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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

First of all, this book is the product of participation. Your voice counts! I'd love to hear what you have to say. So, please tell me what you think about this book, or your observations and questions about unconventional relationships in general: **OffEscalator.com/Contact**

Also, this book is a launching point for a variety of resources about unconventional intimate relationships. Some of these resources are my own, and some are offered by other authors, thinkers and communities. You can find these resources on the website for the Off the Escalator project: **OffEscalator.com/Resources**

This is only the beginning. This book is the first in a series of books. I collected more than enough valuable information in my initial survey to support at least two other books.

As of this writing, Book 2, *10 Common Questions About Unconventional Relationships*, is already written and will be published later in 2017.

Book 3, *Off the Escalator, In the Closet* has largely been assembled. Due out in 2018, it will address how people navigate being public or private about their

unconventional relationships. Also, it will explore how anyone can help make the world a friendlier place for unconventional relationships.

To learn more about this project, and to participate, please subscribe to the Off the Escalator email list: **OffEscalator.com/Updates**

Twitter: @OffTheEscalator

Facebook page: Facebook.com/OffEscalator

This book also is designed to support discussion and interaction. At the end of each part there is a list of discussion questions. If you wish, you may answer these questions online: **OffEscalator.com/Resources/Book1Questions**

On the website, you will also be able to take surveys, quizzes, or share your own story. You can answer anonymously if you like. Just be aware that by engaging in this online interaction, you grant the *Off the Escalator* project permission to use your responses in future books and other content.

However, you don't need to go online or share any information in order to take what you learn in this book further. Simply considering the discussion questions offered in this book on your own, or using them to start conversations with others, can prove enlightening — or at least, interesting.

Each quote from my survey that is included in this book represents a snapshot in time, specifically, from 2013-14. Life moves on. Undoubtedly, many quotes no longer reflect the current circumstances, relationships or views of participants. I cannot rewrite the history of what participants originally said, but I will post online an updated version of my survey. Anyone will be able to take this, including prior participants who wish to offer an update.

This book includes a glossary, since words used to describe traditional relationships often don't suit unconventional relationships well.

Please support this independent project. See **OffEscalator.com** for ideas. Thanks!

PREFACE:

THE STORY OF THE ESCALATOR

What is a relationship?

In the broadest sense, we have relationships with everyone we know or interact with to any significant extent: neighbors, friends and coworkers; teammates, classmates and fellow volunteers; parents, siblings and children. Any of these relationships might feel quite close and important, or not. It all depends.

However, those types of connections usually are not what most people mean when they say they're "in a relationship." Instead, that loaded little phrase typically implies a very specific type of relationship: one that involves the intimacy of affection, sex and romance. One that looks and works a certain way, and that generally is deemed especially important.

The ubiquitous phrase, "in a relationship," tends to evoke a familiar storyline with well-known characters and symbols: a fairy tale with a happy ending, or at least a romantic comedy.

There's a name for the common set of social norms that shape intimate relationships in most Western societies: the *Relationship Escalator*. I did not coin this term, nor have I been able to track down its precise origins.¹ However, this term has arisen over the last several years, mostly among people who needed to find ways to talk about how intimate relationships, and society, are changing.

In a nutshell, the traditional Relationship Escalator looks like this: two (and only two) people progress from initial attraction and dating, to becoming sexually and

romantically involved and exclusive, to adopting a shared identity as a couple, to moving in together and otherwise merging their lives — all the way up to marriage and kids, 'til death do you part.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this approach. The Relationship Escalator is popular for a reason: it works quite well for many people.

It's just not the only game in town.

There is a broad spectrum of intimate relationships. This book is about the ways that people are stepping off this Escalator to explore unconventional approaches to intimate relationships. If you're curious about what these options are, or whether they might apply to you or to people you know, this book can be your guide. You'll hear what hundreds of people have to say about their unconventional relationships, in their own words.

But first, in order to understand what makes some intimate relationships less conventional, it helps to have a very clear picture of what a very traditional relationship might look like. I've had the opportunity to hear many people describe what they believe makes their own relationships unconventional — that's the process which formed the basis of this book. This insight clarified several common conventions which shape how intimate relationships work, and how they tend to fit in with the rest of society and life.

The trouble is, talking about abstract social norms easily gets dry and tedious. People and stories are far more interesting. So, as a backdrop to the real stories of unconventional relationships featured throughout this book, here I offer the fictional tale of a highly traditional relationship — one that rides the Relationship Escalator right from the beginning, and all the way to the top. I will occasionally refer back to this story throughout this book, for contrast.

In the story below, the **bold text** calls attention to the many terms, milestones, value judgments, expectations, obligations, tradeoffs, benefits and privileges commonly associated with Escalator relationships. It can be surprising to realize how thoroughly Relationship Escalator norms are embedded into almost every part of life (in this example, life in the U.S.).

Bundled together and brought into focus, the many indicators of the Relationship Escalator may sound odd since they're often taken for granted. By calling attention to things commonly associated with social norms, I am not trying to denigrate them. "Normal" does not equal "thoughtless" or "boring."

Some of the Escalator indicators noted in this story might sound old-fashioned. However, that is part of what makes them traditional. Society keeps changing, but some norms have surprising staying power.

Real life is always more nuanced than social norms. Thus, few relationships on the more traditional end of the spectrum include all of the indicators noted in this story. Also, many of these indicators (such as falling in love, living together and building a family) also can be found in relationships that are quite unconventional.

Still, it's common for intimate relationships to hit many of these familiar, time-honored marks — or for people to hope that their relationships will look rather like this:

*Chris meets Dana, and they feel a strong spark of mutual attraction. They start talking and hanging out a bit, and then they go out on **dates** — just the two of them, quite **romantic**. They kiss. They start feeling excited.*

*More dates follow — so now they **are dating**. They start **having sex**. When they are out together, they often hold hands or engage in other socially acceptable **public displays of affection**. They develop regular patterns of daily communication, with lots of phone calls, texting and social media interaction. As they **fall in love**, they obsessively think and fantasize about each other.*

*Things **get serious** when they begin to **tell each other, "I love you."** That's when they start to feel **committed**. Of course, this commitment involves **monogamy**: they stop dating others, having sex and flirting with others, and frequenting bars alone. Their **online dating profiles vanish**. They become **Facebook official** by tagging each other as being "in a relationship with..."*

*At this point, Chris and Dana start considering themselves **a couple**. They start **saying "we"** a lot. When speaking to others, they start referring to each other as "**my boyfriend**" or "**my girlfriend**." And between themselves, they start using **terms of endearment**, such as "honey" or "babe," at least as often as they address each other by name.*

*As their emotional investment deepens, they come to feel somewhat **possessive** of each other. So they feel, and sometimes act, jealous whenever somebody else seems interested in, or interesting to, their partner. They're also uncomfortable about each other's prior relationships, so it's helpful that they are **not close to their exes**.*

*Chris and Dana now **spend almost all of their free time together**. This means they see their friends far less often, but they assume their friends understand and support this.*

Other people start **referring to them as a unit**: “Chris & Dana.” They become each other’s **default companion** for almost any occasion, especially high-profile events like holiday parties, where invitations ask for a +1. They **meet each other’s family and friends** — although several of their single friends lament how little they see them these days. Now, Chris & Dana **socialize primarily with other committed couples**.

After a few months of serious dating, Chris & Dana do what they’ve always assumed **must happen next**: they **settle down and move in together**. They **share a bed** and start to **merge their finances**.

They **display each other’s photo at work**, and they **feel free to note the existence of their relationship** in casual conversations, even with coworkers or strangers. This is **not considered oversharing**, even though everyone assumes that Chris & Dana have sex with each other.

They start **making all major decisions together**, and many minor ones too. They discuss or at least **assume a long-term shared future**. They become **mutually accountable** about their behavior and how they spend their time. They grow certain that they really are **The One** for each other.

When Chris gets accepted into a prestigious graduate program in another state, Dana **makes a career sacrifice** so they can move and stay together. They support each other’s goals, interests and dreams, which fortunately mostly align well; the ones that **don’t align so well mostly fade away**.

One night, Chris **pops the question** to Dana over a candlelit dinner, and Dana enthusiastically accepts. **Flashing their new rings**, they publicly announce their **engagement** with much excitement, and they are **unanimously congratulated**.

They easily acquire a **marriage license**. Their **wedding is held in a church** and is **attended by many friends and family**, who all bear **gifts**.

Chris & Dana save their money — helped, in part, by **marital tax breaks**. Eventually, they are able to purchase a home together.

When they **have children**, there is **no question about their right or ability to parent**. They feel immense pride in having created a **real family**. Their **relatives show respect** for, and take pride and interest in, Chris & Dana’s marriage and family.

All along, Chris & Dana’s relationship has felt completely **natural and meant to be**, as if their lives could not have unfolded any other way.

Inevitably, Chris & Dana's marriage is occasionally troubled by conflict and resentment. From time to time they hurt each other's feelings, and they chafe at each other's annoying personal and household habits.

Sometimes they yearn for something different — usually silently since they **fear growing apart**. They believe that the only way to significantly change their relationship would be to **break up** — which would entail **divorce**, major life disruption, and stigma for them and their kids. That would be a **failure**. The thought of **being alone** (without their **other half**) and having to **start over** fills them with dread.

Chris & Dana never consider having other sexual partners, even though sometimes their sexual connection feels a bit stale. **Fidelity** is important to them, so they remain **faithful** to each other, even after many years together. They still share affection and sex. They still love each other a lot — perhaps not with the passion of their initial romance, but in a way that remains mutual and genuine.

Overall, their life together feels fruitful. Its patterns feel familiar and comforting, and not just to them. **Other people easily understand how to interact with Chris & Dana**; they know what to expect from the couple, and what's appropriate.

They still each have connections with friends, although their friendships mostly don't feel as close or important as they once did.

When Chris has a sudden heart attack, Dana is immediately notified as **next of kin**. At the hospital, Dana need only mention that they are married in order to **attend Chris' bedside** and **make medical decisions** while Chris is incapacitated. Fortunately, Chris makes a full recovery, with a large part of the costs covered by the **spousal health insurance** that is a benefit of Dana's employment.

Their kids grow up and move out, and the **empty nesters** peaceably share middle and old age. They develop some separate hobbies and renew and deepen ties with friends and community.

After many years, Dana grows frail and ill. Chris, their children and their grandchildren lovingly **provide care and support** to the very end. At Dana's funeral, everyone offers condolences to Chris and praises their **perfect marriage**.

And for Chris, who'd never wanted any other kind of life and love, it was indeed pretty perfect. After all, they'd done everything **right**, achieving the kind of **happily ever after** that **everyone should hope for**.

*Like many people, Dana neglected to create a formal will. So after Dana's death, Chris **automatically inherits, with no legal questions or tax hassles**, most of Dana's estate, and assumes sole ownership of their joint assets. Also, Chris begins to receive **survivor benefits from Social Security**, as well as Dana's **pension income**. Such material things don't make up for missing Dana fiercely every day, but they do help Chris get through the remainder of life.*

...Again, Chris and Dana's story probably doesn't precisely mirror your own relationships or those of people you know. Few relationships are 100% on the Escalator in every detail. Usually, it's a matter of degrees: how much a specific relationship resembles the form, trajectory, milestones and goals associated with the Relationship Escalator.

There is considerable variation on the Escalator. The details of what it looks like, and the amount of pressure to ride it, vary by nation, generation, culture and subculture.

Also, the Escalator is a bit of a moving target, thanks to social evolution. For instance, these days, many couples manage to pretty much ride the Escalator without getting married, having kids, or being socially joined at the hip. And now in many countries (including, as of this writing and for the time being, the U.S.), any two unrelated adults can legally marry, regardless of sexual orientation.

That said, the Relationship Escalator does not exist in a vacuum. Race, class, religion, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability and similar types of context can color what it means to ride the Escalator. That's because social norms tend to accommodate social privilege — a thorny topic explored in this book.

Part 1 of this book examines how the Relationship Escalator works, and why some people step off the Escalator.

People ride the Escalator for many reasons. Often, this is a conscious, deliberate choice that honors innate desires, preferences and goals. It can support the kind of life that many people wish to lead and help them be the kind of people they wish to be. This traditional structure fits and serves many people well. Usually, its tradeoffs feel acceptable.

Meanwhile, some people hop on the Escalator without being fully aware that they have other valid options.

While the Escalator comes with steep obligations, it also offers many perks that can be difficult to achieve otherwise. As the amount of bold text in Chris and Dana's story indicates, society has developed myriad ways to accommodate, encourage, recognize, support and favor Escalator relationships. This creates a strong incentive

Stepping Off the Relationship Escalator

to ride the Escalator, even when it might not be such a great fit. It's also a big reason why it can be so daunting to step off the Relationship Escalator.

Nevertheless, many people do step off the Escalator. Here's why...