

THE GAY COUPLES STUDY

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Greetings

By Colleen Hoff

Greetings and welcome to the Spring 2009 Gay Couples Study Newsletter! It has been six months since we relocated to the Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality at San Francisco State University and by now nearly all of you have visited our new offices. I am pleased to know that, for the most part, the move has been good for you. According to what many of you have told us, the location is more centrally located and the building is easier to access.

Early this spring we wrapped up the fourth wave of data collection, meaning that all couples in the study have come in for their fourth appointment. There are two waves left, which end in summer 2009 and spring 2010. Once data collection is complete, we will begin disseminating results. Most likely, some will come to you via the email and postal mail addresses you provided, so please update them if they have changed.

In this issue, Project Director Sean Beougher writes about new findings coming out of a study of gay men in New York City. This study looks at the motivations behind selecting partners

An Introduction to the Latino Gay Couples Study

By Walter Gomez

The Latino Gay Couples Study started in the fall of 2007. The goal of the project is to assess if there are any fundamental differences in the ways in which Latino gay and bisexual men in relationships created and negotiated agreements around sex in and out of their relationships. The focus was directed at possible cultural differences brought upon by race and ethnicity.

In November of 2007, outreach staff on our study team took to the streets in order to recruit this new sample, independent from those participants already enrolled in The Gay Couples Study. The recruitment process consisted of going to bars, nightclubs, and community-based organizations that served gay and bisexual Latino men. The latter proved to be the most

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for casual sex and for longer-term relationships. In the article below, Research Assistant Walter Gómez discusses research we have been conducting for nearly two years on Spanish-speaking, Latino gay couples. Walter is also featured in this issue's Staff Profile. Research Assistant Carla Garcia writes about future research possibilities. Finally, we have an interview with two independent San Francisco researchers, Blake Spears and Lanz Lowen, who are also studying gay couples and are currently recruiting should you be interested in participating.

As always, we appreciate your continued participation and thank you for the time and effort you have invested in our study. Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments. In the meantime, happy reading!

effective venue and provided a majority of our sample. Those individuals had been exposed to HIV information and resources through their involvement in the organizations.

After recruiting ten couples, we conducted the first of two rounds of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews from December, 2007 to March, 2008. Of the 20 participants, the majority were Mexican, 18 were HIV-negative, and their ages ranged from 18-56.

The questions we asked were very similar to the ones we used for the larger, Gay Couples Study interview cohort (please see our Fall 2007 newsletter for more information), however, we added some additional questions that focused on issues

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After The Gay Couples Study

Carla Garcia

As we enter the final stages of data collection (we expect our final survey in early winter of 2010), and our focus increasingly turns to analysis, writing, and the dissemination of the results, we continue to keep an eye out for funding possibilities for future studies. As such, we have recently begun to ask participants when they come in for their sixth and final survey for authorization to re-contact them after The Gay Couples Study closes in the event we receive funding to continue researching the issues that are important to gay men and gay couples.

Please note that authorizing us to re-contact you about future studies does not obligate you to participate. The purpose of this form is for you to agree to let us contact you to see if you would be interested and eligible.

If you took your sixth and final survey before February 2009, you were not given a form to sign authorizing us to re-contact you. If you would like to know about any future studies, please contact



us by phone at 1-888-688-1777 or email at ccgarcia@sfsu.edu. We are happy to send you the form to sign and return to us or you may authorize us to re-contact you via email.

If you have yet to take your sixth and final survey, we will discuss this with you and ask you for authorization when you take your last survey. If you have already signed (or declined signing) this form, there is no need to contact us.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

Intimacy and HIV-Status as Motivators for Gay Men's Partner Selection

By Sean Beougher

In recent years, researchers have begun to acknowledge that gay men are increasingly forgoing condoms when they engage in anal sex. While some interpret this as foolhardy behavior encouraged by assumptions about the effectiveness of current HIV treatments, others worry that gay men may have become fatigued by safer sex messages and are no longer paying attention to them. Yet many studies indicate that most gay men are rarely indiscriminate about safer sex. So why do so many have anal sex without condoms?

Previous research points to two safer sex strategies already in use by many gay men that may help explain the trend: serosorting and negotiated safety.

Serosorting is when individuals choose casual sex partners that are the same HIV-status (or serostatus) as themselves. This could be two HIV-negative individuals choosing each other or two HIV-positive individuals. When two individuals are the same serostatus they are concordant. When two individuals are different serostatuses they are discordant.

Negotiated safety is when two HIV-negative individuals in a steady relationship either choose to be monogamous or, if they allow sex with outside partners, agree to only have safe sex with those partners. Regardless of whether the couple allows sex with others, their goal is to stop using condoms with each other.

Both strategies show gay men actively taking their health into their own hands. But are these strategies as simple as screening out discordant partners? Researchers at City University of New York questioned whether other factors – namely the desire for intimacy – influence gay men when they select casual partners based on serostatus. To find out, they interviewed 16 HIV-negative and 16 HIV-positive gay men of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in New York City to see what motivated them when they chose casual partners.

The researchers defined 'intimacy' broadly to include its sexual, emotional, and physical components. They did so because many people find the need for intimacy in all its forms a strong motivator when seeking partners. Based on their broad definition, the researchers asked participants how intimacy motivates them as they select partners for sex and potential future relationships based on serostatus. They also asked how future goals and past relationships might contribute to choices based on serostatus and whether other issues come up as they reconciled a desire for intimacy with attempts to have safer sex.

Three themes emerged in the analysis. First, HIV risk reduction was the primary motive when the men selected concordant partners. Understandably then, many of the men perceived discordant sex (that is, having sex with someone who is of a different HIV-status) as inherently risky. In general, the HIV-negative gay men choose other HIV-negative gay men as a way

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Research Opportunity

The Couples Study

Independent researchers Blake Spears and Lanz Lowen are examining long-term gay male couples with open relationships. We sat down to talk to them about their research interests, how it is being independent researchers, and how they found out about us. Project Director Sean Beougher interviews.

Q: Tell me about your personal and professional backgrounds.

A: We both have training and professional experience in research and psychology.

Blake is a marketing research consultant and founder of Insight Healthcare Consulting. He routinely conducts focus groups and individual interviews with physicians to assess the market potential and positioning of new pharmaceutical products and medical devices. Blake has a B.S. in Chemical Engineering from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and an MBA from Stanford.

Lanz is an organization development consultant who coaches executives and facilitates team development retreats. Data collection through confidential interviews is a core element in his work. Lanz has Master's Degrees in both Clinical and Organizational Psychology.

Q: Why study gay couples with open relationships?

A: Although open relationships are common in the gay community, little has been written about them. As a long-term couple (we've been together for 33 years), we know from our own experience that there are benefits as well as challenges. We are curious how other long-term couples with open relationships have navigated these waters. What was helpful? What was problematic? What is the impact of opening your relationship? We are exploring these issues to identify themes and develop models that may be of value for others.

Q: Why not include couples who are monogamous?

A: Because of our own history as a couple and our personal interests, we were concerned about being unable to represent monogamous couples and their experiences as fully as they deserve. Although our study is focused on open relationships, we have had great conversations along the way with couples who are in rewarding long-term monogamous relationships.

Myths in our community about monogamous couples are clearly erroneous. There are honest, long-term monogamous gay



relationships that exist and are satisfying.

Q: What do you hope to find? Also, have you considered what you will do with your results?

A: First, if there are different ways of structuring and thinking about open relationships that work for couples, we want to be able to share that. Second, we want to be able to describe behaviors, attitudes, and norms that help couples deal honestly and effectively with having an open relationship. Finally, we want to know more about the impact having an open relationship has on trust, intimacy, commitment, the couple's sex life, and the degree to which it influences the couple's development.

We plan to post the summary of our analysis on our website as soon as we complete all interviews and analyze the data. We are expecting to use the findings as the basis for writing a book or a series of articles.

Q: How has it been working outside of traditional institutions such as universities and research organizations?

A: We have to provide our own funding. Also, we suspect that recruiting participants is more difficult because we don't have the built-in credibility of a university. On the plus side, we have a free hand in designing and executing the study based on our own interests and the expertise we bring from our respective fields.

Q: What does participating in your study entail?

A: Participating involves a 45-minute interview with each partner (partners are interviewed separately). Interviews can be conducted in person or over the phone. All information given is confidential and will not be shared with anyone.

For participating, a donation of \$100 will be made to the LGBT

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relevant to gay Latino men. The interviews were transcribed and then translated from Spanish to English.

After going through the interviews and field notes from this process, we designed a set of codes to use as we analyzed the data. In the winter of 2009, Sean Bougher and I started coding the data from these interviews in both English and Spanish using the Transana qualitative software program.

We recently completed our initial analysis just as the second and final round of interviews was wrapping up. So far, we have interviewed seven couples for the second wave. Soon, the study team will begin an in-depth analysis of the data which will turn into a number of publications looking at the way in which gay and bisexual Latino men handle their agreements about sex with outside partners. As we begin disseminating results next spring, please keep your eyes open for this important work!

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or AIDS organization of choice as a gesture of our appreciation for the time and effort of each couple participating. Each couple will also be notified of summary results and can request that a copy be sent to them.

7. How did you find out about us, here at The Gay Couples Study?

We heard from several couples we were trying to recruit that, “we’re already in *that* study.” We had known about the Gay Couples Study, but thought it was primarily HIV-related. We were surprised and excited to find out about its comprehensiveness. Our study, however, focuses on one aspect of gay male coupling: couples with open relationships. We believe both studies will be useful to the community and to couples looking for models and information.

8. Any interesting stories that have come out of researching this topic?

Although it seems obvious, we still find ourselves surprised at how unique each relationship is. As a couple in an open relationship, we have always had fairly clear rules around what’s permissible and what’s not. It was our way of managing the ambiguity of an open relationship by having boundaries. Consequently, we included a number of questions about rules in the interview. However, we had to re-think this when we heard in the very first interview, “Oh, we don’t believe in rules. The last thing I want is to tell my partner what he can and cannot do.” People are unique and relationships are even more so. What is front and center for one couple can be off another couple’s map. At the same time, there are common themes. The joy, however, that comes as people describe their relationships is universal.

For more information, or to participate, please visit www.TheCouplesStudy.com or contact Lanz Lowen at 510-530-6875 or LanzLowen@aol.com

*People are unique and relationships are even more so...
...the joy, however, that comes as people describe their
relationships is universal.*

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to minimize the likelihood of being infected with HIV while the HIV-positive gay men choose other HIV-positive gay men as a way to minimize the likelihood of transmitting HIV.

Second, intimacy was a strong motivator for men as they sought concordant partners. Many felt that having a partner of the same serostatus facilitated intimacy because, as far as sexual intimacy is concerned for example, they felt they did not have to worry about HIV. Some chose partners based on serostatus only if they were looking for a steady partner. Otherwise, for casual sex, they were flexible about the serostatus of their casual sex partners.

Third, past sexual and relationship experiences influenced many of the men's choices based on serostatus. For example, one HIV-negative participant who lost his partner to HIV said that in order to avoid going through that experience again he only sought other HIV-negative men.

An overarching theme was the conflict many men encountered when balancing intimacy with HIV risk reduction. Some discussed having a strict policy where they only chose men that were the same serostatus as themselves. Others were more flexible with their partner selection and made exceptions if the "right guy" came along, even if he was a different serostatus. In those cases, the men always prioritized their need for intimacy over their desire to reduce HIV risk.

In conclusion, although the gay men in this study were mindful about safer sex and reducing HIV risk, other concerns influenced the choices they made when they selected partners for casual sex

and potential future relationships. Intimacy, in all its forms, played an important role in that process. Many of the men felt that choosing a concordant partner established sexual intimacy (because they thought that they could avoid using condoms) and facilitated emotional intimacy (because they felt more secure in a relationship with someone of the same serostatus as themselves).

All of the men reconciled intimacy with risk reduction. And for many, the more they wanted to establish intimacy the more likely they were to make exceptions to their rule of seeking concordant partners. Understandably, this was a struggle for these men as they found it challenging to navigate the complex interactions of their motivations, past experiences, and future goals.

Future research should account for these complexities because they represent the lived experiences of many gay men. Intimacy with other men, in all its forms, oftentimes involves more than reducing HIV risk and if future prevention efforts are to be effective they must incorporate a broader understanding of how gay men conduct their sexual and romantic lives.

Reference:

Frost, D., Stirratt, M., & Ouellette, S. (2008). Understanding why gay men seek HIV-seroconcordant partners: Intimacy and risk reduction motivations. *Culture, Health, & Sexuality, 10*(5), 513–527.

}Staff Spotlight: Walter Gómez, Research Assistant

Walter Gómez joined The Gay Couples Study in the fall of 2007. He holds a BA in Sociology from the University of Puerto Rico and was recently awarded a Master's Degree in the same field from the University of California, San Francisco.

Walter was initially hired to oversee a small qualitative study with Latino Spanish-speaking gay couples. After this project's first wave wrapped up in the spring of 2008, he was brought on board to work in the study in a permanent fashion.

Bringing in over seven years of experience in behavioral HIV and sexuality-based research, Walter has been an integral part of the study's qualitative component. He honed his research skills as part of his advanced methods courses as well as working

as a Research Associate at UCSF's Department of Medical Anthropology and the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies.

Walter has presented at conferences in Cuba, Barcelona, Perú, and around the U.S. He hopes to do the same with his findings from the Gay Couples Study as well as to submit papers for publication in the near future.

Walter's research interests involve the intersection of class, ethnicity, and gender and its effects on communication and decision-making. He is also drawn to the role of social networks in the development and management of queer identities and sexual behaviors.



Study Name

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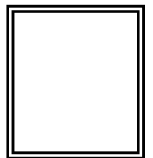
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We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

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