

Down with “Partners”

RAD Content Library

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Limitations of Labels, Binaries, Norms

How do you describe your intimate relationships? Over the past several decades, there has been a liberal social push away from gender-specific role labels like “boyfriend/girlfriend” or “husband/wife” towards gender-neutral alternatives: significant other, spouse, partner. This was often expressed as solidarity with homosexual couples, who would be outed or othered by indicating the sex or gender of their couple-pair by default. Othering people in homosexual pairings through this language was acknowledged as largely harmful, so even many straight couples moved away from using these labels in favor of gender-neutral alternatives.

For some, like nonbinary folks, gender-specific role labels never even fit the relationship they wanted to describe. It makes little sense to be labeled a “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” when not identifying with either of those (or any) gender categories. These terms signify acknowledgement of or identification with gendered expression and/or behavior, and further reify the gendered norms (appearance, division of labor, harmful social conditioning) that already harm and marginalize. Creating and using less harmful language is important to center the experiences of folks at the margins and to allow better accuracy/granularity in communicating meaning.

Monogamism & The Relationship Escalator

Labels like “partner” typically refer to relationships based on the Relationship Escalator, a default set of norms for how relationships “should” look and progress through defined stages from casual interactions to merging into a shared life and family. This performance of relationships is founded in Monogamism, a system that prioritizes sexual and romantic relationships that adhere to normative social scripts over other types of intimacy. It controls people’s behaviors and desires through amatonormativity (linkage of romance and sex with intimacy), the couple form (two autonomous individuals merging into a couple-unit), and pedestalization of sex (prioritizing sex as a distinguishing factor in a relationship, and valuing relationships that include sex over others).

Not Just Labels, But Behavior

Consider whether using the terminology of “partner” is accurate to describe the way you relate to/with (some) people. When building relationships with others, do you use sex as validation of the authenticity or depth of the relationship? Do you co-identify as a couple-unit? Are you following the steps of the Relationship Escalator, working towards merged finances, co-habitation, marriage, family, and propagation of generational wealth? If so, stop! Partner may indeed describe the relationship role you’re performing. Unfortunately, the social role and expectations described by this term and others like it are harmful for all of us. Consider not only abandoning these words, but changing your behavior so they are no longer even applicable.

So-Called “Cheating”

Relationships following the Relationship Escalator rely on coercion and control to limit each person’s behavior and desires. For example, dating culture begets sexual exclusivity with one

other person as a symbol of care and commitment. This makes a relationship more “serious” and increases the costs to freely dissociate from the other person. Divergence from explicit or implied agreements is deemed “cheating,” which is used to justify even the most extreme forms of violent retaliation. Of course, the concept of cheating relies on the existence of rules that one is “breaking,” and entitlement to exclusive access or claim to someone else’s body and behavior.

Sometimes even desires or fantasies (especially about sex outside the defined relationship) lead to severe retribution for “cheating.” Another insidious application of this control is the concept of “emotional cheating,” where any form of closeness, trust, or intimacy with someone besides the monogamous pair-partner is deemed a threat.

Consent & Coercion (not what you think)

Within the system of Monogamism, nobody can truly consent to monogamy — agreement due to coercion is not a free choice. Rather, we are all funneled into this system and implicitly driven towards its recapitulation, so must actively resist it to even approach non-coercive relating.

Indeed, monogamy and coupledness are advertised as the best or only way to access social and material support. Participating in a couple is bundled with receiving care and support work, access to health care, citizenship, medical and legal decision-making power, and respectability from the mainstream. Coupledness is not merely a personal choice, but active participation in a coercive system that precludes others from critical resources that could mean not only freedom, but survival. Not to mention that awareness of and access to information and resources to alternatives — including, but not limited to, collective housing, intentional co-parenting in never-coupled relationships, medical power of attorney assigned to an unrelated adult, temporary autonomous zones to explore our desires in spaces that actively challenge hetero- and mono-normativity — are few and far between.

Assimilation, Normativity, & Validation-Seeking

Some, especially those in favor of the assimilationist LGBT agenda, may argue that non-heterosexual couples using “partner” language makes their relationships appealing to the mainstream. One avenue towards legitimacy is to perform coupledness: to live as part of a couple-unit, at the expense of autonomy and free association. This typically affords positive attention and recognition in social circles, acknowledgement by families as a pair that will reproduce and continue a family legacy, and targeted marketing from capitalist structures that reinforce the consumer family unit (wedding industry, real estate, suburban home furnishings, luxury goods). These are all hallmarks of couple privilege and can feel validating after being excluded and marginalized for so long. However, seeking validation from Rainbow Capitalism only perpetuates slavery to that system. It harms all of us to base the legitimacy of your body, self, identity in the very structures that keep you from living a free, authentic life.

Antagonizing Polyamory & Polynormativity

Just to be clear, while monogamous couples are the worst offenders, Polyamory does not escape this critique. Polyamory is built on the same foundations of the Relationship Escalator,

amatonormativity, enforcement of commitment, and control of others' behaviors and desires. There may be more flexibility in the interpersonal agreements made by partners in Polyamorous relationships as compared to strict monogamous ones (for example, lack of total sexual exclusivity and more explicit communication about expectations instead of following the default model); however, there is still a clear divide who is "in a relationship" and that confers a near-identical set of social privileges and coercive power dynamics.

Some of the challenges Poly folks rally around — like feeling unable to be "out" to family members about important people in their lives and a lack of State-sanctioned marital rights — are not exclusive to Polyamory nor are they addressed by performance of Monogamism in sets of three, four, or an interconnected web of couples built on control and coercion of "partners" (both directly and through third-party consent). Polyamory does not disrupt mono-normativity; rather, it is an assimilationist approach that simply aims to include more people under its particular brand of oppression. Using "partner" to describe people relating in this way may be accurate — and is still not an effective argument for the legitimacy of "partners" in any worthwhile vision of Queer liberation.

What about the (re-)naming of queerplatonic relationships (QPR) as queerplatonic partners (QPP)? This appropriation of queerplatonic to fit it into a partner model — a framework that necessarily reinforces amatonormativity by privileging romantic and coupled relationships with the social roles discussed above — is antithetical to the original utility of the term. While queerplatonic was originally intended to describe non-normative relationships that do not adhere to the romantic-sexual-couple model, assimilationist neoliberal forces have wrested this terminology from the communities that created it. QPP fails to address the harms of "partner," and even QPR is still a relationship label that differentiates a "type" of relationship to form a de facto social hierarchy. Breaking down the belief that couples and romantic-sexual relationships are the best or only place for many forms of intimacy, vulnerability, and collaborative life projects creates the possibility for any of one's relationships (broadly, as any shared interaction with others) to take on these roles. It can be hard to build relationships that challenge amatonormativity and monogamism, as those ideas are actively forced on us almost every moment from many directions. Do not neutralize this difficult and revolutionary work by falling back on dominant terminology that will be used against all of us! QPP is yet another form of refashioning Queer relationships in the form of straight coupledness, relying on the same harmful structures that keep people trapped in that model. Let's break down the validity of "partners" altogether, instead of finding ways for Queer folks to pander to and recapitulate mono-cis-het-normativity!

Personal Control, Systemic Control

As products of and participants in a Monogamist culture, visions outside this paradigm are rare and often silenced. While it is important to break down Monogamist practices — in part through discrediting oppressive role labels — abolition is about creating something new just as much as destroying the old, harmful system. What does it mean to refuse to label someone as your "partner?" Are you afraid of being unable to control or "veto" their actions, of others not seeing your relationship as valid or important, of being devalued in their eyes? By valuing these things, you prioritize the control and coercion that Monogamism has conditioned you to care about.

Visibility Against the Couple Form

Maybe you already challenge these systems and learned behaviors through Relationship Anarchy or some other practice of non-hierarchical, non-rules-based, autonomy-reinforcing, community-oriented relationship building. That's great! Think about all the ways this creates joy, practical benefits, consistency with other political goals, and inspiration in your life and the lives of others around you. You may be modeling some of the values that will build a better, freer world. If you're doing this, and still using "partner" to describe your relationships, think about what that communicates to others. No matter how radical your intimate relationships are in private, the way you publicly communicate about them is what others will see. Even if you personally believe that the way you use "partner" is different and radical and opposes Straight hegemony, it won't be perceived that way by almost any audience. Instead of inspiring others to anti-couple, anti-monogamist, Queer liberatory action, you are legitimizing the couple form and heterosexual script. By using this word, you lend support to the dominant relationship model and make it even more difficult for others to live outside the prison of normativity that traps them into monogamy, marriage, and Straightness.

Expand the Possibility Space

Imagine relationships built on expansive possibilities, where you do not police others' actions and are not policed yourself. Meet based on a mutual desire to explore each other and build, instead of perpetuate a hierarchy of intimacy based on sex and idealization of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family. Value your friendships. Invest time, care, and energy into these relationships and refuse to acknowledge anyone's dismissal of them as "just friends." Abolishing partners is a critical step to shatter the hold of the couple form on our communities. How many revolutionary bonds and projects have been stymied to protect the couple form, or to accede to demands from a partner? Instead, let's build communities that meet everyone's needs, and work towards a better future together. Quash the tendency towards ownership over one another's bodies, and creation of artificial sexual scarcity that only serves to isolate us from our own bodies and each other. There is no ethical "choice" to participate in this system, and indeed the only option is to actively fight against it.

Changing Language, Looking Forward

No matter how "open" or how visible or how extensively-negotiated, it is the concept of "partners" (and the underlying structure of Monogamism) that keep us from a revolution in Queer relating. Abolish partners, and instead focus on authentic, voluntary relationships for mutual benefit: liberatory relating. Build bonds based on shared political values, community, and mutual aid. Bonds where intimacy is not bound by sex, or social expectations of normativity, or the consumer capitalist nuclear family unit. Categorizing your relationships into "partner" vs. "friend" (or indeed any other established role label) creates a hierarchy of intimacy that harms those at the margins by default, and limits possibilities for all of us. Changing language can be hard, and changing behavior harder still, but it is important to build a new, better future of Queer

relating. Resistance only comes through struggle. Queer relationships are expansive, infinite, and an integral part of the Revolution. How will you invest in this future? Abolish partners!

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