally predictable because most of them deal with hypothetical situations (i. e., existence of such norms and/or encouragement of adultery). In this regard care must be taken for, as Merton (1966) pointed out, sometimes the solutions used to deal with a social problem bring about more undesirable consequences than the original problem itself. Due to historical and cultural differences, predictions based on other societies in which these situations may be found are problematic (for example, the consequences of wife hospitality among the Eskimos cannot be used to indicate what would happen if the practice were initiated in the United States). Given the lack of necessary empirical data, it is not presently possible to determine the results of each of the possible solutions to the present problem.

Summary and Conclusion

Friendships are encouraged because they are a positive force leading to social solidarity. Adultery is discouraged because it is a divisive force. Consequently, friendships between members of the opposite sex which include a married person but exclude the spouse are generally not encouraged. In fact, the role is not even clearly defined by society, as are other socially approved roles. Since people are socialized to be players of roles, this anomic situation presents problems.

An individual who enters such an undefined role is not sure of either the parameters of the relationship or the proper verbal and behavioral contents. Therefore, commonly accepted, socially sanctioned patterns and interpretations are missing. In typical socially sanctioned male-female friendships, the prescribed behavior leads to a strengthening of the positive feelings and emotional bonds which exist. This promotes romance and marriage. Thus, such guidelines are inappropriate and dysfunctional for a married person to follow.

In the absence of a socially defined role of friend of the opposite sex to a married person, interpretation of words and actions by those who would pursue the role becomes difficult. Both participants and observers alike lack the "key" to common understanding and uniform decoding. Since the known and familiar commonly serve as the basis for understanding and interpreting the unknown and unfamiliar, individuals both inside and outside the undefined relationship may use the closest defined role, that of lover, as the basis for interpretation and guidance. Thus, what begins as an attempt at a socially approved and desired relationship (i.e., friendship) may, because of society's lack of definition, become a socially disapproved and undesirable relationship (i.e., adultery). If this is true, society may unwittingly be a party to promoting the very behavior it wishes to discourage.

ENDNOTES

¹There have been historical instances when close friendships, both same-sex and cross-sex, have been discouraged for fear they could develop into sexual relationships. Such instances, however, are reflective of Jansenism (heresy) and are contrary to the original and earlier tradition.

²A possible alternative explanation may appear to be the antithesis; namely, rather than an absence of a norm, a norm actually exists which prescribes that cross-sex friendships evolve into sexual relationships. Upon examination, however, it becomes evident that this is not tenable for the following reasons: First, adherence to social norms is typically rewarded whereas sexual relations outside of marriage, albeit among friends, has been typically punished. Second, traditional wisdom, as espoused by parents, teachers, and ministers, prescribes an increase in the number of friendships in order to protect against sexual relations. Third, those most socially acceptable as friends, namely siblings and other close relatives, are among the least acceptable as sexual partners. Finally, the response to question four (see table) indicates that approximately eight out of ten respondents do not agree that cross-sex friendships inevitably become sexual.

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