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Negotiating gay men's relationships: How are monogamy and non-monogamy experienced and practiced over time?

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Abstract

Many gay men's relationships are not static, or fixed to monogamy or non-monogamy over time. This paper uses semi-structured interviews with 61 Australian gay men to explore how monogamy and non-monogamy are experienced over time, expectations of what constitutes the norms of gay men's relationships, and how couples experience and practice change. Though many gay men idealise monogamy, particularly at the beginning of their relationships, it is often experienced as temporary. Non-monogamy is often seen as an inevitable prospect for gay relationships due to the social and cultural norms that operate in gay communities. These expected trajectories are reflected in practice – many relationships begin monogamously and then become non-monogamous over time. While the application of 'rules,' experimentation, and flexibility can facilitate change, couples can struggle to navigate new territory as their relationship structures shift. This is particularly the case when partners value monogamy and non-monogamy differently, or when one partner's values change. These findings shed light on how gay and heterosexual relationships parallel and diverge, and the tensions and opportunities that change can produce for couples.

Keywords

Monogamy, non-monogamy, gay relationships, sexual agreements, couple

Introduction

Monogamy and non-monogamy are typically represented as a dichotomy (Duncan, Prestage, and Grierson 2015), with monogamy positioned as dominant and 'invisibilising' of non-monogamy (Ahmed 2004). Comparing monogamy and non-monogamy in gay men's relationships on the basis of factors such as quality and satisfaction rarely finds any differences (Blasband & Peplau 1985; Bricker and Horne 2007; Hosking 2013; Kurdek 1988; LaSala 2001, 2004; Ramirez & Brown, 2010). Representing gay men's monogamous and non-monogamous relationships as dichotomous has been criticised as crude because it does not account for the complex ways in which they are practiced (Coelho 2012; Duncan et al. 2015; Parsons and Grov 2012). This dichotomy fails to capture the diverse ways in which gay men imagine and practice fidelity, or how and why gay men's practices in relation to monogamy and non-monogamy change. The trajectory of change is typically described as a move from monogamy towards non-monogamy (Adam 2006; Bonello 2009; Bonello and Cross 2010; Hoff and Beougher 2010; Mitchell 2014; Shernoff 1995), yet little research has explored this trajectory in depth, or given attention to relationships that may not shift linearly.

The prospect of a relationship becoming non-monogamous can be experienced as threatening by some men, particularly for those who understand themselves as suited to monogamy, or those who might never have questioned it. Some queer theorists have labelled monogamy as 'assimilationist' because it bolsters heteronormative values (Ahmed 2004). Yet, monogamy is widely practiced in gay men's relationships, with one-third of Australian gay men in a recent study identifying their relationship as monogamous (Bavinton, et al. 2016), indicating that monogamous values 'not only traverse the realm of gay intimacy but are also reproduced within these relationships' (Worth, Reid, and McMillan 2002, 241). Monogamy is assessed by some men not just as a straightforward moral expectation but as an ideal, an accomplishment, and the 'gold standard' against which all other coupled relationships should

be compared (Adam 2006; Duncan, Prestage, and Grierson 2015a). However, due to the norms operating within gay sociality in which sexual opportunity is celebrated, some men may also fear that their monogamous ambitions are unsustainable long-term (Duncan et al. 2015a). Monogamy may therefore be viewed as temporary rather than permanent (Adam 2006; Coelho 2012; Heaphy, Donovan, and Weeks 2004; Hickson et al. 1992; Worth et al. 2002), and non-monogamy may be viewed as an expected trajectory for gay men's relationships (Adam 2006; Coelho 2012; Duncan et al. 2015a).

Within coupled relationships, gay men must negotiate monogamy and non-monogamy over time, and within a complex set of overlapping fields. Competing discourses about monogamy found in broadly heteronormative social worlds, and more specific gay community settings, mean that monogamy is not wholly ideologically freighted with the prevailing assumptions that characterise heterosexual notions of love and romance. Giddens (1992) appraises gay men's relationships as free of the monogamous and normative ideals apparent in heterosexual relationships, thus producing innovative and transformative ways of 'doing' intimacy. These relationships are based off an egalitarian ethic, one in which power is equal and partners maintain personal autonomy in pursuing their sexual desires and needs. However, research shows that couples can find it difficult to discuss their relationship dynamics with each other, particularly when sexual dissatisfaction and sex with other partners are involved (Bonello 2009; Bonello and Cross 2010; Parsons and Grov 2012; Prestage et al 2006; Shernoff 1995; Worth et al. 2002). This suggests that more idealistic notions of gay men's relationships as emblematic of equality and innovation require further interrogation, and that power may have a key role in how couples negotiate their relationships.

To this end, we explored Giddens' ideas about intimacy in a sample of Australian gay men to add to discussions about the diversity of gay men's relationship practices and ideals. We explored how participants conceived of monogamy and non-monogamy over time, and

how couples negotiated change in the status of fidelity when their values towards monogamy and non-monogamy competed. The findings are split into three sections. The first section describes individuals' personal experiences and conceptions of monogamy and non-monogamy, and how they positioned these in relation to gay sociocultural norms. The second section describes how couples approached changes in their relationships. The final section explores couples' negotiations of change, including the tensions and opportunities experienced in relation to disparate desires, needs, and values.

Methods

This paper is based on a sample of 61 gay-identified Australian men who participated in semi-structured interviews about the meaning and practice of monogamy. Men were recruited from urban and regional areas across three Australian states: New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC), and Queensland (QLD). Recruitment was through advertisements in print and online gay media, through gay community organisations, and targeted advertising on Facebook. Interviews were between 50 and 120 minutes in length and were conducted at gay health organisations or participants' homes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An information sheet and consent form was signed by all participants in accordance with the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee. Participants' details have been kept confidential, and pseudonyms have been used in reporting data. Participants reflected on current and previous relationships in their interviews. The original coding process has previously been described (Duncan et al. 2015). Using the coded material in NVivo version 10, thematic analysis (Strauss 1987) was used to re-analyse the data. The interviews were reconsidered, and quotes were extracted from the original coding schedule related to the concept of change. These quotes were grouped into themes, with a focus on relationship change.

The Sample

Participants' demographic characteristics and relationship types are presented in Table 1. However, practices and interpretations of monogamy and non-monogamy were diverse and did not always reflect these closed categories. For example, some men who described their relationship as monogamous also occasionally engaged in threesomes. Likewise, some participants had practiced both monogamy and non-monogamy with current and previous partners. Some men also had complex current relationship situations in which the most discernable pattern was of transition, or they actively rejected strict relationship categories altogether. Interviews explored men's relationship histories, so information about relationship length was not collected systematically.

[Insert table 1 about here]

Findings

During their interviews, most participants discussed changes in fidelity in some way. Participants described how they adapted to change in current and previous relationships, and discussed the potential for change in the future, as well as the tensions and opportunities they experienced in relation to the prospect of change.

Personal conceptions of monogamy and non-monogamy

Expecting and idealising monogamy

An initial expectation of monogamy was common among participants. This was particularly noticeable in younger men who tended to perceive monogamy to be the only and best way to structure relationships. Jacob (22, coupled) said that he preferred being in an exclusive

relationship: *'Exclusive for me. I do come from a Catholic background so even though I'm gay I still believe in the whole stable family thing. So I do want a husband and kids.'* Jacob's expectation of monogamy conformed to the normalising effects of heteronormativity, where certain ways of 'doing' relationships are naturalised and repeated into everyday life from a young age. Other participants assumed that being in a relationship was synonymous with being monogamous and that their partners had the same expectations: *'We didn't discuss being exclusive. In fact, we never discussed being completely exclusive: it was just a given that we would only see each other'* (Danny, 21, Single). Similarly to Jacob, monogamy was 'normalised' for Danny to the extent that he had never questioned it, or perceived it needed discussion. A few men described preferences for monogamy after previous failures in open relationships. For the most part, however, men who wanted monogamy had only ever practiced monogamy and saw themselves as 'monogamous people.' Joel (29, single) not only expected monogamy but also idealised it as symbolic of emotional and spiritual connection. Monogamy consolidated Joel's relationship, bonded him to his partner, and was a platform for longevity.

I think it's important to have monogamy for at least the first three years of your relationship because it creates emotional connections and a spiritual connection. And because in the first three years of your relationship, that's all new and you don't want to rip that out and have that strain put on the relationship. And it's also about trust, so I'd like to have monogamy, at least for the first couple of years of a relationship.

Like Joel, other participants perceived that monogamy created stability, security, intimacy, and trust, qualities that were considered important for creating a solid foundation for relationships. These men had critically assessed monogamy in relation to their desires and emotions, and had aligned themselves to both the practice and values of monogamy, reflecting more traditional

and normative conceptualisations of relationships. They tended to ideologically position monogamy as representing a more moral and decent way of life in comparison to non-monogamy, which seen as analogous with promiscuity, and contributing to a negative representation of gay men.

Experiencing monogamy as temporary

Though expecting and wanting monogamy, many participants also saw it as temporary insofar as they did not expect it would last, or that it needed to last. William (40, single) explained that after a period of time in which the relationship had been consolidated, monogamy becomes less important: *'Once you've got those connections, and built the trust and connections and everything, I don't think it's as important.'* His expectations were such that even from the beginning of a relationship, he may not expect monogamy to last. Frank (49, coupled), on the other hand, never thought that monogamy might be temporary when he entered his relationship. It took some time for him to realise that monogamy was not the only possibility. He described a more steady progression towards threesomes, a process whereby he became detached from the notion that monogamy was necessary, and came to see it as less crucial to a successful romantic relationship.

For the first five years we were monogamous... I developed a romanticised idea of what my relationships would be like, and monogamy was a very strong pillar of that... I wanted a heterosexual version of relationships, and monogamy was important. And then, I can't remember thinking too much about that in the first few years, but probably five years into it we started talking about a threesome and that occurred. And that worked well for us.

Some participants who idealised monogamy struggled with the idea that it might not be sustainable. Joel (29, single) thought he would need to consider non-monogamy in a future relationship.

If you're in a gay relationship, you have to accept that both you and your partner are going to be male, and males have a primal urge to just procreate. So monogamy doesn't necessarily kind of fit within a typical gay relationship but I want it to.

Joel was caught between a desire for monogamy, and struggling to envision it as sustainable long-term. He invoked a form of biological determinism to explain why monogamy did not suit gay relationships.

Expecting non-monogamy

Many participants expected that non-monogamy would become the norm over time and that couples would eventually transition towards non-monogamy over time. Mitchell (24, single) came to consider non-monogamy as more realistic in the long-term through social contact with other gay couples, yet he struggled with this expectation.

Most people in relationships I know that have lasted are open so even though I don't like it, I am aware that if I want a lasting relationship, there's a good chance that's the key to success.

Mitchell viewed non-monogamy as a norm for gay relationships, one that he might need to accommodate if he wanted a long-lasting relationship. Like Joel, Mitchell also thought biology had a determining role in the non-monogamous nature of many gay relationships: *'When you've got two hormonally-driven men sometimes they just need an outlet if they don't want to*

self-destruct.' These urges were understood as inherently male, and as such heightened when two males formed a couple. Mitchell and Joel shared the view that non-monogamy is just what happens to gay couples; an inescapable inevitability for success long-term, though each implied this was something they would have to adjust to. Other participants did not appeal to biology, but rather emphasised the role of exposure to gay social norms and health promotion messages as introducing them to the possibility of non-monogamy.

I'd seen the health promotion information the AIDS Councils and health agencies had out there about different types of relationships. And also from friends both identifying as gay and not. Friends have told me about their relationships and how they negotiated them, and so it was good to put myself into perspective. (Hugh, 47, coupled)

Non-monogamy became tangible for Hugh through his social experiences of, and attachment to gay community, including health promotion and personal networks. Other participants offered explanations related to gay sexual culture for their changing expectations of non-monogamy over time, in particular the availability of sex within gay community life.

With the gay lifestyle, you go to venues where there are sexy men and they're very intimate and physical with each other... I still like to occasionally go out and dance and play around. It's kind of fun, in a fun space with lots of men dancing. And I wouldn't want to deny my partner that. I like doing it myself. (Rex, 51, coupled)

Rather than seeing the eroticism of the gay scene as detrimental to his relationship, Rex thought of it as a pleasure and intimacy that he wanted for himself and his partner.

Other men similarly described non-monogamy as something they not only expected, but wanted and idealised. Marcus (28, coupled) wanted to be like other gay couples who practiced non-monogamy, and thought this was likely to happen as he matured and grew more secure in his relationship.

They're deeply in love and they've got a home together. And they're in a completely open relationship... That's something I would like as well. It'd be nice to get to that point in time where insecurities have gone and you don't worry about who's sleeping with who, so long as you love the person you're going home to... If [partner] and I do stay together long-term, that's where I see our relationship going.

Here Marcus noted the importance of knowing the difference between outside sex and partner love, and this was common theme throughout the interviews. Non-monogamous relationships were frequently centred on discourses of maintaining the couple: *'If exclusivity is something that can't be promised, then as long as I know who they're coming home to the rest is up for negotiation'* (Danny, 21, single). Participants referred to 'returning home,' and non-monogamy was premised upon an ability to remain emotionally committed to one's partner. Thus, rather than diminishing the primary relationship, these men described non-monogamy in ways that reinforced the specialness of the couple. Furthermore, the idea that non-monogamy represented a continual desire for casual sex was often contested: *'There's nothing wrong with us going out and having fun with somebody else but it's not like we go searching for it'* (Alan, 41, coupled). Men practicing non-monogamy described sometimes going months, even years without casual sex, thus challenging the assumption that non-monogamous men were 'promiscuous.' The freedom to have outside sex was often more important than actually seeking out sex, and one of the perceived benefits of non-monogamy was the autonomy it

offered.

I think [he] realised that this wasn't about love, this was about people having the freedom to enjoy other people in a consensual, adult, fun way... But, as it turned out, I wasn't constantly thinking about it. It was like the freedom to have sex with a third party made me less inclined to think about it. (Hugh, 47, coupled)

For many men, therefore, non-monogamy simultaneously reflected the emotional and romantic centrality of the couple while also contesting the requirement that sex be confined to one's partner. In this form, non-monogamy was positioned as more enlightened and progressive than monogamy, which was represented as constraining, old-fashioned, conservative, and narrow. Men repeatedly cited communication and openness as important principles, framed in contrast to a notion of 'blindness' that accompanied investment in monogamy.

I'd say, "Okay, that is your belief that you think monogamy is important." I would ask him why... A lot of them don't think further than what they've been taught, but the majority of them believe it is to be encouraged and aimed for without really realising why. (Dennis, 54, single)

These men positioned non-monogamy as more critically considered and better suited to men in general, and gay men in particular. However, this way of thinking was tempered by an acknowledgement that non-monogamy required more consideration and negotiation because it could not be taken for granted like monogamy.

Approaching change

The expectation that gay men's relationships eventually become non-monogamous was

widely shared, and was the typical pattern of change. Relationships tended to begin monogamously and then at some point shifted towards some form of non-monogamy, although a few longer-term relationships were non-monogamous for quite some time and became implicitly monogamous once the couple had 'moved on' from their 'sexual adventurousness': *'In the early days we were more open and adventurous with other guys but that drifted and we said, "What's the point? We're happy with each other," and that just fizzled out'* (Victor, 62, coupled). The exact point at which relationships tended to change was diverse, but most were 'well established' relationships.

Some men who entered their relationships monogamously were already open to the possibility of non-monogamy in the future. Other men (or their partners) had a shift in attitude about non-monogamy during the relationship. However, a number of men cited pragmatic motivations for change, including short-term or long-term geographical distance. The most common motivation was sexual dissatisfaction due to differing libidos, a loss of attraction to one's partner, or expanding sexual interests that moved beyond what one's partner could accommodate. For example, Jeremy (27, coupled) felt that he needed more sex than his partner.

The physical side of our relationship was an issue. I had a high libido and my partner didn't... We tried different things, and one of them was there was tolerance for sexual activity outside of the relationship.

For these participants, non-monogamy offered a practical solution to the issues they faced in maintaining a regular and satisfying sexual life without the risk of losing their primary relationship.

Once a couple had agreed to change their relationship, commonly mentioned facilitators included: creating 'rules,' experimenting, and flexibility. These facilitators were not always

mutually exclusive. Rules protected the sexual health of the couple, fostered partners' individual sexual and emotional needs, and promoted the primacy of the couple. Rules were most successful when partners trusted each other and communicated, and when they perceived equal benefit and understood the symbolic meaning of the rules.

I would ensure there were rules and a common understanding. And for me, the only way that any open relationship would work was if both parties understood what certain actions meant, both emotionally and ideologically. Is it okay to sleep with this person under this condition? Do we need permission from each other before we do this? (Dominik, 30, coupled)

Couples often experimented with different rules, or as Brian (58, coupled) stated, '*jiggled around to find an even level*' until such a time that the rules suited both partners. Experimentation was not a straightforward experience; couples grappled with feelings of unequal benefit, jealousy, rejection, and entrapment. Joel (29, single), for example, explained that once he and his partner decided to enter into non-monogamy, he struggled with their rule to 'ask for permission.'

... We had rules where you had to ask permission to do it and you had to tell them that you'd done it... And that worked except that, at the time, sex was very spontaneous for me. And so asking permission first wasn't a rule that I could kind of abide by.

Joel and his partner then decided to return to a monogamous agreement but both continued to have sex with casual partners in secrecy until they broke up seven years later.

A small group of men described the need to approach change with flexibility, to respond dynamically to the demands of an established relationship. In a sense, their relationships were

always in a process of experimentation, shifting and weaving in accordance with partners' changing desires and needs. When asked how his relationship was practiced, Hamish (26, coupled) described it as one characterised by fluidity rather than one that moved linearly towards non-monogamy.

It's a fluid thing. It really opens, and closes, and maybe opens again. Maybe even for the same reasons that our sex can be frequent and infrequent, and have a wave... If we were to have sex outside the relationship then that would happen and then it would slow down, and we would say, "Right, we're not having sex outside the relationship."

Having a flexible relationship came with an acknowledgment that desires and needs change over time, and that relationships are contextual, not simply sites in which gay men articulate and practice any particular ideology or follow a particular trajectory in relation to monogamy and non-monogamy. What emerged as more important than a strict relationship structure were commitment, trust, communication, and willingness to compromise.

Negotiating change

Most relationships that changed were well established and initially monogamous. However, a few participants described newer relationships in which they never properly discussed monogamy, and consequently experienced tension when they realised they had different values. Johnny (45, single) described such a situation with an ex-partner. When his partner asked him if would ever 'screw around' behind his back, Johnny responded.

I said, "I've been rooting around for so long, I really don't fundamentally believe in monogamy. The safest sex you can have with anyone is where your partner is completely honest with you." And I thought, "I can't devote myself exclusively to one person."

The couple created a set of rules to mitigate their different values.

Many tears later we decided, "Let's see if we can make this work." We put boundaries around it, and we thought that was a good solution. Keep away from home. Keep it discreet. And it worked for about two years. And then he said, "No, I don't want to do this anymore."

Unfortunately, Johnny explained, the couple broke up.

I still loved him and was committed to him but he couldn't accept that I wanted to do this anymore. And it was an impasse. [Ex-partner] put his foot down and said, "I don't want to do this anymore." And I said, "Well I don't know if I can stop."

Johnny and his partner had profoundly different values, reflecting broader social values as well as personal beliefs, despite attempting to form a mutually beneficial agreement.

Acquiescence

Some men described situations where they or their partner acquiesced or reluctantly accepted a change the status of monogamy in their relationship. As these were more often changes toward non-monogamy, it was the men who preferred monogamy that more frequently acquiesced. In fact, men who preferred non-monogamy rarely described acquiescing to monogamy, even if their relationships began monogamously.

In some cases, both partners were equally free to have sex with others, but only one partner took advantage of this. In describing a previous relationship, Ron (43, coupled) described why he did not benefit from his newly non-monogamous arrangement.

I don't think I was ever happy with it but I was like, I'll give it a go." And at the time I didn't think it'd be quite as non-monogamous as it was... We were equally free to do whatever we wanted outside the relationship but I took little advantage of that whereas my partner took lots of advantage... I could have told him I didn't like it but it kept coming back to either well that's the shape of the relationship or the end of the relationship. So eventually, after two years, we ended it.

Ron loved his partner and so agreed to try non-monogamy, but he did not want to have sex with others, and so felt like he gained little benefit from the arrangement. Hosking (2013) has argued that feeling 'under-benefited' or 'over-benefited' by an arrangement can cause dissatisfaction and a perceived power imbalance between partners. Recognising a power imbalance was contentious for both for men who felt over-benefited and those who felt under-benefited by their arrangements. For example, Andrew (22, single) felt uncomfortable that he over-benefited because his ex-partner accepted Andrew's desire to have sex with others, but expressed no desire to do that himself.

He said he didn't care if his partner goes off and sleeps with some else. But he would never do it. I don't like that because that means that I would have an upper hand in the relationship. I would have the balance of power. I like a relationship to be equal and on equal terms. If I can do it, you can do it too, and you shouldn't feel like you shouldn't be able to.

Men were wary of power imbalances that might cause tension and negative attitudes, and produce a lack of equality between partners. Often, partners who acquiesced did so because they were concerned they may otherwise lose their partner. Although unwilling to compromise

their values regarding monogamy in their own practice, their love for their partner outweighed the necessity for two-way monogamy. Sometimes, after acquiescing, one partner remained dissatisfied, and the relationship broke down. These men experienced the emotional reality of non-monogamy in negative ways, producing for some feelings of jealousy, envy, and distrust.

In other cases, one partner wanted to be non-monogamous themselves, but could not accept that their partner might do the same.

He knew that I'd [had sex with others] before and that I wasn't going to run off with someone. But he knew that if I found out he was doing it, I'd be really pissed off and jealous. We tried a couple of times, even our first few threesomes I got angry and stopped the whole thing 'cause I was really jealous that I saw him with someone else... And that hypocritical jealousy, that's ridiculous. But he just accepted it. He didn't want to hear about it. He said, "As long as you never tell me, I don't care." (Greg, 22, single)

Despite recognising his own contradictions, Greg could not reconcile his jealousies. His partner's coping mechanism was to turn a blind eye to Greg's engagements through an explicit rule of silence, which was a common rule for men who acquiesced. In partners' negotiations, acquiescence was a 'middle ground,' though often an unequal one, within competing discourses regarding monogamy and non-monogamy, and one partner was effectively disenfranchised from his ideal relationship structure.

As a value, monogamy generally has normative support in broader (heterosexual) contexts, and claims for non-monogamy carry little cultural weight. In contrast, the cultural norms that operate around gay relationships mean that non-monogamy does not necessarily carry a lesser status. In fact, in occurrences of acquiescence, men who preferred non-monogamy accrued more power because their ideals reflected what they believed was better

knowledge of gay sociocultural norms, and more progressive thinking. Consequently, men who preferred monogamy were implicitly positioned as more narrow and inexperienced, and thus had little sway in negotiating their desire to remain monogamous.

Guidance

A few participants, who were generally older and more experienced, described guiding a younger partner who favoured monogamy towards acceptance of non-monogamy. Alan (41, coupled), who was eight years older than his partner, introduced him to the idea of non-monogamy.

He took it differently than I do because he was so young and I was older... There's been a few instances where I've helped him push his boundaries because I've had more experiences in things like sex clubs. And some of them he was terrified. We went earlier this year and I said, "I'd love you just to experience a sex club. You don't have to do anything." And we went to one and he was pleasantly surprised.

Older age and experience corresponded to a professed 'superior' understanding of how to make relationships work specifically within gay sociocultural spaces. These men positioned themselves as knowledgeable experts, and had the capacity to influence their younger and less knowledgeable partners. Worth and colleagues (2002:50) have similarly reported that some older partners use experience-based power to make decisions, and their younger partners 'grudgingly fall in line.' In our sample, however, power was rarely exercised by more experienced men with the purpose of dominating their younger partners in an attempt to maintain control of the relationship. Moreover, younger men in our sample did not always immediately accept their partners' positions. They contested and struggled with new ways of

thinking about fidelity, which led them to critically assess their own values against what their partners wanted.

For a split second I did feel, “Oh, this is a shock!” Maybe that was informed by socialised expectations that relationships should be monogamous. But that didn’t last very long. I was very aware that I should be validating my own feelings. I was very pragmatic about it and so I realised “This is fine, this isn’t a problem.” (Hamish, 26, coupled).

Nonetheless, guidance fostered a genuine shift in attitude about non-monogamy for less experienced partners, where an initial favouring of monogamy became less concrete once questioned. Don (49, coupled) experienced such attitudinal shifts under guidance by his partner, whose ability to successfully navigate non-monogamy he admired.

One of the revelations of living with [partner] is that from the beginning he was completely supportive of an open relationship. In fact, he introduced me to [the] concept. He said, “It’s impractical to expect you to be faithful to me and vice versa.” I guess I admire his lack of jealousy.

In contrast to men who acquiesced to non-monogamy, men who were guided by a more experienced partner were willing to re-define how they interpreted fidelity, and experienced non-monogamy as beneficial to individual partners and the couple.

Discussion and conclusion

Our findings support the available literature on gay men’s relationships – those that change tend to start monogamously and then shift towards some form of non-monogamy

(Adam 2006; Bonello 2009; Bonello and Cross 2010; Hoff and Beougher 2010; Mitchell 2014; Shernoff 1995; Worth et al. 2002). However, many of our interviewees expected that both monogamy and non-monogamy would play a role in their relationships at some point. Although Giddens' (1992) assertion that gay men's relationships 'transform intimacy' certainly reflects aspects of our data, at least to the extent that non-monogamy was premised upon discourses of progressiveness and enlightenment, it omits the reality that monogamous and normative values are also practiced and idealised by many gay men. In fact, many participants in our sample were attached to monogamy, if not for the entirety of their relationships, at least at their beginning. This may attest more broadly to the normalisation of monogamous coupledness in Western society, and may apply in particular to younger men, who draw their relationship blueprints from the monogamous and heterosexual models they grew up with (Adam 2006; Philpot et al. 2016). Moreover, some men assumed their relationships would begin monogamously without discussing it, thus contesting Giddens' and Weeks and colleagues' (2001) claim that monogamy is no longer normative among gay men, but something that couples negotiate. Our findings suggest that monogamy is not always negotiated in the context of new relationships; instead it is assumed to be a given of 'being in a couple.' Additionally, many gay relationships mirror some of the mores of normative relationship structures, even those that are non-monogamous, thus problematising arguments about relationship innovation. An abiding principle underpinning the ways in which the men in our sample described monogamy and non-monogamy was in sustaining a primary intimate partnership as special, regardless of the rules on fidelity. This was reinforced by those men who challenged the promiscuous discourses often attached to non-monogamy, and the notion that non-monogamy is a boundless and disorganised frenzy of casual sex. Any re-conceptualisation of intimacy espoused by these men occurred only underneath a privileging of the intimate couple.

Gay men's non-monogamous relationships, according to Giddens, are based on an egalitarian ethic that underpins what makes them innovative. Similarly, Gotham and colleagues (2003) have suggested that gay couples handle conflict more positively than heterosexual couples because they value equality and have fewer differences in power. Indeed, many gay couples believe that an ideal balance is one where both partners are equal (Peplau and Fingerhut 2007). Yet, our data show that those men who acquiesce to non-monogamy do so for fear of losing their partner, thus making the relationship inherently unequal and not grounded on egalitarianism. Importantly, non-monogamy may be institutionally freighted as more realistic or fairer among gay men, and those who favour it may therefore have access to some cultural power. Negotiations of non-monogamy may oblige those who prefer monogamy to extend sexual freedom to their partner under the auspice of liberal tolerance, where the consequences of not 'cooperating' may otherwise make them appear conservative or narrow. The assumption of egalitarianism may fail to adequately consider how partners might value monogamy differently, and how competing values can shape power relations which can enable one partner to fulfil their own needs and desires even against the will of their partner (Ridge 1996; Shernoff 2006; Worth et al. 2002). Recognising issues of power challenges the more idealistic conclusions about equality and innovation in gay men's relationships, and raises questions about the ways men either resist or adapt to new values on monogamy informed by familiarity with gay culture.

Our findings also shed light on the temporal status of monogamy for many gay men. Though some men take monogamy for granted as they enter their relationships, its certainty is challenged as relationships progress and individuals' understandings of gay sociocultural norms grow. Indeed, many men within our sample believed that monogamy may not be a permanent fixture of their relationships. Other research has similarly noted that monogamy is sometimes viewed as unsustainable, and changing towards non-monogamy is therefore seen

by some as expected, even inevitable (Adam 2006; Coelho 2012; Duncan et al. 2015a; Heaphy et al. 2004; Hickson et al. 1992; Worth et al. 2002). In comparison to heterosexual relationships, where the progression to formal attachment naturalises monogamy, and is thereafter rarely questioned, gay men may need to reflect on monogamy in ways their heterosexual counterparts may not, and consider that it may not be the only 'right' relationship structure.

Finally, our findings suggest that some gay men live their relationships flexibly and lack an ideological attachment to monogamy or non-monogamy, which they often do not experience as dichotomous. Rather than confining themselves to a particular relationship structure, they view their desires and needs as changeable, and take a pragmatic approach to their relationships, where commitment and trust take precedence over ideology. Dichotomising monogamy and non-monogamy may therefore be too simple for explaining the lived realities of more fluid relationships, and may fail to capture how relationships can evolve to accommodate different fidelity expectations and behaviours. While evidence supports a broad transition from monogamy to non-monogamy, there are a range of mediating factors that imply monogamy and non-monogamy cannot always be straightforwardly conceived of in a stage-like model, nor adequately understood or thought of as dichotomous or static.

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Table 1. *Demographic characteristics*

Demographic	Number (n=61)
Relationships Status	
Single	34
Monogamous	13
Non-monogamous	14
Age	
18-25 years	18
26-35 years	17
36-45 years	9
46-55 years	10
56+ years	7
HIV status	
HIV-positive	8
HIV-negative	53
Location in Australia	
City	
Melbourne	18
Sydney	15
Brisbane	14
Region	
Central Victoria	4
Northern Rivers	5
Cairns	5
Preferences	
Monogamy	34
Non-monogamy	19
No preference	8