



*Private love develops
in a paradox of
conflicting pressures.
Edwards, T., Erotic and
Politics*

Gay Couples Newsletter



Greetings from the Gay Couples Study

Thank you for participating in the Gay Couples Study. During the first phase of the study we interviewed couples to explore many aspects of their relationships including sex, intimacy and HIV. In the second phase we asked couples to fill out our survey on a computer. Currently we are recruiting couples in the community to participate in another (larger) survey about relationships.

Why Study Gay Couples?

Relevant research shows that gay men in relationships may have more unprotected sex than single gay men, usually with their primary partner. For example, a desire to be closer or for more intimacy in the relationship may contribute to couples engaging in unprotected sex with each other. Whether or not this is 'risky' behavior depends on many factors. In addition, recent studies have found that increased numbers of gay men are becoming infected with HIV from their primary

partner. Therefore, we are hoping to increase our understanding of the dynamics of gay men's relationships, and how they may or may not be associated with sex. The Gay Couples Study promises to be pioneering, as there is little behavioral research looking at gay male couples, the sexual agreements they make, and the role of the HIV-status of the partners. What follows is a brief overview of some of our findings from phase 1 and 2.

Setting Gay Men Apart

We wanted to learn more about relationships among gay male couples. What makes them unique? For example, many couples have open relationships where sex with outside partners is allowed. While some have previously negotiated agreements about it, others have not. Those who have agreements often ask each other to use condoms and practice safe sex when having sex with outside partners. They believe this helps ensure their safety by not putting each other at a higher risk for HIV or STIs.

Previous researchers have asked how gay couples negotiate their agreements about sex with outside partners. Others have asked how these negotiations may reduce HIV risk. So far, their results have yielded mixed results. One study showed that the *type* of agreement was just as important as the *presence* of one. Some types of agreements were broken more than others. On a similar note, another study found that restrictive agreements were not necessarily better at preventing risky behavior. Having rules forbidding sex outside of the relationship, for example, did not ensure they were followed.

Where We Come In

Our research team, led by Colleen Hoff, Ph.D., noticed that none of these previous studies of gay couples involved both partners. As a result, they relied on what one half, rather than both halves, of a couple have to say about the dynamics of their relationship and the agreements they have about sex outside of their relationship.

The Gay Couples Study, in which you participated, seeks to better understand the nature of gay couples and the agreements they have about sex outside of their relationships. Some of the questions that guide our research include how these agreements function, how couples cope when these agreements are broken, and what role HIV status plays in these agreements.

First, we interviewed 38 gay couples and talked to them about the agreements they made around sex with outside partners. We included a variety of gay men in a variety of different relationships, such as those in monogamous relationships as well as those in open relationships. Approximately 1/3 of our couples were both HIV-negative, 1/3 were both HIV-positive, and the remaining 1/3 were sero-discordant, where one partner was HIV-negative and the other was HIV-positive. We interviewed each couple at the same time, but talked to each partner separately. This helped each person respond more openly during the interview and helped us learn more about their relationship and their agreements around sex with outside partners.

What We Found

We were surprised to find that HIV prevention was not a primary motivator in the agreements couples made. Also, these agreements were considered to be an integral part of their relationships. Nonetheless, sometimes these agreements conflicted with safety precautions and put individuals at greater risk for HIV. We also had unique and interesting findings for couples based on their combined HIV status.

Sero-discordant couples, where one partner is HIV-negative and the other is HIV-positive, were highly motivated to keep the HIV-negative partner safe from HIV. Consequently, these couples described the most detailed agreements. Safety within the relationship was a primary component of their agreements, while details about sex outside of the relationship were ultimately secondary.

HIV-negative couples' agreements about sex outside of the relationship were often shaped by their desire to have unprotected sex within their relationship. Therefore, these couples placed more emphasis on practicing safe sex with outside partners than with each other. Trust became a primary component of their agreements, and it led to positive feelings about the relationship itself.

HIV-positive couples were, understandably, the least likely to include details about HIV prevention in their agreements and reported being highly concerned with keeping each other as healthy as possible.

Overall, agreements had positive and negative aspects. For example, agreements supported relationships by symbolizing trust and commitment. Agreements also supported HIV prevention when they were similar and couples openly reported when they were broken. Agreements became a source of friction, however, when they were not mutually understood and agreed upon. Likewise, many agreements were vague and led couples to have a false sense of security. For example, although many couples agreed to only practice safe sex with outside partners, what ‘safe sex’ meant was often open to interpretation. This may increase an individual’s vulnerability to HIV.

Findings from this study informed the survey we developed for phase 2 of the gay couples study. What follows is a brief description of those who participated in phase 2 and some interesting information about gay couples.

Facts from Phase 2

In phase 2, we asked couples to come to our offices in downtown San Francisco to fill out a computerized survey. 202 couples participated in the survey, which was our goal. Of those of you who participated, 63 couples were HIV-positive, 89 couples were HIV-negative, and 49 couples were sero-discordant, where one partner is HIV-positive and the other partner is HIV-negative. The couples were ethnically diverse, with 23 African-American couples, 6 Latino couples, 82 interracial couples, and 91 Caucasian couples. The average length of time couples were together was 5 years and the age of participants ranged from 18 to 79 years.

Given that we conducted the survey when San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom ordered City Hall to allow same-sex couples to marry, 26 couples reported they were married. 41 couples reported being in domestic partnerships, and 12 reported participating in commitment ceremonies.

In sum, although we still have much to uncover, we hope that you enjoyed these findings. Again, we deeply appreciate your taking time out and participating in our study.



I can be changed by what happens to me. But I refuse to be reduced by it.

-Maya Angelou

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Spectrum (North Bay)

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San Anselmo, CA 94960

(415) 457-1115

www.spectrummarin.org

Billy De Frank LGBT Community Center (South Bay)

938 The Alameda

San Jose, CA 95126

(408) 293-2429

www.billydefrank.org

The Center (San Francisco)

1800 Market St.

San Francisco, CA 94102

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We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

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