



Negotiating Change in Gay Men's Agreements

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Existing research on change in agreements:

- Agreements are not static.
- Recognition that many men move across different types of agreements with the same partner and across different partners.
- Most relationships start monogamously and are sometimes then re-negotiated later. Re-negotiation is done through trial and experimentation.
- Communicating about changing agreements can be difficult and potentially a source of conflict.
- Research gap: In depth analysis of how and why agreements change.

Results

- Change in agreements was a prevalent theme across the data set.
- 3 key issues in relation to this:
 - 1) Agreement change conflict
 - 2) Clarifying Agreements
 - 3) Reasons why agreements changed

Background

- Agreements are how gay men structure their relationships.
- Agreements usually manifest in the form of implicit or explicit rules or guidelines. They are in place to protect the 'specialness' of the relationship, serve the partner's individual sexual and emotional needs, and protect the sexual health of the couple.
- In research, agreements are usually considered as a dichotomy between monogamy and non-monogamy.
- Some research argues agreements are much more complex and varied. They are disconnected from categorisation.

Methods



- Monopoly questionnaire asking gay and bisexual men about their attitudes towards monogamy and relationships.
- Free-text options available for participants to write down their own thoughts.
- Over 4000 usable questionnaires. 2083 of these utilised at least one of the free-text options.
- These were coded to identify key themes and issues in relation to agreements.
- Free-text limitation: It is impossible to further interrogate responses.

Agreement Change Conflict

Disagreement about agreement

"Still a work in progress. We have had a couple of discussions and I would like to be open but he is less sure. We will be monogamous while we work through those issues" (31, NSW).

- The men disagreed about what they wanted from the relationship, or the style of relationship.
- Monogamy a 'fall-back option' while the couple discussed their disagreements.

Communication silence

"We are not supposed to have sex with others, but I secretly occasionally do so. I think he does not do the same, but one can never be certain. I feel guilty that I have secret sex, but it seems to be the best way to keep happiness all round" (52, NSW).

- These men were unhappy with their current agreements, but did not communicate this to their partner, and often broke their agreements as a result.
- Sometimes a lack of communication was experienced as internal conflict, where they wanted their agreement to change, but were worried about communicating this to their partner, or were unsure how they themselves would handle the changes.

Clarifying Agreements

Potentially change

"We have no general arrangement or agreement on sleeping with others outside of the relationship. However, we both have discussed the possibility" (33, NSW).

- Changing agreements has been discussed as a possibility, but no action has been taken yet.
- No political affinity with a certain style of relationship.

Making the change

"We were monogamous for the first five years of our relationship but have since realised that we wanted to have physical relationships with others. Since then we have had a monogamish relationship" (33, VIC).

- The men had discussed changing their agreement, and had followed through on the discussion.
- Most of the respondents discussed making the change to allow for sex with other men, but this was not always the case.

Break-ups

"I had a monogamous relationship of five years. We broke up six months ago because he wanted an open relationship" (29, QLD).

- The couple couldn't make their values about their agreements meet up, or a lack of communication about change caused them to cheat (or be cheated on), and this was hurtful enough to end the relationship.

Work in progress

"It was about getting to know the other person and understand the rules, the expectations, the fights, and responsibilities.

The relationship is still very young and we are still establishing these ground rules. It's been all about open communication and discussion of what we are looking for and what we want" (49, QLD).

- Agreement is still being negotiated, or they have experienced a number of different agreements over time.
- No political affinity with a certain style of relationship.

Breaking agreements

"We agreed that our relationship was monogamous. Two years later, I found out that he had been cheating on me. We talked and worked things out, and now we're both allowed to have sex with others as long as we don't tell" (36, VIC).

- Breaking an agreement opens up discussion about unhappiness with that agreement, and inadvertently helps the couple clarify or change it.

Reasons for change

Mismatched sexual desires/drives

"We both came to a realisation, myself later than he, that our sexual needs may not be fulfilled by each other for the rest of our lives" (40, QLD).

- The men had different desires for sex, or had different sex drives.
- They changed their agreement to resolve a sexual issue that may have already existed, or to prevent one from arising in the future.

Medical conditions

"I love my primary partner very much and if he can get his medical issue sorted we will resume our monogamous relationship" (42, QLD).

- For medical reasons, one partner cannot or doesn't want to have sex, so they change their agreement.
- These changes may only be temporary.

Sexual exploration

"We have been in a monogamous relationship of 18 years and were each other's first. We felt it fair that we both had a chance to experience other people but didn't want to end our relationship to do so" (43, NSW).

- Their desires may not have diverged, but they still wanted to experience sex with other men.

Geographical distance

"There was a period when we were going to be in a long-distance relationship for an extended period, and I wasn't willing to be celibate for that long. We opened our relationship for that period" (30, NSW).

- One partner moves away temporarily or permanently, and the couple faces a period without sex, so they change their agreement.
- These changes may only be temporary.

Conclusions

- Communication vital in ensuring agreements change harmoniously.
- Breaking an agreement can help a couple clarify their agreement if they communicate properly.
- Agreements are self-defined and can be highly changeable. Some men may not find much meaning in HIV prevention efforts that do not meet the structure of their relationship.
- HIV rarely mentioned in agreement changes and therefore not a primary factor when negotiating change.
- HIV prevention needs to resonate in ways that are meaningful for men whose agreements might be changing.

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