**‘I’d much rather have sexual intimacy as opposed to sex’: Young Australian gay men, sex, relationships and monogamy**

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**Abstract**

Few studies have explored how young gay men negotiate opportunities for rethinking sexual and relationship life associated with gay sexual cultures upon coming out. Drawing on qualitative interview data with Australian gay men aged 18–30, this article explores a tension these participants described between a desire for monogamy as the basis to a committed, enduring and mature relationship on one hand, and sexual opportunities associated with ‘the gay scene’ on the other. We analyse these men’s negotiation of this tension in the context of wider political shifts in the social status of gay men’s relationships, encapsulated in a debate between those who see ‘homonormativity’ and those who see transformation in the contemporary relationship practices of gay men.

Keywords

Homonormativity, intimacy, monogamy, relationships, young gay men

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**Introduction**

There is a significant literature describing the myriad ways in which gay men have constructed alternative relationship models to those institutionalised in heterosexual life (Adam, 2006; Giddens, 1992; Green, 2006; Stacey, 2011; Weeks et al., 2003). Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2003) provide a compelling portrait of the ways in which, in the absence of traditional marriage, non-heterosexuals have produced creative ‘experiments in living’ in response to the ‘fundamental question of ‘‘how shall we live?’’’ (2003: 3). Similarly, Adam (2006) argues that gay sexual cultures provide unique opportunities for sexual self-expression that in turn have produced innovative emotional connections between gay men.

However, very few studies have explored the characteristics of young gay men’s relational lives, particularly in regard to the social norms and expectations they may have grown up with and those they encounter as they come out, meet other gay men, and venture onto the commercial gay scene. In this article, we explore the ways in which young Australian gay men (aged 18–30) conduct their sexual and relationship lives, and how they make sense of the choices available to them in the absence of marriage and family conventions that define sexual and relational life for young heterosexual men. Drawing on data from a qualitative study exploring gay men’s experiences and definitions of monogamy and relationships, we seek to provide an understanding of the tensions, ambivalences and contradictions that underpin sex and relationships for younger gay men.

**Young gay men, sex, relationships and homonormativity**

Most research on the relationship lives of young gay men is framed in terms of risk factors or vulnerability to HIV (Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana et al., 2011; Bauermeister, Ventuneac et al., 2012; Eisenberg, et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2011; Prestage et al., 2008). For instance, Trussler et al. (2000) explored the sexual and relationship patterns in young gay men’s lives in Vancouver to better understand the personal, interpersonal and social factors that lead men to compromise their sexual safety. Participants described ‘coming out’ into an identity and a social and sexual scene that brought new challenges regarding sex, love and relationships, in parallel with the hostility of a homophobic culture and society. The authors noted a tension between a desire for lasting relationships with sexual opportunities and cultural practices in gay life: ‘the men in our study talk about a desire for both monogamous relationships and casual sex at the same time as if it is the central problem of their lives’ (Trussler et al., 2000). The young men in Ridge, Plummer and Peasley’s (2006) study described the rituals related to dance, drug use, sex and embodiment that characterised their passage through the commercial gay scene as one in which new, potentially exciting opportunities for self-expression were offset with new forms of isolation, exclusion and loss of self. Anderson (2012) argues that young gay men come out onto a social scene in which monogamy is expected, but rarely maintained. Recent Australian survey research suggests younger men are more likely to report being in a monogamous than an open relationship (Prestage et al., 2008). Younger men also tend to have shorter relationships indicating the practice of ‘serial monogamy’ (Mustanski et al., 2011; Prestage et al., 2008).

However, it is no longer the case that gay men are excluded wholesale from the mainstream institutions of heterosexual relationship life, as evidenced by the contemporary same-sex marriage campaign and the focus it has assumed in gay politics. As in other domains, the figure of the same-sex couple is currently pre-eminent in Australian gay social and cultural life, while more radical sexual and relationship forms appear to have been strategically silenced in favour of an ‘equal rights’ discourse that makes little mention of sex (Klesse, 2007; Warner, 1999). Critics have taken aim at the normalising effects of such political strategies of accommodation within the social and cultural institutions of heterosexual society in a now well-rehearsed critique on ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan, 2002; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Klesse, 2007; Richardson, 2004). According to this critique, social tolerance and legal equality discourses foster the incorporation of some gay men and lesbians into the mainstream of neoliberal, heteronormative citizenship at the expense of others whose gender or sexual identities or practices cannot be so easily tolerated. Middle class and white gays and lesbians more easily access these forms of citizenship, while sexuality is privatised and domesticated with long-term, monogamous coupledom emblematic of ‘good’ gay citizenship and other forms constituted as morally weaker or personally less fulfilling.

Earlier research on gay men’s relationships described static models of men’s partnerships (i.e. monogamous or ‘open’), or described monogamy as a stage in the formation of new relationships (McWhirter and Mattison, 1984). Subsequent work (Adam, 2006; Green, 2006; Stacey, 2011; Weeks et al., 2003) has tended to explore monogamy as the structure against which gay men cultivate alternative arrangements, neglecting the meaning and practice of monogamy itself (Duncan et al., 2014). Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2003) identified the chosen nature of relationships and the implicit need for their negotiation to ensure equality and mutual satisfaction as more important than whether monogamy was the basis to the relationship among their participants.

However, Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott find the account offered by Weeks et al., and others too ‘optimistic’ (2010: 75), and lament ‘the demise of the critique of monogamy’ (2010: 99) as one casualty in the neo-liberal gay politics currently ascendant in many western settings:

Those still arguing for non-monogamy . . . remain a minority. The move away from questioning the privileging of couple relationships has blunted the critique of heterosexuality and is intimately connected with the pursuit of a rights agenda that seeks inclusion into pre-existing normative patterns of sexual and domestic life. (2010: 100).

A polarised account of the political potential of same-sex intimacies has therefore emerged, pivoting between notions of assimilation and transformation (Weeks, Duncan et al.). However, a limitation of this ideological reading of monogamy as a function of a contemporary liberal gay politics is that, while non-monogamy can be seen as a political position from which to critique the institutionalisation of heterosexuality, monogamy can only ever be seen as complicit in that which is normative and therefore oppressive to other ways of organising sex, intimacy and relationships (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Frank and DeLamater, 2010; Klesse, 2007). To better understand the workings of homonormativity, which speaks to the withdrawal of a wide range of critical resources for thinking about the ways personal choices are actually socially compelled, requires a more nuanced account of how it is that heteronormativity becomes homonormative.

To counter this limitation, a number of geographers have recently advanced a critical approach to thinking about the uneven and variable nature of the impact of homonormativity. As Podmore (2013: 263) argues: ‘while legislation against homophobia, the adoption of non-discrimination clauses, and the extension of marriage rights have produced official ‘equalities’ landscapes for sexual minorities in many core nations, these forms of sexual legitimation have been socially and spatially uneven’. Following more than a decade of engagement with the ‘forces of assimilation’ that produce ‘homonormativities’ (2013), Podmore suggests moving beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion to explore how a ‘climate of equalities’ is reshaping the spacialities of LGBT lives.

Brown (2009, 2012) similarly contests the portrait of ‘homonormativity’ as ‘allencompassing and unassailable’ (2012: 1067) and, drawing on the work of Oswin (2005), argues that if we reject the binary between radical and homonormative we may find more interdependence between so-called queer spaces and those fostered by the heteronormative impulses of contemporary gay political movements. Brown argues, vice-versa, that if there are many heterosexualities then it is a folly to position heterosexual spaces, and the practices and norms that appear to strengthen them, as always oppressive (that is, to ‘indicate a state of assimilation’ (Brown, 2009: 1500)), or to be wilfully blind to the unexpected social relations which might be given rise to (Brown, 2009).

In a recent example of work analysing the uneven effects of homonormativity, Nash (2013) explores the meaning and significance of gay community for a generation of young gay men in Canada who conceive of themselves as ‘post-gay’. She argues that:

certain segments of the LGBT population in Toronto are experiencing a ‘post-mo [post-modern] world’. A new generation of twentysomething men, arguably, white, middle class and technologically savvy, are experiencing themselves as sexual and gendered beings in historical and geographical circumstances that are completely different from the LGBT generations that went before. (2013: 250)

Nash questions whether a ‘post-gay’ identity has a distinctly generational sensibility, suggesting that there may be a generational gap in regard to the effects of homonormativity, which nonetheless remains uneven according to social positionings based on race, ethnicity and class. Robinson (2013) found a similar generational difference between young and older Australian gay men’s views on same-sex marriage.

Thus, understanding the effects of homonormativity requires analysing the variable, contextual, and everyday experience of negotiating the changing meaning and practical significance of a gay identity. It is in this spirit that we explore the data that follow. In particular, we seek to analyse the ways in which young gay Australian men appear to negotiate a tension between competing ideologies furnishing their understandings of sex, intimacy and monogamy – the heteronormative discourse of ‘complementarity’ between the sexes which sustains monogamy as ‘natural’ and ‘good’, versus the rejection of orthodoxies associated with heterosexuality in gay liberation and homonormative critiques. We pay particularly close attention to the figure of ‘the scene’, simultaneously a material space formed by the social and commercial spaces constituting gay urban gay life, and a more ephemeral concept embodying ideals about sexuality, identity and belonging tied up with a now long and established history of ideas about sexual liberation. We also explore the ways in which monogamy as the ideal is found wanting, the ways young gay men experience and understand this loss of value, and the formulation of new meanings and values around alternatives to monogamy.

Importantly, we find that this embrace of alternatives to monogamy may have much more in common with the conditions of late modernity and neoliberal governmentality than those who advance non-monogamy as a political strategy against heteronormativity might expect. As such, we also ask whether monogamy might be a ‘red herring’ as far as debates about homonormativity are concerned. As Brown (2009: 1506) implies, non-monogamy is not necessarily incompatible with ‘the figure of the affluent gay consumer’. Provided non-monogamy is a private aspect of the publicly endorsed, equal gay couple, it is fully consistent with the ideals of the neo-liberal state and with the sexual and social opportunities of the commercial gay scene. Is it possible that monogamy may also be more complicated in practice than it is ideologically positioned within the homonormative critique?

**Methodology**

The data for this article are drawn from a larger project exploring the meanings and practice of intimacy, relationships and monogamy among Australian gay men. Following approval from La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee, 61 gay identified men were recruited from three Australian states on the Eastern seaboard (Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland) to participate in an individual face-to-face interview. The sample in each state was divided 3:1 between the capital city (Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane) and a regional centre (Central Victoria, Northern Rivers, and Cairns). In the capital cities, the sample was age stratified (18–25; 25–35; 35+), but this was not practically possible in the regional centres due to the smaller number of interviews conducted in these locations.

Men were recruited by advertisements in the print and online gay press, appeals to gay organisations, and targeted advertising on Facebook. Advertisements asked for men in monogamous or open relationships and single men to participate in an interview about their experiences, thoughts and preferences with regard to relationships, including whether they conceived of monogamy as an HIV prevention strategy. Participants were screened on the basis of the aforementioned age categories, but were diverse in regards to relationship length, HIV status, ethnic background, educational level, and relationship status.

Semi-structured interviews of between 50 and 120 minutes were conducted at local gay men’s health organisations or participants’ homes, recorded and subsequently transcribed. Participants reviewed an information sheet and signed a consent form in accordance with Ethics procedures. All participant details have been kept confidential and participants are referred to by pseudonym in the reporting of data that follows.

Interviews were transcribed and reviewed by each of the investigators, and several meetings were held to discuss initial impressions of the data. Analysis for the present article was guided by the following question: How do young gay Australian men construct meaning in relation to questions of intimacy, sex and relationships at the intersection of competing ideologies regarding the significance and value of monogamy? To answer this question, we drew on Foucauldian discourse analysis. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourses enable and constrain what can be thought, said and done (Burman and Parker, 1993). They privilege particular versions of social reality and legitimate existing social structures and power relations accordingly (Willig, 2008: 113). A Foucauldian discourse analysis enables questioning of the relationship between how individuals think and feel, the practices they engage in, and the social relations within which their experience is located (Willig, 2008). In particular, we were interested in the ways in which these young men understood their sexual and relationship lives as reflections of age-specific choices.

Each transcript was read and reread by the lead author before transcripts were imported into the data analysis software NVIVO9 for coding. An initial stage of open-coding involved the analysis of words and sentences for underlying discourses and patterns of meaning across the data set. Close attention was then paid to the various subject positions afforded participants by the discourses identified, the ways in which participants deployed particular discourses to position themselves or others, and the ways in which particular discourses facilitated certain forms of action and self-understanding, while closing down others.

As indicated, quantitative data suggest younger gay men adopt different kinds of relationships to those of their older counterparts. Thus, the current article is comprised of data from interviews with 26 men aged 18–30 years. Eight of these men were in a relationship: four were monogamous; two were dealing with an incidence of ‘cheating’ in a monogamous relationship; and two were in relationships with an open agreement. Among the 18 single men, 16 described their ideal relationship as monogamous. Importantly, in responding to the request for participants these men were likely to be particularly reflective and thoughtful about the questions we asked them, and as a qualitative sample, cannot be thought to constitute a representative sample of young Australian gay men.

There is considerable debate about what constitutes a ‘young person’ in the sexual health literature, and there are a number of terms and concepts employed to capture a diverse range of developmental experiences and social transitions specific to being a ‘young person’ (Hendry et al., 2013). Torkelson (2012) has argued that emerging adulthood is often defined in terms of heterosexual markers of maturity, including marriage and family, excluding those who are same-sex attracted or transgender. For the purposes of this article we have defined ‘young gay men’ to mean men aged 18–30, having identified shared patterns of relationship practice and meaning-making among this cohort of men. While aspects of the following themes were present among those men over 30, there was a strong sense among these men that age made a difference to how they experienced relationships.

**Intimacy, maturity, ‘the scene’ and flexibility**

In the following sections, we present three themes that each explore the ways in which participants spoke about sex, intimacy and relationships. In the first, we analyse a developmental narrative that underpinned how men thought about ‘the gay scene’ and the realisation of their ambitions for monogamy in a future relationship. In the second, we look at the ways in which some men positioned themselves as abnormal, or exemplary, in response to a perceived pressure to be more sexually free than they felt comfortable. Finally, we look at how some men described learning to experience sex and intimacy with greater flexibility, and increased care for the preservation of oneself and others, than they had previously thought possible.

***Rites of passage***

A committed romantic partnership was desired by all of the men interviewed, with 22 of the 26 participants describing monogamy as the basis to such a relationship. Monogamy was freighted with symbolic meanings related to security and trust, and sex was frequently described as more meaningful when experienced in a committed relationship: ‘When I can find an emotional connection with one person and sex just amplifies that, that’s sort of how I view sex in general, which is why monogamy is more important to me’ (Lee, 21, coupled). However, there was also an emphasis on youthful sexual exploration and experience as a rite of passage, which was frequently described as a normal part of heterosexual adolescence denied to gay men. According to Phillip:

I never had that sort of teenage sex stage I s’pose so it was good to have that sort of period for a while. But I got over that sort of pretty quickly . . . I’m happy to do it but like ultimately I’d be looking for something serious. (Phillip, 25, single)

Like Phillip, a number of these men described balancing competing desires for a period of sexual exploration and experience, with a longing for a secure, usually monogamous relationship.

I don’t wanna miss out on going out and having fun, and having lots of, well not lots of but a reasonable amount of non-committal sex and stuff. I wanna go out and have fun and not be committed but, you know, I also really wouldn’t mind having someone to be close with. (Brent, 19, single)

Many of these men envisaged remaining single, or uncommitted, until their late 20s or early 30s when they might ‘settle down’ into an ongoing romantic partnership. Relationships were also imagined as part of a wider script on maturity, finding parallels in the sexual scripts of heterosexual men of similar age (Green, 2006):

By 27 ideally I’d like a good, solid relationship of at least a couple of years, be ready to maybe start only going out clubbing every fortnight or so . . . I’d be looking at entering [the] big corporate world and buying my first house, and at least buying a very nice new car, and hopefully have a dual income with someone who’s very similar-minded to do that with. (Greg, 22, single)

Consideration of relationships also included significant reflection on gay sexual culture, typically embodied in the figure of ‘the scene’. This included the dynamics and norms that informed the commercial and online worlds of gay men’s social interactions. The scene was usually understood by these men to provide opportunities to construct and strengthen a gay identity, or to place limits on the kinds of relationship that were possible. For instance, Andre described the limitations the scene placed on his desire for a long-term relationship:

I’m 22 and I want people my own age and I see that most of them don’t ever plan on being in relationships until about 28, 29 . . . Maybe the younger I am I should actually have fun and enjoy my life, getting out there and being intimate with people I feel comfortable being intimate with. And not having the full strings attached with it. (Andre, 22, single)

As Andre’s comment demonstrates, the scene was ordered according to a wider social script on youthful sexual exploration and the notion of eventually ‘settling down’. In fact, men saw their own sexual careers in terms of a phase, an expression of a youthful gay masculine sexuality in which the ‘scene’ was frequently scapegoated as the thing that one would ‘mature’ out of:

. . . if I can get this whole rooting everybody out of my system now then I won’t feel like I need to do that when I’m older. (Joel, 29, single)

Perhaps it takes until then [age 30] until people are a bit more focused and settled, and over getting pissed and taking drugs every weekend . . . If I find someone that I like I wanna try and make it work and not piss-fart around. And not have my head turned by every hot guy with big pecs that walks past. (Eddie, 26, single)

Monogamy was the expectation of the majority of men in this age group (22 of 26), and many young men perceived it to be the ‘real’ desire of most other gay men too: I think for the most part gay males are looking for a monogamous relationship. Although it may be taking them some non-monogamous relationships to get there- . . . the demonstration of that is just how hard we’re all fighting for gay marriage equality at the moment. (Danny, 21, single) Yet, despite their beliefs that other gay men really did want monogamy, it could be said that monogamy constituted a personal flashpoint in which these men’s own relationship ambitions were ambiguously framed in relation to the sexual life of the scene. As Eddie (26, single) related: ‘Even on things like Grindr1 you always see people with ‘‘lonely, wants cuddles’’. Like that’s what everyone strives for. It’s just difficult to obtain.’ In fact, monogamy was idealised, even among men who doubted their own capacity to maintain it. For instance, Greg’s (22, coupled) new boyfriend had the unquestioned expectation that their relationship would be monogamous, but Greg hoped his boyfriend would ‘evolve’ on the issue: ‘I think he’s slowly becoming less like he was [innocent] and more like I am [experienced]. I can see it happening over time.’ Yet, paradoxically, Greg also thought of monogamy as offering the secure, committed relationship he felt was currently unattainable:

I’d be happy to settle for just normal sex and one-on-one for ages if it meant like an actual loving, long-term, committed relationship that went deeper than sort of 22-year-olds tend to go . . . strict monogamous . . . commitment for the rest of your life I could never, ever, ever possibly do. But if I had to choose it would probably be monogamous. (Greg, 22, coupled)

It was apparent that these young men found themselves negotiating a tension between a desire for monogamy, as an expression of an ideal, committed relationship, and yet, understood ‘the scene’ as a field of social forces which limited their capacity to achieve the relationship ideal – at least until they had either got the scene out of their system, or had matured to a phase of life in which new social norms and institutions supported the realisation of their ambitions.

***Am I normal?***

Whereas some men appeared to reconcile the tension between their ambition for a committed (putatively monogamous) relationship with the opportunities of the scene by placing a time limit on ‘rooting around’, others described feelings of exclusion and isolation as a consequence of a perceived normalisation of casual sex among their gay peers. For instance, Danny (21, single) described feeling that he was unusual because of his reluctance to have sex outside a relationship:

I think that there’s sort of this odd pressure on gay men to suddenly have such an incredible sexual history. And it has intimidated me in the past because I wonder, am I abnormal or am I actually normal?

Danny understood these feelings to reflect his cultural background: ‘Coming from an ethnic background, and especially a religious type background as well, it can put a lot of pressure on a person.’ Similarly, Dale (23, single) described the conflict he experienced trying to reconcile a model of relationship based on a conventional dating script with casual sexual experiences:

Whenever I’ve tried to have casual sex with someone I’ve always ended up going, ‘oh, we should be dating now’, and treating it like, ‘what is your favourite movie?’ And then going, but I don’t like this person. Why am I trying to talk to them? And then there’s this weird conflict of interest in my head. And I just couldn’t sort it out.

Whereas some men understood themselves to be at odds with the sexual norms of their gay peers, others drew on promiscuity discourses to position casual sex as less meaningful or unhealthy. Brandon (29, single) described himself as ‘constitutionally single’ (the only man to view single life favourably) and spoke about how his Christian values were at odds with those of most gay men. He was intent on remaining single, and chaste, outside a lifelong, monogamous commitment:

I’m not into flings and just hooking-up randomly. For me that’s just a bit shallow . . . you’re bonding with people physically but not emotionally, and so there’s disconnect I think between what you do with your body and who you are on the inside. I don’t think that that disconnect is healthy.

Thus, sitting behind the valuation of monogamy, and the notion that the scene fostered a period of sexual experimentation which one would mature out of, was a binary in which a number of men constituted casual sex as superficial and less meaningful, in opposition to relationship sex which was mature and full of meaning. This was also gendered insofar as many participants thought their own romantic desires foiled by a gay sexual culture structured by a biological male sex drive:

You have to kind of accept that both you and your partner are gonna be male and males have a tendency – it’s kind of like a primal urge to just kind of procreate. So like monogamy to me doesn’t necessarily kind of fit within a kind of typical gay relationship – but I want it to. (Joel, 29, single)

Joel’s use of procreation as a metaphor for the male sexual drive was paralleled by Jacob (22, single), who observed the circulation of a sexual double-standard in his friends’ outlooks on sex and relationships.

We bitch about how we hate all gay men ‘cause even though we are gay men, [They’re] just all sluts, just wanna root. [We’re] sick of being treated like a piece of meat. That sort of thing . . . you know, girls say the same thing.

Jacob reflected on whether he was too quick to have sex with new partners and speculated that this undermined the development of any serious commitment: ‘I prefer to wait it out, but then I never do. It’s sort of like I don’t want this guy to lose interest in me. But if I held back I’d probably keep more [of his] interest.’

The clearly gendered ideas these men held with regard to gay sexual culture were frequently offset by their insistence that their own preferences or desires were for secure, monogamous relationships. In their perceived isolation as men who favoured monogamy, men like Joel and Jacob therefore understood themselves to be rare, or exceptional, in their capacity for greater intimate commitment than other gay men. These men also made the assumption that the sexual drive they observed in other gay men, or as a weakness in themselves, was incompatible with monogamy, framing monogamy as the soft, secure and more meaningful setting for emotional life in opposition to the superficial, dangerous, masculine world of ‘the scene’.

For instance, Joel (29, single) described a change in his outlook on sex and relationships following a recent HIV test: ‘[Before the test scare] I could have sex with people without having an emotional connection. I didn’t have intellectual conversations with my friends. I kind of acted like a bimbo . . . I’d kind of lost contact with my values.’ Joel described how the strategy of dividing sex and emotion enabled him to manage his feelings about casual sex: ‘It meant that I could get away with the whole like random sex thing and sleeping with a multitude of people without feeling bad about it.’ This strategy has been infrequently analysed in work on gay men, although Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2003) found that while most men could separate ‘sex’ and ‘love’ in the abstract, this was easier in practice for men in committed relationships (2003: 144). Joel described how the HIV test had challenged him to re-evaluate his approach to sex and relationships:

I hadn’t planned on getting like good news . . . that shocked me ’cause I was really expecting bad news. I thought, ‘Okay, well if I’m gonna have sex, I really want it to actually be important.’ I really want to have that kind of emotional connection and that spiritual connection because I can’t really afford to put myself through all of that crap of like having to get tested and all of that for anything less important.

Joel went on to describe men who engaged in the scene as less likely to know their own minds, or be cognisant of the values they were living by – the consequence of which was sexual risk-taking. Yet, Joel also found it difficult to imagine remaining sexually faithful to one person: ‘I’m kind of being double-sided, ’cause there’s the potential that I would want to go off and have sex with other people but I wouldn’t really want them [partner] to, which is – not good!’

The idea of ‘losing oneself’ and being ‘double-sided’ (Joel, 29, single), of ‘stretching’ and ‘separating’ oneself (Brandon, 29, single), and of ‘weird conflict of interest’ (Dale, 23, single) position gay sexual culture as threatening to the integrity of the self. Variously these men establish their own sexual values by drawing on discourses regarding the absence of value and meaning in casual sex, or relationships that are not codified in more meaningful (i.e. ‘mature’) terms. For some men, this reflects the tensions and complexities of reconciling competing identities, beliefs or commitments which conflict with their ideas about how gay men conduct sex and relationships. Other men drew on familiar discourses about mental health, sexual excess and sexual health to challenge the sexual norms they felt subject to.

Challenging the pervasive representation of the scene as fostering superficial relationships, Jared (23, coupled) was in fact genuinely unusual in that he described finding supportive resources for his desire for monogamy in a gay men’s HIV workshop, but still perceived himself to be ‘traditional’, or unusual:

I think my preference for monogamy is very traditional. Like just a gay equivalent of straight couples. I suppose I’m a pretty traditional guy. But then, after I went to the [HIV prevention] workshops, I felt that monogamy was also very good for not getting STIs and HIV.

***Intimacy can be more than just sex***

Some participants described learning to think about and conduct relationships differently to how they had expected them to be organised prior to venturing onto the scene. In particular, serial dating and ‘fuckbuddy’ relationships appeared to ameliorate the difficulty many described experiencing in managing a separation between sex and intimacy.

When I first went into the scene I was really kind of idealistic and I thought ‘I will only have sex with people if I’m in a relationship with them.’ But then it became over time quite clear that it’s hard to have relationships in the scene . . . I would still prefer to have sex in a relationship, but if there’s not one on the horizon, I’m not going to be, you know, celibate. (Daniel, 30, single)

I can and I have done it [casual sex] but I don’t prefer it. I think the sex is that much better when there’s emotion in a relationship. When I’ve done it with a trusted friend, there has been emotion but not feelings of love or anything like that. There’s been a certain degree of trust because they are a friend. (Keith, 22, single)

Neither Daniel nor Keith challenge the notion that sex in a relationship is more meaningful, but describe adapting to the sexual conditions of gay scene life, including for Keith, sex with trusted friends. Andre (22, single) similarly described how his thoughts on sex and intimacy had changed:

I guess growing up and realising that hey, intimacy can be more than just sex and I can be intimate with someone and have that connection with them without having that fully-fledged monogamous relationship . . . we’re two really good friends, I trust you and I feel comfortable with you. And I enjoy sharing time with you. I will share a bit more with you.

Yet, for Andre, that shift was also about protecting himself from the emotional turmoil of over-investing in the romantic symbolism of previous relationships:

I’d go on dates and it would be the whole, ‘Will you go out with me?’ the whole romance, lovey-dovey type stuff, and what-not. I found that I was connecting with the person on a greater level than they were connecting with me. Or vice versa. And leading to when the break-up happened, a mourning period.

Yet, monogamy remained at the heart of Andre’s relationship ideal, and he perceived ‘open communication’ to be a defensive strategy designed to insulate him from the uncertainties of gay relationships:

I wanna be more open is so that I don’t become too attached to one person. I guess it’s sort of a defence mechanism that I’ve developed over time. I guess monogamy doesn’t really fit in there at the moment but I know it will.

Andre challenged the opposition between sex and intimacy, but remained committed to the idea that monogamy might offer him the most secure form of relationship in the future. Becoming ‘open’ means lowering one’s ‘lovey-dovey’ expectations, but not jettisoning them altogether. Other men reflected on the limitations of conventional relationship scripts and the tensions that these created in terms of their emerging gay identities. Brent (19, single) described chafing at the restrictions imposed by a recent relationship:

About a month-and-a-half in [to the new relationship], I just noticed that for some reason all these guys wanted to meet up with me and have some fun. And on one level I was very tempted to go and do it and not reveal it [to my boyfriend] . . . I was starting to become my own person and I was starting to get out amongst the gay scene and meet lots of other guys. I needed to get all of that out of my system before I settled down again. (Brent, 19, single)

Brent decided the best thing to do was to ask his boyfriend to establish a nonmonogamous agreement about sex with secondary partners, but this was not to his partner’s satisfaction and the relationship ended. Thus, the opportunities of the sexual field connoted by the scene created not only tensions in relation to the adaptation to new sexual values and norms, but also dilemmas in how to organise relationships ethically. For instance, Mitchell (24, single) described the rules of dating a new partner:

It’s only been like five dates in three weeks, which is in itself rather fast. I’m open to the idea of it continuing but at no point am I going to say I’m in a relationship or this is my boyfriend, especially given the fact that after the third date there’s someone who seems to have a crush on me and just due to the fact that I’m considering this [other person’s interest] shows that I’m not so into this [current dating partner] that I wouldn’t consider other possibilities. So I feel a little guilty in a sense that I’m dating someone – not relationship but dating someone – but still considering outside possibilities. Because one of the few rules, for lack of a better term, that I would have if dating is to not lead people along – not screw them over on purpose. It’s a bit of a dog-eat-dog world with dating but I don’t want to hurt anyone.

Mitchell revealed a desire to ‘play the field’, remaining uncommitted to avoid emotionally hurting his boyfriend. The flexible quality of this mode of dating contains a concern with ensuring that one is neither too serious about the partner, nor ‘in too deep’ to safely and easily get out of the commitment. Significantly, the commitment was defined by the imposition of sexual exclusivity and the constraint this places on access to the sexual possibilities of the scene.

Among those coupled men who favoured non-monogamy, motivations were diverse, yet they generally understood it as a practical solution to preventing the end of a relationship or ensuring its sexual vitality:

I wouldn’t call it ‘monogamous’ and I wouldn’t call it ‘open’ . . . we will have threesomes and we’ll have foursomes . . . it sort of spices things up . . .We wouldn’t condone going and picking somebody up and sleeping with them without the other person. (Marcus, 28, coupled)

Hamish’s partner of five years had surprised him by revealing several recent sexual encounters at a beat. Hamish saw this as an opportunity to push for an ‘open’ agreement, something that had been prohibited following an earlier infidelity on his part:

At the moment I suppose he wants a closed relationship but he might change in a few months. At that point I think I’d kind of say to him, ‘Look, maybe it’s time for me to also have another encounter with another guy.’ And maybe push the issue at that point. (Hamish, 26, coupled)

A desire not to impose a restriction on a partner, and to enjoy the flexibility and autonomy of an open relationship in which communication was the basis were also features of these men’s outlooks on relationships.

**Discussion: Between assimilation and transformation**

Between the ‘optimism’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010) of concepts such as ‘life experiments’ (Weeks et al., 2003) to describe gay relationships, and the ideological weight of ‘strong theories of homonormativity’ (Brown, 2009), we found that serial relationships, dating, fuckbuddy relationships and casual hook-ups coexisted in tension with monogamy as the prevailing ‘gold standard’ for ‘mature’ and ‘satisfying’ relationships among this group of young men. Participants rarely expressed a political position on monogamy as a social practice imbued with greater privilege than its alternatives, but did describe tensions reconciling their desires for secure, committed relationships with the sexual life of ‘the scene’. They managed this tension with frequent appeals to a stage model of development in which young adulthood was understood to afford a period of sexual experimentation before one is expected to ‘get serious’ and ‘settle down’.

Paradoxically, many of these men condemned the superficiality of a casual sexual culture among gay men, and drew on familiar, sometimes gendered, ‘promiscuity discourses’ (Klesse, 2007: 60) accordingly. Future relationships were imagined in parallel with career ambitions and a vision of property ownership and social status balanced by a capacity to resist the opportunities that characterise ‘scene’ life (including sexual opportunity, drugs, alcohol, and clubbing). Within this narrative, participants positioned themselves as vulnerable, their own desires for secure, committed relationships at odds with their perceptions of the desires of other gay men. Monogamy was expressed as a current relationship ideal that was otherwise foiled by the immaturity of one’s peers or the absence of successful (monogamous) gay male relationship models. Speculatively, we wonder if some of these men invoke the pressures of ‘the scene’ as a way to distance themselves from the incompatibility of their competing desires for sexual autonomy and a romantic relationship ideal (underpinned by monogamy and a forever-after script of happiness). For a number, ‘the scene’ appears to function psychologically as an external, corrupting force that bears upon their true, authentic (monogamous) selves.

Those men in monogamous relationships generally described withdrawing or avoiding the social life of the scene altogether. These men tended to conceive of monogamy as either the only, or the best way, to arrange their relationships, and few had contemplated non-monogamy as a valid alternative (Duncan et al., 2014).

Thus, these men were less likely to demonstrate the reflexivity gay men have been charged with in more optimistic accounts of relationship innovation. Rather, they were more likely to demonstrate struggle and conflict in negotiating competing values on sex and relationships. A few described finding strength to resist the pressures on sexual life they felt subject to by drawing on religious or ethnic identities – rather than straightforward exclusion or judgement from those communities as might be expected. Still, many perceived themselves to be traditional, old-fashioned, or abnormal in their outlook on sex and relationships.

It was rare for young men to cite liberationist ideas about sexual freedom which were not about an entitlement to sexual experimentation understood as temporally limited to their youth. Indeed, cast through the lens of the contemporary Australian campaign for same-sex marriage, the sexual and relationship lives of older single gay men were often looked upon as sad and disappointing, reflecting not social and political choices, but the limitations imposed by a homophobic culture and the sexual limitations of the scene itself. Significantly, increased acceptance of sexual diversity, embodied by the political project of same-sex marriage, was understood to offer up greater choice in personal life, not less.

Some men described expanding their definitions of intimacy, or loosening preestablished rules on sex and relationships. Unlike the notion of maturity which characterised the speech of many of the men’s vision of a future relationship ideal, this was described as a process of self-discovery in which these men were managing the insecurities and uncertainties of relationships girded by a different set of ideals. Some spoke about the need to be self-protective, and how the process of learning to be less idealistic in regard to sex and relationships was driven by peer and social norms requiring a separation between sex and intimacy. Preserving the self, or one’s sexual opportunities in the ‘dog-eat-dog world’ of gay dating, meant that these men emphasised flexibility and pragmatism as to the prospect of romance and intimacy. Whether this was balancing competing flirtations or experimenting with ‘fuckbuddy’ arrangements, they described the limitations of sexual fidelity in the sexual scene.

Thus, while it was endorsed, monogamy was also contested among these men – if not along the lines of its idealisation – at least in terms of its practical realisation. This is consistent with Giddens’ (1992) claims that ‘pure relationships’, characteristic of intimacy in late modernity, are marked less by the symbolism of classical Romance than by more pragmatic notions of love. Yet, Jackson and Scott (2010) are right to bemoan the demise of the critique of monogamy in the public sphere. As these men’s experiences demonstrate, the absence of a political account of the ways in which intimate choices are compelled through the logic of institutionalised heterosexuality creates tensions and conflicts that result from the stigmatisation of sexual choices that are inconsistent with the ideal of a ‘good’ relationship or life. These experiences undermine claims regarding the presence of self-conscious ‘reflexivity’ among gay men in regard to relationships (Giddens, 1992).

However, the absence of a political critique of monogamy in these men’s accounts of relationship life does not necessarily imply that non-monogamy will not emerge as a creative possibility in these men’s future relationship lives. In accordance with discourses of autonomy and choice, non-monogamy offers a practical solution to the pressures of gay scene life, which these men attribute to promiscuity and masculine sex-drive discourses. While monogamy remains privileged insofar as it is idealised as the best and most secure way in which to live one’s (future) relationship life, it is simultaneously weakened by a perceived need to be flexible, adaptable and emotionally restrained.

But, an emphasis on choice and individualised self-care as a function of essentialised ideas about masculinity or sexual freedom seems hardly a progressive step forward, particularly for young gay men struggling with the tensions raised by the sexual opportunities of gay life. This is perhaps a reason why some men fall back on pejorative understandings of promiscuity, refusing to submit to the idea of an essential male sexual drive that seems so at odds with the feelings sex and intimacy raise within them. It is worth thinking of the ways in which gay communities might develop the resources that support young gay men as they negotiate new sexual opportunities and choices, so that they might work out what feels most comfortable for them, while undermining the idea that casual sex and intimacy are opposite, as dominant promiscuity discourses maintain. A first step may be in making visible the diversity of gay men’s relationships.

This observation takes us back to our earlier suggestion that the monogamy/ non-monogamy binary may be a red herring in accounts of heteronormativity if we only think of it in terms of its ideological status, rather than as a daily practice that particular subjects may struggle with. The limitation of thinking about the monogamy/ non-monogamy binary solely in terms of whether it reflects homonormativity or a radical outside to institutionalised heterosexuality is that we miss the opportunity to explore the ways in which it functions to order and make meaningful, or meaningless, the sexual opportunities and relationships available to sexual subjects. Looking beyond its complicity to the ways in which it functions means thinking beyond whether monogamy is done by gay men, and whether it is complicit or conservative, to what its effects might be. It also provokes a challenge as to how we might creatively deconstruct the monogamy/non-monogamy binary while recognising that its effects are not simply ideological, but also practically, emotionally and psychologically powerful.

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Note 1. Grindr is a dating mobile phone application.

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