



# Realities, relationships and sexual risk among young gay men (YGM) in the context of recent HIV infections in Vancouver

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# Background

Few studies address the intimate lives of young gay men at risk for HIV infection.

Recent incidence data indicate that regular partnerships are significant predictors of the likelihood of HIV infection.



# Objectives

- The objective of this qualitative study was to examine how the dynamics of men's intimate sexual lives and relationships contribute to HIV vulnerability.



# Methods

- An ongoing qualitative study nested within the Vanguard project.
- 24 participants have been recruited, 12 of whom are HIV-positive and 12 HIV-negative.
- Participants are interviewed up to four times over 12 months.
- Textual data are coded, managed and explored using NUDIST qualitative research software.
- Themes investigated include early life experiences, violence, sexual careers, kinds of relationships and types of sexual partners.



# Looking for “Mr.. Right”: The idealization of monogamy

“Monogamy....it’s really a painful subject for people. Because people are betrayed. When two people enter into a relationship, and agree that monogamy....living by society’s rules, if you agree that it’s monogamous, and you don’t follow through, that’s betrayal....it’s wrong to betray somebody....”**Hey if you don’t like the rules we set at the outset, let’s talk about changing them.”** HIV positive man.



# Looking for “Mr. Right”: The idealization of monogamy

“....the people I know....typically there’s been more interest in relationships as they’re coming out....and then they get more attached than the other person and it’s usually a sad scene, they get dumped, they get clingy, they get dumped....”

HIV negative young gay man.



# Looking for “Mr. Right”: The idealization of monogamy

- “....my ideal thing would be a monogamous relationship....I like to sometimes bring in a bit of variety....I would more enjoy, like three-ways with my partner....I don’t really enjoy my partner going off and having sex without me” HIV positive man
- ‘You had a partner for two and a half years, was it monogamous.?’ “Yeah on my part, but I know he cheated....a few times....I can’t share somebody....my partner that I am with now....the one I’m gonna marry...” HIV positive man



# Risks Associated with Relationships

“When I'm depressed I have incredibly low self-esteem and feel self-destructive. It is like anyone can do anything they want to me. And I don't care. It is almost like I'm not there. And I go for physical intimacy, and separate myself from emotions. That is my escape.”



# Risks Associated with Relationships

“Being in school and chased and beaten all the time. They knew I was ‘different’. I was myself and obviously people noticed. It has always been that way. I went out with girls and stuff like that, but still they chased me.” HIV negative man



# Risks Associated with Relationships

“Bareback sex has been mainly just been regular partners... so, two people and we had been tested... as opposed to sort of unsafe situations. There's been a couple times where guys would like, put their cock in and things would go on for a few seconds before I would say, ‘Okay, you have to stop.’ Um, then there was one time where a guy took the condom off in behind me without me realizing. He fucked me for quite a while before I figured it out. I was just upset, I mean I guess, really, it is assault.

...

I guess he pulled out and slid the condom off and put his cock back in very quickly without me noticing.”



# Breakups and Sexual Vulnerability

“Do I remember what happened in me becoming positive? Not my first but my second boyfriend....we went out for a year and a half and then we broke up....I was pretty messed up....I started drinking a lot and going to the bath house....I just this once slipped up and just was kind of crazy and silly, whatever. Plus I was upset about the end of the relationship and wanted to get back together with him even though I knew he was the wrong person for me, it was like a whole bunch of stuff going on. I think I just put myself at risk. **A couple of times.**” HIV positive young man.



# Breakups and Sexual Vulnerability

“I was in a very vulnerable, weak state of my life in the time frame that seroconversion happened. Like I was still upset over the break-up of my previous relationship . It was the big one for me. I was young and just came out. I was really good about safe sex, but there was times, obviously it slid and other times when I was not aware.” HIV positive man



# Summary

- There is a dissonance between the concept of “Mr. Right” and the ability to achieve safety in relationships.
- Risk largely takes place in the context of relationships and these realities are under-addressed in HIV prevention and literature.
- In order to understand rising HIV incidence, we are better to begin with understanding the cultural context in which risks are taken.



# Recommendations

- Communities need to understand 'coming out' and relationship 'break ups' are crucial times in gay men's life cycles, and are highly vulnerable times for the increase of HIV/AIDS infection.
- Health interventions should incorporate understanding of gay men's cultural beliefs into their strategies.



# Recommendations

- Ongoing campaigns for the prevention of HIV/AIDS should be supported financially by all levels of government, with renewed efforts aimed at addressing the realities of young gay men's lives.
- Education aimed at violence and homophobia in schools needs to be ongoing in all schools.

