**Exploring diversity in the ‘regular partner’ category in HIV research among Australian gay and bisexual men**

**Abstract**

In recent explorations of gay men’s partnership practices, the ‘regular partner’ category (often labelled as ‘boyfriend’) in HIV research does not capture how men perceive and conduct commitment in different partnerships, and the implications this has for HIV prevention. The current category of regular partner may be too crude to account for the diversity of gay and bisexual men’s partnerships. Drawing on in-depth interviews with a sample of 61 Australian gay-identified men, we explore a diversity of partnership types that represent unique ways of enacting commitment. In addition to the standard ‘boyfriend’ type, we identify three other regular partnership types: ‘fuckbuddies’, dating, and serial monogamy, each with specific issues for conceptualising HIV and STI risk and prevention. These partnerships suggest important differences in the way men conceive and practice intimacy and sex, with implications for HIV prevention.

**Introduction**

Epidemiological research and behavioural surveillance into gay and bisexual men’s (GBM) sexual partners typically distinguishes between ‘casual’ (anonymous, infrequent) and ‘regular’ (familiar, ongoing) partners.Regular partnerships have been cited as a substantial source of new HIV infection among GBM (Davidovitch, et al. 2001; Kippax, et al., 2003; Sullivan, Salazar, Buchbinder & Sanchez, 2009). However, regular partnerships are often assumed to be romantic and committed relationships, with terms such as ‘boyfriend’ and ‘husband’ often used as supplementary definers. Bavinton and colleagues (2016; 2017) and Cornelisse and colleagues (2018) argue that identifying regular partnerships in such a way obscures the diversity of GBM’s partnership types and associated risk profiles. Findings from Down and colleagues (2017) suggest that HIV infection within regular partnerships is more likely to occur from ‘fuckbuddies’ rather than from romantic ‘boyfriends’. So, the romantic, boyfriend-type relationship assumed in the regular partner category may be an insufficient, even misleading basis for predicting HIV risk and for developing HIV prevention messages that resonate with GBM whose regular partnerships are not ‘boyfriend’-like.

Among GBM, concepts of familiarity, intimacy, and trust are central to decisions about condomless anal intercourse (CLAI; Kippax, et. al., 2003; Karney, et al., 2010; Wheldon & Pathak, 2010; Golub, Starks, Payton, & Parsons, 2011; Beougher, Gomez, & Hoff, 2011; Rouwenhorst, Mallitt, & Prestage, 2012; Van den Boom, et al., 2012). Men are more likely to engage in CLAI with partners with whom they are well acquainted, irrespective of HIV status (Prestage, Fengyi, Grulich, de Wit, & Zablotska, 2011; Van den Boom, Stolte, Sandfort, & Davidovich, 2012). Men tend to forgo condoms to increase intimacy with a partner, and as an expression of commitment to and a reflection of familiarity with them (Kippax, et al., 2003; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin, 2011; Mitchell, Harvey, Champeau, & Seal, 2012). GBM in romantic relationships are likely to have higher levels of commitment and familiarity than men in other kinds of sexual partnerships, and are therefore more likely to engage in those forms of communication that foster the development of sexual agreements that permit the type of CLAI which poses no risk for HIV transmission. This includes, but is not limited to ‘negotiated safety’ agreements, where HIV-negative concordant couples agree to dispense with condoms within their relationships, while at the same time agreeing to use condoms if they engage in sex with casual partners (Kippax et al. 1997).

We know little about how GBM conceive of and practice CLAI in other regular sexual partnerships that are not boyfriend-like. Understanding such conceptions and practices can offer valuable insights into how to diversify prevention messages that are consistent with men’s experiences and practices, and in ways that move beyond broad-target messages that fail to encapsulate a diverse set of partnerships (Worth, Reid, & McMillan, 2002; Kippax, et al., 2003; Blais, 2006; Golub, et al., 2011). There are, however, some limited recent data regarding fuckbuddy partnerships in Anglo-developed contexts (Bavinton et al. 2016; 2017; Cornelisse et al. 2018). These studies highlight that it is not uncommon for GBM to have multiple simultaneous regular partnerships of various combinations of boyfriends and fuckbuddies, and that, in comparison to GBM in romantic relationships, men with fuckbuddy partnerships commonly lack an expectation of monogamy, are less likely to know a partner’s serostatus, and express less commitment and trust.

In this paper, using semi-structured interviews with Australian gay men, we explore three kinds of regular partnerships that we argue go beyond the typically assumed conception of the ‘regular partner’ category: fuckbuddies, dating, and serial monogamy. In doing so, we seek to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of different sexual and emotional connections, and the symbolism attached to those, with implications for understanding commitment, trust and sexual risk among GBM, and how this can inform HIV prevention messages.

**Methodology**

Qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews exploring intimacy, relationships and monogamy/non-monogamy were conducted by the senior author with 61 Australian gay men in 2011. Following approval from La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee, men were recruited from three Australian states (Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland). Men were recruited via advertisements in the print and online gay press, through 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 relationship experiences, thoughts and preferences. Interviews were between 50 and 120 minutes in duration. Written consent was obtained, participant details have been kept confidential, and participants are referred to by pseudonym in the reporting of data that follows.

The original coding process has already been described (Duncan et al. 2015b). Using the coded material in NVivo, thematic analysis (Strauss 1987) was used to reanalyse the data. The interviews were reconsidered by the first author in relation to social, intimate, and sexual experiences with regular partners, and material was then extracted from the coding schedule and grouped into partnership categories, with a focus on identifying common and disparate themes running within and between categories. Upon completion of the analysis, the finalised data were discussed by study investigators to explore further complexities.

**The Sample**

Participants were diverse in age, geographic distribution, ethnic background, educational level, and relationship status (Table 1). Participants described both their current relationship and sexual life, and reflected on past relationship experiences and the ways these informed their current thoughts and preferences.

**Findings**

In addition to the category of ‘regular partner’ commonly conceived as ‘boyfriend’, we identified three other categories of regular partner: fuckbuddies, dating, and serial monogamy.

**Fuckbuddies**

Participants described ongoing sexual relationships with partners with whom there was a greater familiarity or friendship than casual partnerships but without the romance or commitment of boyfriend-type relationships, often referring to them as ‘friends-with-benefits’ or ‘fuckbuddies’. Sexual encounters could be infrequent and informal (such as friends who had not seen each other for some time, or who lived far apart) or more formal arrangements whereby they had a standing arrangement to have sex on a regular basis. Fuckbuddy partnerships were ones of a sexual nature where, despite the presence of intimacy and affection, it was implicit that the relationship had no explicitly articulated romantic future.

*I mean at one stage I might have had more friends with benefits… you might say ‘fuckbuddy’… I never saw them as being potential relationships, just sometimes friends I’d known for a long time. But I think sex was more a bit of fun together than any emotional involvement.* (Rex, 51, coupled)

As Rex identifies, fuckbuddy relationships enable sex and pleasure uncoupled from the emotional commitment required of romantic relationships. Yet, because they include friends who he has known for a long time, they are characterised by a shared understanding about what each partner expects: fun. Thus, fuckbuddies were described as a less attached partnership than a committed, romantic relationship, but one that was comprised of at least some similar elements in terms of familiarity and shared understanding. These partnerships were rarely considered a ‘stage’ on the way to a relationship, but some men were open to that possibility.Fuckbuddy partnerships also allowed men to enjoy the sexual opportunity and domestic independence of single life while at the same time experiencing some sense of ongoing, but not necessarily permanent or exclusive, intimacy with sexual partners.

*I was actually seeing three guys at once. Not seeing, but just showing intimacy with them. So I guess you could call it ‘friends with benefits’. But we had more respect for each other than to say that we’re friends with benefits. It was more like an agreement between all of us and it was like, “Well I’m not just yours and you don’t have to be just mine. You can go and have dinner with other people and sleep with other people, and things like that, ‘cause I’m gonna do the same thing.”* (Andrew, 22, single)

For Andrew, having multiple fuckbuddies proved a satisfying ‘middle ground’ that incorporated some advantages of both single and coupled life. Significantly, Andrew finds the concept of friends-with-benefits inadequate for capturing the depth of respect present in this arrangement. In fact, the freedom to meet and sleep with other people is characterised as a quality of this arrangement which indicates it’s depth of meaning and value. Conversely, Brian (58, coupled), who was in a romantic coupled relationship, perceived fuckbuddy partnerships as potentially threatening to, or unworkable alongside his romantic non-monogamous relationship.

*[Partner] proposed that he was gonna have the flatmate as a fuckbuddy and I was really challenged by that because it didn’t involve me and there was an emotional side to it that was breaking the intimate relationship we had.*

Though Brian did not express that fuckbuddy partners should not share intimacy, he did think that a fuckbuddy would be inappropriate alongside his romantic relationship because the presence of emotional intimacy with a fuckbuddy might threaten the intimate specialness of his romantic relationship. Casual partners were not threatening to his relationship because they were not ongoing and rarely involved emotional attachment.

Many younger men interviewed considered fuckbuddy agreements preferable to casual sex. The presence of feelings of familiarity and trust ameliorated anxieties about the perceived ‘morality’ of anonymous and casual sex. Brandon (20, single), for example, described difficulty meeting and having sex with strangers due to the absence of intimacy and trust.

*I’m not into flings and just hooking up randomly. For me that’s just a bit shallow and it serves a physical need in the short term, but I think if you’re doing that with other people, you’re giving away part of yourself each time. And you’re bonding with people physically but not emotionally.*

Brandon drew on discourses of promiscuity to position casual sex as shallow. For him, sex should meet an emotional need to bond more than a physical desire, and the only moral way to achieve that was in the context of some form of partnership with intimacy and familiarity. Fuckbuddy arrangements were also described as opportunities to learn to separate sex and relationship expectations, particularly in response to prior failed romances.

*It’s me actually coming to terms with my own thoughts and changing the pattern of me sort of thinking that intimacy is excluded... or is only for relationships and me now broadening that to actually maybe it’s not… intimacy can exist but it doesn’t have to be that symbolic unionship of in a relationship. It can be just we’re two really good friends and I trust you, and I feel comfortable with you.* (Andre, 22, single)

Andre untangled himself from the notion that intimacy should only be expressed in romantic relationships, and found that he could share intimate moments in sexual partnerships with friends whom he already trusted. However, whilst recognising the value of fuckbuddy relationships, including the autonomy and flexibility they provided, long-term committed relationships remained idealised as the best form of future relationship for many participants. It was not necessarily that single men fundamentally disliked single life, although several very much did, but that they imagined relationships as the ideal way in which to be happy. Some men considered having some form of emotional attachment with a fuckbuddy as better than no emotional attachment at all.

*Possibly if worse comes to worse and I couldn’t find somebody that I could have a long-term relationship with, at least then finding a fuckbuddy that I trust and like… and just knowing that this person is clean or safe is more the main priority.* (Rodney, 32, single)

Yet, Rodney nonetheless positioned fuckbuddy partnerships as a deficit against a committed relationship, which revealed his idealisation of a normative relationship trajectory. Similarly, indicating how HIV prevention discourses shaped some men’s outlooks on casual versus committed (i.e. putatively monogamous) partnerships, Rodney thought that having a fuckbuddy whom he trusted to be ‘clean’ (i.e. HIV-negative) meant he could worry less about his sexual health. Contrasting Rodney’s comments, however, some fuckbuddy partnerships appeared to rely on irregular and incomplete communication about HIV risk.

*With this previous guy, we never really had that discussion. Like, we had a discussion that was about something like, “Look, I just had all my STD tests again and they’ve all come back clean.” But it took months for him to test and be sure that he was also clean, but we weren’t using condoms during that time…I guess I’d seem him enough to just believe in him that he was fine.* (Ron, 43, coupled)

Among HIV-negative men in particular, having a certain level of familiarity and regularity with a fuckbuddy partner was a sufficient basis on which to trust a partner with regard to one’s own level of risk. As Ron indicates, some men saw little need to communicate about their sexual health because of the implicit trust signified by the friendship. Furthermore, talking about sexual health in terms of negotiated safety is a model of agreement formation unsuited to such partnerships. As Ron implies, the expectation that men should engage in such conversations as a matter of building trust in a partnership may also formalise it or imply greater commitment than warranted in ways that some men may experience as threatening to the autonomy and sexual freedom that characterised their motivations for fuckbuddy partnerships.

As a consequence of both the greater trust facilitated by the familiarity of a fuckbuddy partner, and the fact that formal communication strategies for the formation of agreements are designed to build on and consolidate the kinds of emotional trust and obligations that characterise ongoing, romantic relationships, ‘agreements’ to dispense with condoms with fuckbuddies could be informally and quickly formed. They also appeared to be rarely revisited, even though this agreement was the basis on which fuckbuddies continued to have CLAI while having other sexual partners. This resonates with research showing that agreements have as much if not more to do with fostering emotional intimacy and security between romantic partners than sexual security per se – a feature less central to the maintenance of fuckbuddy relationships.

**Dating**

Regular relationships are generally described in the literature in terms of fixed, observable, and quantifiable characteristics, leaving little space to conceptualise the ways in which partnerships evolve and potentially deepen as time goes on. A particular regular partnerships formation that emerged in the data analysis was around the concept of ‘dating’. This formation was defined less by the enduring commitment or emotional connection characterising ongoing romantic partnerships, although these were either hoped for or at least a known possibility.

The term ‘dating’ referred to actively pursuing a romantic relationship with a potential boyfriend, but not yet defining it as a coupled relationship.

*For me, dating, it’s when you’re still starting to get to know someone and you may already have some sort of intimacy and you’re having sex and so on, but I don’t think you’re calling each other a couple yet. You may not have introduced each other to friends and family, and haven’t really made plans together to travel or things like that.* (Daniel, 29, single)

For Daniel, dating partnerships were formative and exploratory, without a clear definition and certainly without the formal markers of commitment and intimacy suggested by introducing a partner to one’s friends and family or planning travel together. New dating partnerships in particular were considered to be exploratory and uncertain, and therefore open to review and revision. Participants described dating as characterised by a sense of promise and uncertainty, with the need to exercise restraint in the emotional investments they made with new partners. In particular, they described the need to avoid ascribing any suggestion of commitment to a new and uncertain situation, which manifested in an unwillingness to clarify the question of exclusivity until the relationship had become sufficiently ‘serious’.

*We’ve never had a conversation about that because I don’t want to trigger that conversation. I don’t want to ask that and have him say “We’re exclusively dating boyfriends.” Like I’d rather leave that one totally untouched… So at five dates I’m beginning to feel uncomfortable because I don’t know how long it is until it’s exclusive.* (Mitchell, 24, single)

Mitchell explained further that he was unwilling to prematurely formalise a commitment because he was simultaneously *‘sussing out’* another man and was unsure about whom he cared about more, and because he was travelling soon and did not want to have an exclusive partnership that would prevent him having sex while travelling. Thus, his broad desire to develop a romantic relationship conflicted with his desire not to be tied down, or at least not to settle until he was absolutely sure who he liked more.

Yet, even as dating partnerships did develop beyond the initial stages (typified by a phase of familiarisation in an attempt to assess compatibility), some men were still reluctant to discuss exclusivity, even if they wanted it. Several expressed concern that if they did discuss it while dating, their partner may not reciprocate their desire to further formalise the relationship, or may find they were on a different wavelength in terms of commitment.

*I guess it can be a bit fuzzy ‘cause unless it’s set down in stone that you are exclusive, and are treated that way… but then if you do try to set that boundary too early, people get a bit scared. I think that’s what happens.* (Jacob, 22, single)

This concern paralleled that of those men who described a reluctance to discuss the partnership with fuckbuddy partners lest they imply they were more committed to the partnership than their partner might want. ‘Playing the field’, that is, keeping one’s options open, or being seen not to be too serious about the relationship were key aspects of the dating scripts these men described, clearly indicating the ways in which discussions about sexual risk are incompatible with such regular partnerships.For others, however, the issue of exclusivity while dating did not need discussion. Rather, sexual exclusivity was seen as the defining feature of a boyfriend relationship, and so it was implied, even expected, even if the partners had not made their commitment to each other ‘official’.

*There are a certain number of dates after which you should probably be kind of exclusive because there’s an expectation. It’s not because there’s an agreement but because almost there's a… An assumption, I guess, you’ve been dating for some amount of time. There's an assumption that unless you’ve talked about it being open, it’s not.* (Mitchell, 24, single)

From Mitchell’s perspective, serious relationships are monogamous relationships. A conversation about sexual risk is only warranted as part of a conversation about a sexual agreement with external partners. However, such conversations, and even the presumption of fidelity, are incomplete in dating partnerships. Participants were either hesitant to discuss exclusivity or perceived little need to discuss it because it was implied.

There was a striking lack of consistency among the men regarding when and if they should stop using condoms with a man they were dating. Some men conflated CLAI with romantic, committed relationships and for these men it was only when the relationship was formalised, when a certain level of trust was perceived to have developed, and there had been an explicit discussion about dispensing with condoms and subsequent testing for HIV , that it was acceptable to have condomless sex.

*We talked about it in depth. And it was at least six months because of the timing for HIV and all that stuff to appear in your system. So we went and had all that checked out. And we were both fine. And by that stage as well we knew each other better and so we were both more comfortable with not using condoms anymore. Because we’d established a really sick [strong] level of trust.* (Justin, 23, coupled)

Yet, for other participants the decision to discontinue with condoms occurred once a more abstract sense of trust had been obtained rather than via explicit negotiation and formalisation of a relationship. When asked what informed his decision to stop using condoms, Daniel (29, single) responded: *‘I think there isn’t any sort of clear signpost. It’s all, this person has these qualities and I can trust them now. It happens organically but it does take time.’* This mirrored the ephemeral feelings of trust participants described between fuckbuddy partners.Thus, participants did not necessarily need to consider themselves ‘in a relationship’ to forgo condoms with their dating partner; trust and perceived commitment ameliorated any sense of sexual health risk, or the need for a more rational approach, such as those offered in models of explicit communication, test and trust strategies.

Participants described how ‘missing’ their partner, spending prolonged periods of time with them, and feeling comfortable and relaxed with, committed to, and trusting of them were all indicators they their partnership was becoming more serious. These signals reflect the normative discourses of ‘falling in love,’ a passage that presaged a shift in relationship status.

*What made them relationships? I suppose the acknowledgement by both of us that it was a relationship. That it was beyond just dating around. And the whole unwritten kind of atmosphere that’s there.* (Brent, 19, single)

Brent described how he could intrinsically and intangibly ‘feel’ his partnership becoming a relationship. Formal conversations about fidelity and sexual risk were inimical to the loose, formative and exploratory nature of dating relationships these men described, elements which also worked to protect the sexual flexibility and freedom to leave an early dating partnership they also valued. So, for these men, ‘forming’ a romantic relationship rarely involved a discussion about monogamy or non-monogamy; instead monogamy was assumed and it was implied that relationships would begin that way: ‘*Then we just decided to stop using condoms. So there was a discussion to that point, but we didn’t discuss specifically monogamy ‘cause we both just assumed that’* (Ron, 43, coupled). The symbolism of monogamy as a form of emotional ‘glue’ binding partners to each other was also a feature of the way in which dating partnerships might become more serious. Until such a time however, participants described feeling their way and building trust and emotional intimacy, in parallel with the material markers of relationship formation including travel, shared friends and meeting family.

**Serial Monogamy**

The loose and exploratory features of dating relationships were central to another pattern we identified in the practice of regular partnerships: serial monogamy. Rather than a specific style of partnership, this was a particular mode of partnership practice, particularly prominent among the younger men in the sample. Serial monogamy occurred when monogamous romantic relationships among younger men became established quickly and after a limited period of familiarisation, before ending within a few weeks or months. This process was then quickly repeated with new sexual partners with minimal time in-between. Mitchell (24, single), who appeared to take particular advantage of the flexibility of early dating relationships and was reluctant to enter into a more formal (and therefore, in his eyes, a more restrictive, monogamous relationship) provided his own intriguing theory of serial monogamy, describing it as *‘the two month twink rule’*.

*People have been socially programmed either through TV or their parents that they need to be in a relationship and they need to be in love to have sex. A lot of the young gays now meet someone they like, they go on a date or two, and they find some nugget of compatibility, and all of a sudden they’re in a relationship within two weeks. And they have sex – lots and lots of sex. And then they realise they’re not very compatible or the sex gets boring, or they see someone else who catches their eye. The entire cycle happens within two months.*

According to Mitchell, people learn through socialisation that sex is only acceptable if it happens within a loving relationship. The inverse implication is that people should not have sex if they are not romantically attached, thus morally positioning casual sex as taboo. As has been noted in previous work (Duncan, Prestage, and Grierson 2015), many younger men in this sample believed that casual sex was the norm among Australian gay men, but nonetheless struggled with this norm. They drew on promiscuity discourses to position casual sex as meaningless or unhealthy, and conversely thought of relationship sex as meaningful and ‘safe’. At the same time, these younger men expressed a desire to ‘play the field’ and engage in the sexual opportunities available to gay men. So, as Mitchell suggests, uncritically forming a ‘relationship’ permits younger GBM to have sex while at the same time avoiding anxieties about what they perceive as an unwanted ‘promiscuous’ label attached to casual sex.

Other participants offered a different explanation about the practice of serial monogamy. They positioned it as a knee-jerk response to the normative idea that one is only successful if in a relationship. In the broadest sense, many younger men repeatedly considered being in a relationship as the accepted and expected trajectory for happiness. Some participants (of varying ages), who positioned themselves as more reflective of the ‘realities’ of gay relationships, were critical of these ‘other’, naïve young GBM. They believed that these young GBM blindly entered into serial monogamous partnerships for the sake of being in a relationship, and as an acceptance of this normative trajectory. Indeed, Joel (29, single) described it as:

*It’s like when you’re at a nightclub and like you get to the end of the night and then you just kind of start looking around going, “Oh …” and then you end up just going, “Okay, you’ll do,” and then go home with some random person that you’re not particularly attracted to and not particularly interested in.*

If dating was characterised by a longer period of familiarisation in an attempt to determine social and sexual compatibility, serial monogamy, appears to involve much less deliberation.

After describing his *‘two month twink* rule’, Mitchell went on to explain why he thought serial monogamous partnerships were unsuccessful – they are premised upon ‘*counting your chickens too early’;* whereas in practice, relationships take time to develop. In fact, Mitchell was doing his best to avoid developing commitment too soon with a man he was newly dating at the time of his interview.

*I’ve mentioned I’m not in any kind of rush… so I’m trying to not put any strong signs in. But I suspect the fact that we hooked up on our first date, we slept over on the second date and had a rather domestic home date on the third date. So, on our fourth date I said, “let’s go bowling and see the city, and not just do that domestic stuff.”*

Like Mitchell, Corey (39, coupled) had learned the benefit of establishing familiarity with one’s partner before committing to a relationship: ‘*I suppose the biggest difference was when we first met is that we actually dated for like several weeks, whereas all my previous partners, we had a one-night stand and decided to have a relationship out of that.’* Men practicing serial monogamy, conversely, were perceived to rush into romantic relationships without taking the time to establish the level of commitment that a period of dating would usually afford. Consequently, with little opportunity to become familiar with their partners, sexual health was rarely discussed. Rather, some men assumed that CLAI was acceptable simply because being in a relationship meant they were protected from HIV. As was the pattern of serial monogamy, they then did so similarly with multiple partners over a short period of time.

**Discussion**

Each of the partnership categories and modes of relationship practice described here have distinct characteristics with regard to intimacy, trust, familiarity, and sexual risk that do not wholly align with the romantic, boyfriend-like relationship traditionally conceptualised in the regular partner category in public health. Our findings provide important insights into the diversity of gay men’s experiences of regular partnerships, and the relative strengths and vulnerabilities to HIV of specific partnership types and relationship practices.

In contrast to dating partnerships, fuckbuddy partnerships mostly lack the expectation or desire for a romantic future, even if romance may be a feature of the pleasures they offer. Their appeal lies in their flexibility, both in terms of sex and emotional attachment. They offer some sense of sexual familiarity and intimacy while also allowing for experiences to be shared with other sexual partners, and without the expectation of exclusivity or emotional attachment (provided unrequited affection does not develop). At the same time, having sex on a regular basis increases familiarity with one’s partner, which can produce feelings of trust. Consequently, in this sample partners were often perceived to pose a limited sexual health risk, and CLAI was considered more acceptable in comparison to sex with casual partners, even if discussion about HIV prevention was limited. So, condoms may not be perceived as a relevant HIV prevention strategy for GBM with fuckbuddies. Similarly, ongoing or ‘serious’ communication about sexual health was not always perceived as necessary, given the trust that was described as present between partners, nor appropriate, given the ways in which formal conversations about risk were understood to be features of boyfriend rather than causal or fuckbuddy relationships. Thus, negotiated safety agreements, which have been promoted broadly for all regular partnerships, and which require a high level of communication, trust, and commitment, may similarly not be appropriate in fuckbuddy partnerships (Bavinton et al. 2016; 2017).

Dating partnerships can carry the hope or potential for a romantic future. For many of the men in our sample, sharing time with their dating partners led to intimacy and trust developing, which coincided with increasingly inconsistent condom use. Yet, discussing HIV and condoms was often articulated as irrelevant and possibly even detrimental or antithetical to the concept of dating. Furthermore, discussion of exclusivity was at times problematic in dating partnerships. Some men were uncertain about when and if exclusivity became relevant, and how one’s own feelings accorded with those of a partner, leaving them hesitant to discuss the future of the partnership, lest they imply greater intimacy or commitment than was warranted by the partnership itself. This uncertainty presents a contradiction in the practices of these men – being confident enough in a *partner* to have CLAI, but not of a *partnership* to actually discuss it. Also, men often assumed that after a certain period of dating, exclusivity was implied and did not require direct communication about the topic until agreeing that it had become a ‘relationship’. The distinct silence around communication in both scenarios demonstrates that, along with condoms, negotiated safety agreements may not be workable for men in dating partnerships.

In exploring the kinds of strategies appropriate for regular partnerships that are not romantic relationships, it may be useful to consider HIV prevention in terms of how well acquainted partners are, and consequently how easily negotiation, communication, and *reasoned* trust can occur, rather than how GBM categorise their partners per se. Down and colleagues (2017) found that HIV infection is more likely to occur from partners who have had little or no prior acquaintance, suggesting that the characteristics, contexts, and lengths of partnerships are more appropriate indicators of HIV infection than the categories GBM ascribe to their partners. Regardless of how it is categorised, if communication about sexual health does not fit in with the ways in which a partnership is practiced, then Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) is a practical option. PrEP is an effective prevention strategy whereby HIV-negative people take a daily pill to protect themselves from HIV (Fonner et al. 2016). Given that GBM on PrEP know they are protected from HIV, the need for communication with partners may not be a factor in determining how ‘at risk’ they perceive themselves to be (Garret can you help me re-word?). At such a time that ongoing communication does become a feature of a partnership, partners can communicate about which HIV prevention strategy best suits their situation. It is here that HIV prevention in regular partnerships becomes negotiated rather than individualised, and information about another partner (their HIV, PrEP or viral load status) might be used in considerations of HIV prevention. Crucial to safely negotiating HIV prevention with another partner is the notion of *reasoned* trust. Evidence from the Australian Seroconversion Study found that of GBM with regular partners, fuckbuddies were a greater source of HIV infection than romantic partners (Down et al. 2017). This indicates that the *perception* that a fuckbuddy partner poses little risk may not always be warranted (although in some it most certainly may be), and that trust in a fuckbuddy (signposted by non-condom use) can sometimes be misplaced. *Reasoned* trust implies partners are familiar with each other to the extent that they can be absolutely sure they can trust the knowledge they have about each other’s HIV, PrEP, and UVL status, as well as condom use with other partners, which also implies that conversations about sexual health have occurred.

Of course, knowing when these conversations become appropriate can be problematic, as evidenced by the unwillingness or hesitancy of some of our men to talk to their sexual partners about sexual health. For dating partnerships in particular, some GBM might feel like a negotiated HIV prevention approach *should* reflect the intensity and closeness of their partnership, but they are nonetheless hesitant or perceive no need to have those kinds of conversations. At the same time, these men may similarly perceive no need for an individualised approach such as PrEP precisely because closeness they feel to their partner eliminates any perception that they could pose a risk. In these moments, these men may place themselves at risk because they have not identified what their dating partner is doing with other sexual partners. So, an important consideration in determining appropriate HIV prevention strategies for GBM who are dating is how dating partnerships transition into romantic, committed relationships, and how conversations about sexual health fit in to such scenarios. For example, how soon do dating partners tend to dispense with condoms and/or PrEP, when does negotiated safety become relevant, and how does the topic of exclusivity (or not) fit into these moments? This is particularly important because, as Down and colleagues (2017) found, more HIV infections occur in newer partnerships than in established, longer-term relationships. While our data can provide some initial insight into the dating practices of GBM, further understanding of the unclear, flexible and highly subjective boundaries between ‘dating’ and romantic relationships is required to enable more effective HIV prevention strategies.

Although ‘categories’ can conceal complexity in intimate interactions, it may be useful for HIV organisations to draw on the ‘fuckbuddy’ terminology in HIV prevention efforts as it is already commonly used language among at least Australian GBM. However, due to the fact that fuckbuddy partnerships often become unintentionally obscured within the regular partner category (Bavinton et al. 2016, 2017; Cornelisse et al. 2018), there is limited health promotion specifically targeting GBM with fuckbuddy partners which encourages them to consider PrEP, yet PrEP is a relevant option for many fuckbuddy partnerships. Future research and promotion efforts can acknowledge the uniqueness of fuckbuddy partnerships (Bavinton et al. 2016, 2017; Cornelisse et al. 2018) and produce campaigns specific to GBM with fuckbuddy partners to encourage PrEP uptake. (Garrett – unsure of this paragraph, but I still want to make the point again that fuckbuddy partnerships can become lost in the broad ‘regular partner’ category, but it is important they are defined uniquely because they represent a substantial source of HIV infection.)

Finally, serial monogamy presents a different set of issues as a mode of partnership practice rather than a specific style of partnership. It comes with implied narratives around love, familiarity, and trust. Rather than developing over time and then being utilised in discussions about sexual health, these characteristics are taken for granted as already existing in the relationship and used as a premise to dispense with condoms. In opposition to the high-level and ongoing negotiation evident in negotiated safety, this leads some to place more trust in the sexual health of their partner than is warranted. As is the practice of serial monogamy, this process of quickly forgoing condoms is repeated with several partners in a short amount of time, so in fact these men might end up with the same number of partners as other men who are having casual sex, but doing so in the context of a ‘relationship’, which they assume protects them from HIV. Rather than developing a specific HIV prevention strategy for men practicing serial monogamy (because it only becomes clear that one has been practicing serial monogamy in hindsight), it is important to continue to educate younger GBM in particular about characteristics including trust and familiarity, how they make CLAI safe in the context of relationships, and how best to discuss safe sex with partners.

**Conclusion**

A better understanding of the ways in which GBM conduct, negotiate, and manage their sexual interactions reveals diversity in the often crudely defined ‘regular partner’ category. GBM make decisions about sexual health based on the social and sexual connections they share with their partners, and it is important that sexual health interventions are responsive and sensitive to the complexities, fluidity, and meanings of these connections, while at the same time not losing sight of the factors than can exacerbate or ameliorate risk, such as time as familiarity. Such interventions need to be vigilant in continually evolving to align with GBM’s practices with the aim of resonating with men in all kinds of partnerships, each with their own HIV prevention needs.

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**Table 1.** *Demographic characteristics*

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