

ANET's Gay Men's Relationships Survey: Qualitative Analysis

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Introduction

This paper reports on the main findings of the qualitative component of an online survey of gay men's relationships conducted by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO).

Of the 1521 people who responded to the survey, 700 (46%) responded to some or all of the 10 open-ended questions in the survey. These questions covered: the content of relationship agreements; communication strategies with partners (including communication about sex, sexually transmissible infections and HIV); the positive and negative aspects of relationships; and the most important issues for gay men in relationships in general. As negotiation of relationship agreements was a central feature of the survey, participants were also asked if they or their partner had ever broken a sexual agreement and, if so, how the breach was dealt with.

The analysis presented here specifically focuses on the content, negotiation and function of relationship agreements, communication between partners, responses to breaches of agreements, and what men considered to be the key issues for contemporary gay relationships. The written responses were read to identify patterns, inconsistencies and themes. The analysis was informed by the themes emergent from the written responses and relevant literature on gay men, HIV and relationships.

Findings

Relationship agreements

The survey respondents provided a range of responses to the question: '*what things do you and your partner have agreements about?*' These included finances, domestic matters, holiday planning, social activities, work/life balance, communication and sex inside and outside of the relationship. The majority of responses addressed agreements about sex, HIV and STIs (sexually transmissible infections). This is not surprising given the overall nature of the survey and the fact that the information was being solicited by an HIV/AIDS organisation. However, agreements about sex, HIV and STIs are also likely to have prominence in gay men's relationships given the relatively common practice of 'open' or sexually- non-exclusive relationships among gay men. Within the context of a variety of relationship forms, some monogamous and some open, gay men have needed to develop a range of strategies to reduce the risks of HIV and STIs while also protecting the primacy of their regular partner (Hickson et al., 1992)

Sex inside and outside of relationships

Participants used a range of rules and strategies to manage HIV, STIs and sex inside and outside of a primary relationship including defining:

- Whether sex with other people (casual partners) was acceptable
- Where sex could or should take place (e.g. at home, at sex venues)
- What types of sex or sexual practices were acceptable or desirable within the relationship
- What types of sex or sexual practices were acceptable or desirable outside the relationship (e.g. kissing, oral sex, anal sex)
- What counted as safe sex and how this was ensured

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- Whether repeat encounters with casual partners were acceptable
- What degree of emotional involvement was required between primary partners or acceptable with casual partners outside the relationship
- Whether casual partners could be brought home
- Whether sex with casual partners could only happen if both primary partners were present (e.g. threesomes, group sex)
- What was required to meet the sexual or emotional needs of both primary partners (e.g. frequency of sex, time spent together, providing mutual support)

Open relationships necessitated the use of rules and strategies to protect the primary relationship from 'emotional infidelity' and to reduce the risks of HIV and STIs being 'brought in' to the relationship from outside. For example:

Condom use for anal sex with partners outside of our relationship. No sexual partners to be brought back to our home.

We can have sex with other guys in sex venues. Not to bring anyone home alone, not sleep over, or any romantic thing (cinema, dinner with [the] other person).

Some men recognised the potential for outside sexual relations to produce tension, distrust and jealousy and therefore adopted strategies to avoid these problems. For example, some men described trying to ensure that sex outside the relationship did not result in either partner having unmet sexual needs, and of prioritising sex within the relationship:

Either of us can not bring any guy back into the house and we prefer not to tell one another when we have been with someone else, so no one can be jealous. If I want sex and he has been with someone, or the other way round, we have to go again, ha ha...

...I have expectations that the sexual needs of us as a couple should be met before either of us has sex outside the relationship, i.e. he should not have sex with others if I am unrequited by him...

Other men sought to avoid feelings of jealousy and mistrust by agreeing to always tell each other about outside sex. Conversely others sought the same outcome by agreeing not to discuss sex with casual partners:

Not to engage in sex with other men without first discussing it with the other, and then only by agreement.

Our bedroom is our space and casual partners are never allowed in there, we also don't discuss encounters so there is not jealousy.

Although open relationships are to a degree normalised in gay sexual cultures these data underline that such relationships are not always easy. Participants suggested that non-exclusive relationship agreements often require a significant amount of negotiation as well as a range of strategies to identify and manage potential problems and tensions.

Men also had agreements about sex within their relationships, including committing to talking openly about sexual needs and desires, preferences for sexual positions and practices, and agreements about using condoms or not:

...always talking about problems or issues we have with each other, no silent treatment. Be up front about things that bug me/him. Say no when you don't want to have sex, and don't get shitty if I say no to you".

Using condoms in our relationship and other relationships we may engage in.

Monogamy

Contemporary gay relationships are often characterised as being innovative, having a diversity of relationship forms and redefining acceptable or desirable forms of support and intimacy (Adam, 2006; Weeks et al., 2001). Unlike heterosexual relationships, monogamy and sexual exclusivity are not prescribed or expected within all gay relationships. This does not mean that all gay men reject monogamy, but rather that monogamy is one option in a range of relationship alternatives. In the relationships survey, over a third of men who were currently in a relationship said they were in a monogamous relationship. For some this was established through an explicit agreement, while for others monogamy was assumed rather than explicitly negotiated. In some cases 'monogamy' included being able to have threesomes or group sex together as a couple but not to have casual sex on their own. This 'stretching' of the meaning and practice of monogamy is indicative of the ways in which acceptable forms of intimacy can be redefined within contemporary gay relationships (Adam, 2006; Weeks et al., 2001).

Some participants described their relationship as monogamous but said they either knew or suspected that their partner had had sex with another person. Similarly, some of the men who were in monogamous relationships said they had had a casual sexual encounter outside the relationship. When these occasional infidelities were discovered or disclosed, they did not necessarily result in the relationship ending or being renegotiated as an open relationship. Adam (2006) has argued that monogamy operates for many gay men as an 'accomplishment' and 'provisional rule of thumb' rather than a fixed rule. However, for other survey participants, infidelity was still regarded as a serious breach of the relationship that could lead to conflict or ending the relationship.

Communication

A number of researchers have highlighted the importance of communication, trust and honesty in establishing and maintaining effective relationship agreements (Kippax et al., 1993; Prestage et al., 2006). The survey asked participants a range of questions related to communication with partners, including how they communicated with their partners about significant issues, including sex, HIV and STIs. Not surprisingly, face-to-face talk or talking over the phone were the most common forms of communication. Some participants also used email and text messaging and a small number said they used body language and sex to communicate with their partners.

Some participants set aside particular times and contexts to talk or discuss issues within the relationships e.g. over a glass of wine, before dinner, or in bed. While most men highlighted communication as essential to their relationship, it was not always clear what they believed counted as good or effective communication. However, some respondents did identify factors they believed facilitated communication. These included: patience; the capacity to stay calm; willingness to compromise; listening; being non-judgmental; using questions to tease out an issue; honesty, and; openness.

Others identified factors that in some cases worked against effective communication. These included age differences; cultural differences; a lack of confidence; and arguing. While most men said they were relatively comfortable talking to their partners some said it was difficult to discuss sex and in particular sex outside the relationship:

We communicate very well except for sex outside the relationship.

We talk together – although on issues relating to sex this is sometimes difficult... interesting it seemed easier to talk about early in the relationship. Sometimes we email each other to talk about difficult issues – this is probably because we had a long distance relationship for several years.

The above quote also indicates that communication strategies vary over the course of a relationship and that direct face-to-face talk may not be appropriate (or possible) in all circumstances.

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The survey asked specifically about strategies participants or their partners had used to raise issues like HIV, STIs and sex with other partners. Frequently men advocated being direct and straightforward:

I'm fairly direct. It's not the kind of conversation you can really ease into, making a comfortable segue between chatting about how pleasant the weather has been, and how unpleasant herpes is, for example.

Others offered a range of alternative strategies for bringing up potentially awkward or controversial issues, for example sex with other partners. Strategies included weaving them into a broader conversation about sexual preferences, past relationships, and the experiences of peers and friends. Others said they had left sexual health brochures lying around the house or used a relevant media article or a sexual fantasy to initiate the conversation:

We were shagging after having had lunch with a friend of ours who we both know the other finds attractive. I told him that I fantasise about the other guy fucking him, and he said that he would like that. I said that we should organise it, and he agreed...

When it came to identifying how to raise issues like HIV status, STIs and condom use for the first time, participants commonly advocated discussion either before ever having sex or when it seemed likely the other person would become a boyfriend or regular partner. The timeframe varied for establishing whether a relationship was likely to develop or become an ongoing fixture. For some men relationships were established and announced after a few dates while for others this took a few months. This could therefore affect when respondents felt it was appropriate to discuss issues such as HIV or STIs. Participants also suggested they would discuss HIV testing or STIs if either partner wanted to stop using condoms. While some men explicitly mentioned the need for HIV and STI testing prior to any unprotected anal sex, most responses did not provide this level of detail. It is therefore hard to determine whether agreements to stop using condoms were negotiated and linked to HIV test results and how many only involved the verbal disclosure of status and trusting each other's perceived status:

Always practise safe sex until you decide to get more serious and then have discussion about ur relationship and the sex that goes with it.

It was common for participants to see HIV, condom use, STIs and sex within and outside of the relationship as important issues to discuss early in the relationship. In contrast, only a few participants mentioned the need to revisit these issues on a regular or ongoing basis:

When we first had a sexual experience: safe sex was immediately discussed. I did not ask about previous lovers or experiences, we talked about safe practices. I suggest DO NOT WAIT. The first time you have a sexual encounter; talk about STI's. Do not stop talking about when the first encounter is over; make normal part of the discussion. (*emphasis in the original)*

Implicit agreements

The survey asked participants if they had ever been in a relationship that had an agreement about sex that was not a clear spoken agreement. Of the men who answered this question 27% said they had been in a relationship with this kind of agreement. The closed question was followed by an open-ended question that asked men to describe how the implicit agreement was negotiated. Responses included: body language; using actions rather than words; intuition: trust, and; having a general openness:

Body language and a "vibe" that I get.

We just sort of understood each other.

By talking about our views of sex, by the end the unspoken agreement was clear.

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While the question specifically asked men to describe how the agreement was established, a significant number of participants chose to describe the effect of having an unspoken agreement rather than describing how it was negotiated:

Badly. It taught me that agreements need to be spoken.

In the past I have been in relationships where the agreement was implied, both too shy or scared to talk about it openly. It was built on trust, and ultimately I was let down, there it is very important to me to discuss issues up front now.

I didn't think it was necessary to tell partners that I expected them to be faithful. Unfortunately all my past boyfriends have cheated on me.

The absence of a clear spoken agreement was commonly seen as a mistake – something that resulted in needs not being met, relationship conflict, mistrust and, in some cases, relationship breakdown. A study by Wagner et al., (2000) of men in serodiscordant couples found that men in explicitly monogamous or explicitly 'open' relationships experienced greater consensus on relationship issues as well as greater affection and sexual satisfaction than couples who had assumed agreements or were secretive about sex outside the relationship. In other words, having a clear spoken agreement was more important than what type of agreement a couple had.

Broken agreements

While most participants agreed that communication was valued in their relationships, communication could be difficult, particularly for those who said they had experienced a breached agreement. Men were asked to describe how they handled a breach, whether it was talked about, resolved or resulted in an end to the relationship or an alteration to the agreement.

Some described talking about and working through the issues generated by the breach and recommitting to the original agreement. A small number said they changed their agreement as a result, in some cases making it more open but in other cases deciding to be monogamous. Others felt unable to discuss the breach and said they just ignored the situation. In some cases, ignoring the breach had resulted in the relationship ending:

My partner had sex with other men, and decided not to tell me about it. When I found out, I broke off the relationship as he'd broken our agreement and violated my trust.

Some described talking about a broken agreement but ultimately felt the breach had generated mistrust and ongoing conflict within the relationship. Other men said they were too afraid to tell their partners about breaking their agreement, as they believed it would lead to conflict and possibly end the relationship.

A few participants said that they or their partner had engaged in unsafe sex with another partner and had therefore had to reintroduce condoms into their primary relationship for a time. While many did report negative consequences of broken agreements some reported more positive outcomes. For example, a broken agreement could create an opportunity to discuss broader relationship issues, clarify agreements and in some cases rewrite or recommit to the agreement:

Had sex with another guy. I told him about it and he was initially upset but after a while we decided to free things up and have never been happier.

After at least 24 hrs of fighting and time to think some things over we didn't change the agreement but had a better understanding of it and more of what we want from our sex life.

Important issues for gay relationships

Participants were asked what they considered to be the most important issues for contemporary gay relationships. Participants identified a range of issues including:

- Discrimination and homophobia
- Legal recognition
- Social recognition
- Marriage/civil unions
- STI's, safe sex, HIV
- Love
- Drugs
- Monogamy
- Open relationships
- Children

The majority of participants identified HIV and safe sex and the absence of legal and social recognition for gay relationships as the most important issues for contemporary gay relationships. Many participants believed the lack of recognition created significant barriers to maintaining strong and committed sexual partnerships:

Dealing with homophobic people and the rest of society. Trying to keep a relationship alive while dealing with all that can be very difficult.

Safe sex. The ability to have children. Having relationship recognised by our families and communities.

Marriage for sure, pretty much because it gives us the same rights other long-term relationships enjoy and also it marks the acceptance of gay couples in society. Sort of like a seal of approval removing the ideology that our relationships are deviant. Also adoption and child rearing in any sense. I would sure love to have kids someday and to me I feel love is more important than gender.

While there was general agreement among participants that legal and social recognition of gay relationships was important, some participants did not support the pursuit of same-sex marriage to achieve formal relationship recognition. Others suggested formal recognition of gay relationships needed to accommodate the differences of gay relationships from heterosexual norms:

Safe sex will be a major concern for gay men for many years to come. I think that an important issue for gay men is that of HIV/AIDS and what can be done to support research into eradicating this devastating illness. Secondly I think that gay men should explore alternative relationship structures to challenge broader society and the presuppositions of the heterosexual orthodoxy that maintains enforced monogamy.

Conclusion

A significant number of respondents either desired or believed they were in monogamous relationships. This may be partially explained by the fact that a high proportion (62.5% of the total sample) was aged 35 years or younger *and* were in relationships of less than six months duration. Previous Australian research found that younger gay men (35 years old or younger) were more likely to have a monogamy agreement, and that men with monogamy agreements were more likely to be in relationships of shorter duration (less than 12 months) (Prestage et al., 2008). It is possible that younger men either have more traditional views of relationships than older men or that they simply have a preference for monogamy until they have gained more relationship experience. As men age and their experience grows, they may be more likely to experiment with different relationship forms.

Kippax et al., (1993) argued that to be effective, negotiated safety agreements (that allow unprotected anal intercourse between regular partners) need trust and honesty, yet trust is often assumed to be a concomitant of love and intimacy rather than something that needs to be discussed and negotiated. Indeed, some men perceive negotiation and discussion as antithetical to trust (Willig, 1997).

The data from the open-ended questions presented here indicate that while HIV, STIs and sex inside and outside of relationships are significant issues, so too are love, careers, finances and domestic compatibility. Legal and social recognition of relationships appears to be important to gay men and is perhaps neglected in HIV or STI-focused analyses. Communication, trust, and honesty are highly valued, however what these terms mean and how they are used (particularly when making or renegotiating agreements) is not always clear and needs further investigation. It is also likely that at some stages in their lives gay men may need access to information and resources that assist them to build skills to communicate with partners, decide which relationship forms are appropriate for them, or deal with broken agreements.

It would appear that issues such as social and legal recognition of relationships are seemingly distinct from issues such as HIV/STI prevention and therefore are outside the remit of education and prevention. However, as the data from this survey attest, relationships and relationship agreements are multifaceted, and it is unlikely that gay men experience the social, sexual, emotional elements of their relationships (as well as considerations of HIV, STIs or safe sex) as distinct categories. Paying attention to the emotions, desires, legal conditions and cultural meanings that frame gay men's partnerships provides a fuller understanding of the conditions under which men form, negotiate and break agreements and relationships. Understanding the position of HIV and STIs in relation to these related and at times competing relationship priorities can only benefit HIV education and prevention.

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