



# Some thoughts on rules, responsibility, ethics, polyamory, and relationships



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So. A few months ago, i was talking to  about his family, and he said something that in one moment really solidified some ideas AMBER and I have been exploring for quite some time, and which illustrated what has always been a fundamental flaw in my relationship with my ex-wife. I've been poking at what he said, and its implications, ever since, and the more I think about it, the more I believe that it represents what is arguably one of the most important axioms of an ethical non-monogamous relationship.

We were talking about relationship rules, and specifically about veto power--a relationship rule which gives one partner the right to "veto" another partner's relationship.

's relationships are based on rules, which explicitly include veto power; superficially, some of the rules between he and his partner resemble many of the rules that existed between me and my ex-wife. My relationship with AMBER is not rules-based; neither of us has any explicit veto power, nor any rules which explicitly govern who we may become romantically involved with or under what circumstances. Instead, our relationship understandings center around the idea that each of us has a responsibility to do what's right for the other, and if either of us fails to take care of our relationship with the other properly, then it will result in consequences that hurt the relationship.

These seem like two different approaches; and as a result of my experiences with my ex-wife, during which she on many occasions would veto relationships that I and my partner had invested a great deal of emotional energy in, sometimes many years after the relationship started, and often for little or no reason she could articulate, I became inherently suspicious of rules-based relationship structures and most especially of veto power.

's relationship with his partner explicitly permits him to veto her relationship, but something he said during the course of our conversation really made it clear just how different in conception, if not in superficial form, his relationship structures are from the ones between my ex-wife and I. He said, "I could veto 's relationship with , but if I did, there would be serious consequences for the relationship between  and I."

That, in a nutshell, is the most crucial difference between his relationship with his partners and my relationship with my ex-wife, and i think it's an attitude that is crucial and fundamental for any ethical relationship at all. Just in that one sentence, i believe  hit upon a key for any reasonable system of ethical relationships.

In my relationship with my ex-wife, there was never that sense of consequence--never an idea that "I am ethically responsible for the consequences of my decisions *even if the rules we agreed to permit me to make those decisions.*" In hindsight, it should have been obvious; when you make a decision that hurts your partner or that breaks your partner's heart, you can reasonably expect that to have consequences regardless of whether or not your partner agreed to those rules or agreed to give you that power. All the

things you do have consequences.

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To some outside observers, it seems like the breaking point in my relationship with my ex-wife came about when i started dating AMBER. Some of the people who've known me well for a long time recognize that the seeds for the end of my our relationship were planted much earlier, when she arbitrarily vetoed a relationship between me and another partner, ELAINE, I'd been seeing for abou two or three years. Not only did she end that relationship, she also explicitly forbade me ever to speak to ELAINE again--not something that was originally a part of our negotiated framework, but something that it's actually quite easy for one partner to enforce on another. ELAINE and I were both devastated by the loss of that relationship; the fact that I had agreed to give my ex-wife the authority to make that decision does not change the reality that if you break your lover's heart, particularly if you break your lover's heart on multiple occasions over an extended period of time, you're going to damage your relationship with your lover, no matter what reason you have for doing it or what your relationship agreements say.

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 understands this on an intuitive level. My ex-wife does not; she maintains to this day that she did nothing wrong and bears no responsibility of any kind whatsoever for any part of our breakup, as everything she did was within the rules. Because of this, the relationship structures that exist in 's family are, in operation, much closer to the structures within my relationship with AMBER than with my relationship with my ex-wife, even though they look similar to the rules between my ex-wife and I, because the behavior of the people in 's family is governed by a sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of their decisions.

The difference between a rules-based relationship and a relationship not based on rules is, I think, far less significant than the difference between a relationship based on responsibility for the consequences of individual decisions and a relationship based on a sense that anything permitted by the rules is okay. It is possible to build a rules-based relationship in which the people involved take responsibility for the consequences of their actions, and I think  and his family have done that. In fact, there are a lot of things about their relationship that both AMBER and I admire, and as we develop our relationship with  and , there are aspects of 's relationship structures we are deliberately and consciously emulating. My own skepticism about veto power aside,  and his family have built something quite remarkable, and a person could do far worse than hope to construct a relationship as well as they have built theirs.

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This stuff has been rattling around in my head for months, but it took [this post](#)  in the Polyamory community to really demonstrate to me how universally applicable the idea of responsibility is. The post concerns the question about whether or not it is socially acceptable to invite one or two members of a poly family to a function without inviting all the members of the family.

Many of the answers focus on manners and etiquette, and quite honestly, i think that misses the point. *It doesn't really matter what the rules of etiquette say.* What matters is that a person who invites part of a poly family but not the entire family to a function is asking the people he's invited to choose between him and their partners. By extending the invitation, he's saying "I want you to make a choice: you may spend this time with me, or you may spend this time with your sweeties, but not both."

Does he have the right to do that? Sure. A host may choose to invite or not invite anyone to a function as he pleases. But the law of unintended consequence is as universal and inescapable as the law of gravity; and in this case, the unintended consequence of inviting only some members of a family to an event is that if you make a person choose between you and someone he cares about enough times, eventually he's going to stop choosing you.

Etiquette permits you to invite who you please, just as our negotiated rules permitted my ex-wife to veto who she pleased. In both cases, though, the decisions carry a price tag, and the person making those decisions is responsible for those consequences regardless of what the rules say. Invite only part of a family often enough, and you will eventually hurt your friendship with those people--people don't like being put in a position where they have to choose between friends and partners. Veto enough people and sooner or later you're going to break your lover's heart, and you will eventually hurt your relationship--people don't like having their hearts broken. In each case, it's not the rules that are the most relevant; it's *whether or not you accept responsibility for the consequences of the decisions you make.*

Consequence is what shapes relationships. Responsibility for those consequences, not adherence to the rules, is what defines an ethical person.

TAGS: [polyamory](#).



24 comments



April 7 2005, 16:33:23 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Rules that are used to \*hurt\* your partner (or your partner's partner) aren't rules anymore - they are weapons. When you love someone and they love you, you have a responsibility to them, for their happiness and well-being. C and I both have 'veto' power - but I wouldn't \*use\* it (and neither would he) unless it were a situation where I thought the other relationship was harmful to him or to our relationship. And I CERTAINLY wouldn't just say, "No, sorry, it's over for you, your wings are clipped" without explaining my feelings and concerns.

As my sage father explained to me long ago: you can do whatever you like in this world - as long as you are prepared to pay the consequences.



[tacit](#)

April 14 2005, 19:13:08 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

*"When you love someone and they love you, you have a responsibility to them, for their happiness and well-being."*

Yep. This seems intuitively obvious in hindsight, but I think it's often easy to miss when someone feels frightened or threatened or insecure. The irony is that a person who feels threatened or afraid is most likely to do things that hurt his partner...which is most likely to lead to precisely the thing that person is afraid of.

   
[April 14 2005, 19:22:31 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Sounds like my pets when they're hurt - they run and hide, and hiss and spit and try to claw me, even though I'm trying to help them. It's instinctive to protect yourself when you're hurting - but eventually you either mature past that, or you don't.

   
[April 7 2005, 16:47:52 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

just...wow.

\*memoried\*

   
[April 7 2005, 16:47:56 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

In the words of my stepdaughter, "I love you. Can I have your babies???" ;^) Seriously, though, I think you have hit the nail on the head, and I may ask for permission to send some of this on to that same person I mentioned in the other thread.

   
[April 7 2005, 18:16:20 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

NO! They are MY babies to have!! I will VETO YOU.

\*ehem\*

   
[April 7 2005, 18:31:07 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Hee hee. Thanks for that most-needed chuckle this morning.

 [tacit](#)  
[April 14 2005, 19:14:44 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

You certainly may! :)

**More than fair.**

   
[April 7 2005, 16:58:12 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

One of the things I struggle with most when talking about my relationship (and its problems) with others is that we run into the "Well, it isn't \_FAIR\_," complaint often. And yes, there's some rationale to this; just because my husband is still seeing his girlfriend after I broke up with her does not mean that it is unfair for

him to ask [not demand, not threaten, not force, just ask] me to see no one else. What you have just illustrated I think makes it very clear; the consequences of my seeing someone else far outweigh any "fairness" in the transaction.

   
April 7 2005, 17:00:01 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

bravo!

   
April 7 2005, 17:14:53 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Ooooooo... I just love seeing the wiggle do its work!!! I seem to recall trying to have a similar conversation with you and your ex about this a while back (years?) ... it's so wonderful to see you coming to understand this. Now, if only she would - but I'm doubtful of that happening anytime soon.

**[a note on veto...](#)**  
   
April 7 2005, 17:19:39 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

We have veto in our triad but there is a limit on it; after a relationship hits that, it is too late to veto. Veto does always have consequences.

   
April 7 2005, 18:17:10 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Carved-in-stone rules don't work for pretty much anything, particularly relationships. Our "rules" are more common-sense statements and the only explicit ones are "Introduce me," "Come home" and "Don't bring any new health problems with you." Anything other than that is open for discussion.

I am very sensitive to alienating other partners. I'm just not going to make some unilateral decision without considering everybody involved. It's my relationship, too, even if I'm not the least bit interested in it being a sexual one.

And, just for the record, your problem with "the rules" started long before ELAINE.

  **tacit**  
April 14 2005, 19:20:38 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Yep, that's true. In fact, those rules became a problem early on in the relationship between you and I, when my ex sought to place limitations on what each of us was permitted to feel as well as what we were permitted to do. And even staying within those rules didn't, I think, give her the security she was looking for.

   
April 7 2005, 18:49:21 UTC  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Very interesting concepts.   and I are in the middle of contemplating adding a third person to our "engagements" and this touches on a few issues I've been pondering lately.

As always, excellent ideas.



April 7 2005, 20:01:32 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Food for thought and a very astute articulation of the difference between law-based ethics and anarchy-based ethics. A lot of people don't understand that in an anarchic system the lack of rules is made up for /and then some/ by a sense of personal responsibility and enlightened self-interest.



April 7 2005, 22:34:24 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

*In each case, it's not the rules that are the most relevant; it's whether or not you accept responsibility for the consequences of the decisions you make.*

*Consequence is what shapes relationships. Responsibility for those consequences, not adherence to the rules, is what defines an ethical person.*

Well said. This strikes me as true not just of romantic relationships, nor even just of relationships, but of all commitments, both the contract (promise) kind and the open-ended (existential) kind.



April 8 2005, 04:56:47 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Great thoughts. So, I assume this will all go into a book at some point...

We reserve veto for the most serious of situations. It's certainly nothing to take lightly as the consequences are very hefty.

Of course, that means that a "veto" is essentially the same thing as saying, "this stops or I stop being involved with you."

It's happened once and it took us nearly two years to get our relationship straightened out. I can only hope that our relationship and understanding of each other is such that it will not happen again. I don't believe I could recover.



[tacit](#)

April 14 2005, 19:24:36 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

As a matter of fact, I am still working on a book about polyamory--and as I write, it seems the idea of consequence and responsibility for consequence is turning into an ongoing theme. :)

The idea of a "veto" in the sense of "I can tell you to stop doing X" and a "veto" in the sense that "if you do X, you and I will no longer be involved" seem similar at first glance, but I believe they're actually quite different, and will often produce different results. The former approach to veto seeks to place limits on another person; the latter, only on one's self. This represents, I think, two fundamentally different approaches to relationships.



April 9 2005, 03:05:58 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Great post, written with exceptional clarity--thinking clearly during murky relationship situations is always tricky.

**"...better have a damn good reason for doing so."**



April 10 2005, 00:04:54 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I agree that veto is not to be taken lightly. It's too bad for your ex that she didn't wield her veto more judiciously.

One thing that having "rules" does is give a base of expectation. I'd much rather ask permission than beg forgiveness. We renegotiate the rules pretty regularly, but other than for safety, it's really about knowing where the comfort level of the other partner is. It's not a way to control each other. It's a way to avoid unnecessarily hurting each other.



April 13 2005, 22:05:48 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Yay! I said something that wasn't just a random stream of syllables!!! ;-)



**tacit**

April 14 2005, 19:08:07 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Thumbspool? Instruction refrains outcome eyebolt graduate vendor!



May 6 2005, 18:46:19 UTC

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

This gives me food for thought. I've had this type of conversation with my husband:

Me: "Well, I'm doing things within our rules/agreements."

Him: "You're talking about rules, and I'm talking about how this makes me *feel*."

I was not terribly sympathetic at the time, but I probably should have been more so. I plan to bring this topic up to him tonight.

(Just thought I should also note that we have very few rules, and "veto power" is not one of them.)