Differences in risk among gay couples with Monogamous, Non-monogamous and Discrepant sexual agreements

Deepalika Chakravarty§±, Colleen Hoff§, Torsten Neilands±, Sean Beougher§, Lynae Darbes±

§: Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality, SFSU, CA
±: Center for AIDS Prevention Studies, UCSF, CA
Objectives

- Of the Longitudinal Gay Couples Study:
  - Identify relationship factors associated with sexual risk among gay male couples

- Of this presentation:
  - Demonstrate how couples differ by agreement type
  - Implications of these differences for HIV risk
Presentation Outline

- Definitions of variables
  - Sexual agreements and their types
  - Relationship characteristics
  - Sexual risk for HIV
- Results
- Conclusions
- Implications for HIV prevention
Quick Recap

The Longitudinal Gay Couples Study

- Sample of 566 gay male couples from SF Bay area (baseline)
- Ethnically and racially diverse sample
- All couple serostatus types included
- All agreement types included
- ACASI survey administered separately to each partner
- Designed to have 6 waves of surveying
Sexual Agreement - Definition

“Many couples have an understanding, expectation or agreement about the ground rules regarding sex with outside partners. Some agreements are very specific and are discussed directly by each partner. For example, a couple may verbally agree with each other not to have anal sex with outside partners. Other agreements may not be specifically defined and/or may not be discussed at all. For example, a couple may assume they can both have sex outside the relationship, but never talk about it. Think about how you and your primary partner currently handle sex with outside partners. The next series of questions will be asking about the current agreement you have with your primary partner about sexual encounters outside your relationship. This can include an agreement to not have sex with outside partners.”

- Sexual agreements are ubiquitous in gay male couples
Role of Agreements

Sexual agreements play an important role in gay male relationships

- Foster trust
- Provide structure
- Sexual enhancement
- Non-heteronormative (supports gay identity)
Types of Agreements

- Agreements are broadly classified as closed (i.e., monogamous) or open (i.e., non-monogamous)
- These two categories encompass a wide range of specific agreements, for instance
  - ‘Classic’ Monogamy
  - Open, allowing three-ways only
  - Open, but with restrictions on who, when, where, what
  - Open, without any restrictions
- Agreements may be explicit or implicit
Query about Agreement Type

- Which of the following scenarios best describes the current agreement you and your primary partner have?
  - Both of us cannot have any sex with an outside partner
  - We can have sex with outside partners, but with some conditions or restrictions
  - We can have sex with outside partners, without any conditions or restrictions
  - We do not have an agreement

- Couples’ agreement type was categorized into
  - Monogamous
  - Open
  - Discrepant (one partner stated their agreement as monogamous while the other stated it was open)
Relationship Characteristics

- Agreement Investment
- Relationship Satisfaction
- Intimacy
- Trust
- Commitment
- Attachment
- Autonomy
- Equality
- Mutual Constructive Communication
- Mutual Avoidance and Withholding
‘Risk’ - Definition

- Unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) with an outside partner of discordant or unknown HIV status
- UAI included
  - Receptive (/bottom) and insertive (/top) sex
  - Dipping
  - Ejaculation
  - Withdrawal
- Counts of UAI acts in the previous 3 months was dichotomized into:
  - Zero acts of UAI
  - At least one act of UAI
Analyses

- Frequencies and cross tabulations
- Means of couples’ scores on relationship factors were compared across the three agreement types
- Logistic regression performed with UAI with outside partner of discordant or unknown serostatus, as the outcome
Results - Agreements

- Over 99% of couples had an agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monogamous</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>(45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-monogamous</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>(47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepant</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No agreement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(&lt; 1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 64% of couples reported explicitly discussing their agreement with their primary partner
## Results - Agreement Breaks and Disclosure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Type</th>
<th>Total # of times agreement broken in previous 12 months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monogamous (246 couples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice or more</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t Know”</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total # of times break disclosed</th>
<th>Monogamous (71 couples)</th>
<th>Non-Monogamous (91 couples)</th>
<th>Discrepant (19 couples)</th>
<th>Overall (181 couples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zero</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice or more</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t Know”</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agreements do get broken but are not always disclosed to the partner.
### Results - Relationship Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Characteristic</th>
<th>Couple's Agreement Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment in Sexual Agreement</td>
<td>43.39&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>39.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>147.31&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>26.10&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>64.37&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment</td>
<td>53.41&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>48.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>59.13&lt;sup&gt;ab&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Constructive Communication</td>
<td>9.24&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Avoidance and Withholding</td>
<td>9.11&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures shown are group means for each measure.
## Results – Prevalence of Risk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agreement Type</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monogamous agreement</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Agreement</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>(38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepant Agreement</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘n’ represents couples where either partner reported UAI.
## Results – Odds of UAI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open Agreement</td>
<td>8.23</td>
<td>&lt;.0001</td>
<td>(4.69, 14.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepant Agreement</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>0.0046</td>
<td>(1.47, 8.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Length</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.9461</td>
<td>(0.998, 1.002)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reference category:** Men within couples with a *monogamous agreement*

**Control Variable:** Relationship length
Conclusions - 1

- Almost all gay couples have agreements about sex with outside partners
  - May be explicit or implicit
  - Substantial differences may exist between partners’ understanding of their agreement

- Agreements do get broken but are not necessarily disclosed to the partner
  - Non-disclosure can lead to possible risk for HIV infection and other STI’s
  - Non-disclosure can threaten relationship quality (e.g., guilt, distance)
Conclusions - 2

Strength of relationship factors varies by agreement type.

- Couples with monogamous agreements scored significantly higher on agreement investment, intimacy, trust, commitment, attachment, equality.
- For each of the above characteristics, couples with discrepant agreements scored the lowest.
- Couples with discrepant agreements scored significantly lower in the measure of constructive communication and significantly higher in mutual avoidance and withholding communication.
- Relationship satisfaction and autonomy did not differ significantly among the three agreement types.
Risk behavior varies by agreement type. Compared to men in the monogamous group,

- men in the discrepant group were more likely to engage in UAI with outside partners of discordant or unknown HIV status

- men in the non-monogamous group were also more likely to engage in UAI with outside partners of discordant or unknown HIV status
Implications for HIV Prevention

- Agreements are a vital point of intervention

- Couples with discrepant agreements are at heightened risk for HIV transmission due to contradictory understanding of their agreement

- To avoid these discrepancies, couples should be encouraged to discuss their agreement frequently, frankly and explicitly

- Couple level intervention to improve communication between partners may be highly effective
Thank You

(deepc@sfsu.edu)

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