



HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Arch Sex Behav. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2019 May 01.

Published in final edited form as:

Arch Sex Behav. 2018 May ; 47(4): 1221–1230. doi:10.1007/s10508-017-1058-6.

“It was supposed to be a Onetime Thing:” Experiences of Romantic & Sexual Relationship Typologies among Young Gay, Bisexual, and Other Men who have Sex with Men

Stephen P. Sullivan, MPH¹, Emily S Pingel, MPH², Rob Stephenson, PhD¹, and José A Bauermeister, MPH, PhD³

¹University of Michigan School of Nursing Center for Sexuality and Health Disparities, Ann Arbor, MI 48109

²Department of Sociology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

³University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, Philadelphia, PA

Abstract

Young gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) are at elevated risk for HIV infection, highlighting the need to understand the elements of prevention and risk associated with their relationships. We employed a phenomenological approach to explore how young MSM become involved in different romantic and sexual experiences. We analyzed 28 semi-structured interviews conducted with young MSM living in Michigan. Using a phenomenological approach, we analyzed the data using an inductive coding strategy and thematic analysis. Participants defined their romantic and sexual interactions with a limited set of partner classifications (e.g. dating, hooking up, friends-with-benefits), but recognized how these classifications were shifting, sometimes unexpectedly so (e.g., a date turning into a hook up and vice versa). Young MSM described relationships in transition that at times defied available typologies or hybridized elements of multiple partner types at once. Based on our analyses, we underscore the need to acknowledge the fluctuating and contextual nature of young MSM’s romantic and sexual experiences. We discuss the relevance of our findings in terms of the developmental period of young adulthood and the implications our findings have HIV prevention efforts among young MSM.

Keywords

young MSM; relationship types; HIV

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the HIV epidemic continues to disproportionately impact gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM). Although MSM represent less than 2% of the national population, in 2013 68% of all new HIV infections were derived from male-to-male sexual contact (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014). Within this population, young MSM in particular are at elevated risk for HIV infection (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012, 2014). From 2008 to 2010,

80% of all HIV diagnoses among 13–24 year olds occurred among young MSM and during that same time period, new infections among young MSM increased by 22% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Goodreau et al., 2012). Given these data, it is critical to understand what factors are linked to young MSM's engagement in high HIV risk behavior such as condomless anal sex – a key transmission pathway among this population.

A growing body of research has begun to examine how relationships in particular shape HIV transmission risk among adult MSM. While past prevention efforts assumed condomless anal sex with casual partners was driving the HIV epidemic, recent studies estimate that 32–68% of all HIV transmissions among adult MSM take place within main partnerships (Goodreau et al., 2012; Sullivan, Salazar, Buchbinder, & Sanchez, 2009). Additional behavioral data suggests that, compared to their single peers, adult MSM in relationships participate in less frequent testing for HIV (Chakravarty, Hoff, Neilands, & Darbes, 2012; Stephenson, White, Darbes, Hoff, & Sullivan, 2015) and report greater condomless anal sex (Sullivan et al., 2009). In a sample of 566 adult MSM couples, for example, Hoff, Chakravarty, Beougher, Neilands, & Darbes, (2012) found that 65% reported having condomless anal sex with their primary partner. In an effort to understand the motivations behind this high prevalence of condomless anal sex within dyadic relationships, recent research has documented how forgoing condoms can be a tactical move among adult MSM to denote trust and foster intimacy with their partners (Berg, 2009; Carballo-Diéguez et al., 2011; Golub, Starks, Payton, & Parsons, 2011). Goldenberg, Finneran, Andes, & Stephenson (2015), for example, found that feelings of love, increased intimacy, and augmented trust reduced perceptions of HIV risk and in some cases promoted condomless anal sex among adult MSM. However, certain relationship dynamics have also been associated with preventive behaviors. Darbes, Chakravarty, Neilands, Beougher & Hoff (2014) observed among 556 adult MSM couples that those who reported higher levels of commitment and satisfaction were less likely to have condomless anal sex with outside partners of sero-discordant or unknown HIV status. Consequently, examining MSM's relationships may help uncover targetable modes of prevention that are specific to the dyadic settings where HIV risk may take place.

While the extant literature on relationships and HIV among adult MSM has contributed to our understanding of behavioral risk, these findings may not be transferable to young MSM given the unique set of developmental transitions they undergo from adolescence to emerging adulthood. This transitional period entails many pivotal life changes for young MSM including increased independence, neurocognitive maturity, identity development, sexual exploration, and partner seeking acculturation (Harper, 2007; Mustanski, Newcomb, Du Bois, Garcia, & Grov, 2011; Wong, Schrager, Chou, Weiss, & Kipke, 2013). In terms of young MSM's relationships, this developmental period is characterized by multiple short-term experiences that follow one another in succession over an abbreviated amount of time (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin, 2011; Mustanski, Newcomb, Du Bois, Garcia, & Grov, 2011). Among 122 young MSM ages 16–20, Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin (2011), for example, found that 57% of their sample reported having two or more serious relationships over an 18 month period. The initiation of these relationships also coincides with young MSM's average age of first anal sex - 16 to 18 years of age (Bruce, Harper, Fernández, & Jamil, 2012; Halkitis et al., 2013; Nelson Glick & Golden, 2014). For young people, their

first relationships serve as formative experiences that begin to solidify strategies on how to engage with and seek out romantic and sexual partners in the future (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). However, relative to their heterosexual counterparts, young MSM may confront additional challenges when pursuing relationships such as the invalidation or rejection of same-sex relationships by their family or social peers, internalized homophobia, and a lack of models exemplifying how to seek partners within the gay community (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015; Rostosky & Riggle, 2017). Furthermore, young MSM's formal sexual education rarely covers how to have anal sex nor how to negotiate condoms during those encounters (Eisenberg, Bauermeister, Johns, Pingel, & Santana, 2011; Kubicek et al., 2008; Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, & Kipke, 2011). In this light, it is important to understand how young MSM navigate relationships during this unique developmental state and how this may differentially influence their sexual risk practices.

Studies specifically analyzing young MSM relationships have documented disparities in their protective and risk promoting qualities across various partner types. Modeling work by Sullivan et al. (2009) estimated that the proportion of HIV infections among young MSM ages 18–29 that were attributed to a main or serious partner ranged from 79–84%. This high estimation is further reinforced by elevated rates of condomless anal sex recorded among young MSM and their serious partners (Mustanski, Newcomb, Du Bois, Garcia, & Grov, 2011). Among a recent cohort of 450 young MSM, compared to those reporting serious partners, young MSM reporting any other more casual partner type had significantly lower rates of condomless anal sex ranging from a reduction of 79–97% (Newcomb, Ryan, Garofalo, & Mustanski, 2014). Similar to adult MSM, high concentrations of condomless anal sex among serious partners may be in part explained by some young MSM's willingness to forgo condoms in an attempt to express love, intimacy, trust, and/or commitment with a partner (Greene, Andrews, Kuper, & Mustanski, 2014; Mustanski, Dubois, Prescott, & Ybarra, 2014). However, young MSM do not necessarily pursue serious or casual partners in a mutually exclusive fashion. Among 431 young single MSM, Bauermeister, Leslie-Santana, Johns, Pingel, & Eisenberg (2011) found that those who often pursued both romantic and casual partners online reported significantly higher condomless anal sex partners than those who pursued romantic partners more often than casual. This finding in particular draws into question whether dichotomizing “serious” vs. “casual” partnerships alone captures the complexity of young MSM's relationships and how they may at times facilitate HIV risk. Research among young adults in the U.S. has shown that they further categorize their partners within various relationship typologies (i.e. friends with benefits, hook-ups, dates, romantic relationships, etc.) following select emotional and sexual criteria (Bauman & Berman, 2005; Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Analyzing an online sample of 1,359 young single MSM, Bauermeister (2014) found that participants reported some combination of three principal types of relationship: romantic interests, hookups, and friends with benefits. Interestingly, among this same sample, young single MSM who reported having multiple different relationship types were found to report significantly higher numbers of condomless anal sex partners than those who reported having any singular relationship type regardless of whether or not it was considered more serious or casual (Bauermeister, 2014).

Taken together, this body of work suggests the need to further understand how young MSM define and experience the boundaries between various relationship and partner typologies. In order to enhance the interpretation of relationship data among young MSM, we explore qualitatively how young MSM describe and negotiate various romantic and sexual relationships. Doing so may help determine the extent to which different relationship types are stable or evolving entities upon which young MSM may base their HIV prevention decisions. Moreover, understanding this information has the potential to aid intervention researchers in aligning specific prevention tools to the relational contexts where some young MSM experience HIV risk.

METHODS

Sample

Thirty participants who reported using online dating websites in the past 3 months participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews about their sex education experiences, as well as their dating and sexual behaviors. These interview data were derived from a larger study aimed at analyzing how young MSM use online platforms to seek romantic and sexual partners and how their experiences might inform HIV prevention efforts. To be eligible for participation, recruits had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of the interview, identify as male, reside in Michigan, report being White/ Caucasian, Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino, identify as non-heterosexual, report having used a dating website in the past 3 months and be currently single. Participants were recruited through advertisements on two social networking sites, participant referrals, and flyers posted at local venues. Promotional materials displayed a series of questions related to *some* of the eligibility criteria, mentioned the \$30 Visa e-gift card incentive, and provided a number to call if interested. Social network advertisements were visible only to users who identified as men, who listed themselves as interested in other men, and who fit the specified age range.

The sample's median age was 22 years old ($M = 21.96$; $SD = 1.75$). The racial composition of the sample was as follows: 18 self-identified as White and 12 as African American. In conjunction with ethnicity, 2 White participants identified as White/Latino, and 1 African American participant identified as African American/Latino. In the eligibility screener, participants were able to check all sexual/gender identity categories that they felt applied, resulting in several mixed categories (e.g., questioning/gay). Twenty-one participants identified as gay, two as gay/bisexual, four as bisexual, one as questioning/gay, one as gay/trans and one identified as trans. Over 90% of the sample (28 cases) reported having had sex with someone they met on a dating website in the past 3 months. Five participants reported being HIV positive at the time of the study. Given our prior research with this population, and our desire to sample two "homogenous" racial groups (i.e., African Americans and Whites) we felt confident that we would reach saturation with 12 interviews per group and nevertheless have six interviews for those identifying as other than African American or White. We revisited this issue once we had completed 25 interviews and, noting thematic saturation, decided to complete data collection once we had completed 30 interviews. During the interview, two participants identified as gender non-conforming or transgender

and due to the uniqueness of their experience, we excluded these two participants for analysis in order to focus only on cisgender young MSM (N = 28).

Procedure

Research assistants trained in qualitative interviewing techniques conducted the interviews over the phone or in person to accommodate participants' transportation and desire for privacy. We did not observe any differences in the duration of interviews, depth of narratives shared by participants, or overall presence of themes by interviews conducted in person (N=8) and those conducted by phone (N=20). Through conducting these interviews by telephone and not face-to-face, we had greater access to a minority population as well as limited the time commitment and increased the convenience of the interviews (Holt, 2010; Novick, 2008; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). We also did not identify any signs of discomfort (i.e. body language, verbal discussion of discomfort, facial expressions). Participants were asked to consent both to the interview process and to the use of an audio recorder. The interviewers began by reading a detailed consent form to each participant, explaining the purpose of the study (i.e., speaking with young MSM about how they use the Internet for dating) and their rights as a research participant. Interviews typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes.

A semi-structured qualitative interview guide was created specifically for the larger study. The interview guide was grounded in a social constructivist framework, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality and focuses on the meanings that participants ascribe to their experiences. Using this semi-structured interview guide, research assistants then conducted an in-depth interview covering topic areas such as prior relationship experiences, strategies employed to distinguish romantic interests from hookups, and recent sexual behaviors with male partners, among other topics. The guide provided a general structure for discussion, but interviewers frequently asked participants to elaborate on their answers based on their life experiences and perceptions. Young MSM in this study provided accounts of their own experiences, and the interviewers probed with additional questions based on participants' responses, inviting participants to discuss additional information that was not covered in the interview guide.

After each interview, the interviewer wrote down their impressions into a protocol form and subsequently debriefed with the principal investigator to encourage reflexivity during the interview process. Several research assistants, all of whom have training in qualitative methods and more specifically conducting research with young MSM, transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews into text. Upon completion of transcription, all participant names, partner names, and other key identifiable information were removed or changed in order to preserve the anonymity of participants. Study data were protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the [Redacted for Review].

Analytic Strategy

In acknowledging that various aspects of identity and experience may influence the interpretation of qualitative data, we engaged in reflexive practices in order to become aware

of the biases and strengths of the researcher's perspective. The primary author of this research is a White gay-identified man who works with and alongside the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) community within research, activist, and personal capacities. Throughout the analytic process, the main author participated in regular memoing and peer debriefing discussions with the contributing authors as well as other members of the research center as a means of increasing the overall trustworthiness of the study. Peer debriefing discussions included researchers and students across the LGBTQ spectrum with varied racial/ethnic identities, educational backgrounds, and theoretical perspectives.

In order to identify the meta-level themes relevant to how young MSM experience different relationship types, we utilized a phenomenological approach of inductive coding (Patton, 2015). We started by selecting five interviews with participants of different demographic characteristics (1 Black, gay identified man living with HIV; 2 White, gay identified men who reported being HIV negative; 1 White/Latino gay man who reported being HIV negative; and 1 Black/Latino gay identified man who reported being HIV negative). We then open-coded those five interviews creating detailed, micro-level codes grounded in the language of participants. For example, one open code from this analytic phase was "currently dating a guy unofficially." Upon completion we organized these open codes into higher level content categories. Using the same example, the open code "currently dating a guy unofficially" was compiled with other similar open codes under a larger category of "Not Easily Definable" relationships. These code groupings were then compiled into a referential hierarchy based on level of specificity (i.e., overarching meta-codes precede sub-codes). So our "Not Easily Definable" grouping became a sub-code, "Complicated Relationships," under the larger meta-code of "Relationship Types." With this code hierarchy, we then further focus coded all 28 interviews. During the focus coding phase, the primary author consulted with other team members to clarify coding ambiguities and to modify existing codes when confronted with participant experiences that were not captured by the original code structure. After fully coding the dataset, we finally conducted a thematic analysis of the coded data to draw out patterns and themes related to participants' experiences of romantic and sexual relationships.

RESULTS

Relationship Types

Young MSM in this study made sense of their romantic and sexual experiences in relation to three relationship types that circulate as collective labels: 1) *hooking up*, 2) *friends-with-benefits*, and 3) *dating*. Hooking up is often used to characterize brief, sexually focused encounters that have little expectation for emotional attachment or mutual commitment. The sort of sexual contact implied here is broadly defined, but at its core hooking up is usually an ephemeral experience. Akin to this dynamic, friends-with-benefits tends to describe either a sexual friendship or a more consistent sexual partner wherein there is little to no expectation for exclusivity or romantic involvement and where the primary emotion is friendship rather than romantic attachment. Finally, dating usually signifies a relational state where more time is spent outside of the bedroom in order to get to know someone and explore romantic

possibilities under varying degrees of monogamy. While the meanings that underwrite these conventional relationship typologies are more or less stable, experientially they are by no means inflexible. Instead, young MSM in this study recounted the multitude of ways these relationship types can be adapted and transformed into one another over time. The transitional spaces lying in between hooking up, friends-with-benefits and dating are moments where participants actively or unknowingly revised these relationship types in order to fit their concrete experiences of relational change.

Fluid Relationship Types

Young MSM in this study detailed a variety of ways in which their romantic and sexual experiences took on new definitions over time. Thematically, we distinguish between six different fluid relationship types that participants described, 1) hooking up that turned into dating, 2) date that turned into hooking up, 3) hooking up that turned into friends-with-benefits, 4) friends-with-benefits that turned into semi-dating, 5) breaking up with strings, and 6) ambiguous exploration. For the sake of analysis, we examine the dynamics and motivations characterizing each of these relationship types separately; however, we recognize the fluid and shifting nature of these interstitial experiences. This organization is not meant to be understood as unidirectional, bounded, or exhaustive, rather it is meant to sample the diversity of experiences made possible in these moments of interpersonal transition.

Hooking up that turned into Dating—One relational trajectory that young MSM in this study highlighted was hooking up to dating scenarios. These experiences speak to situations where what was anticipated to be a brief sexual encounter turned into more romantically involved dating. Participants described arriving at this transition in one of two ways, through 1) sexual introductions, and 2) unexpected redirections.

Sexual Introductions—Some participants came to this relational trajectory through being introduced to their partner over the course of a sexual episode. As one respondent explained,

“It was probably the third or the fourth time that I ever actually like had consensual sex. He was the first guy that I actually had sex with, but he talked me into having a threesome, but then after that had happened he accused me of cheating on him with the dude that he wanted to be in the threesome. So then after he broke up with me, because he felt that I was cheating on him, the other guy asked me out and I started going out on dates with him.” (White, 24 years old)

Here the threesome served as the prime introductory space to meet another young man whom he later was able to date. That initial sexual episode provided the formative basis for their future interactions wherein they decidedly switched the relationship type from hooking up to dating. Similar to this dynamic, others described getting to know their partners more personally over the course of multiple sexual episodes. As one young man recalled,

“I had my first experience with a guy that I knew and um, we hooked up on Halloween and after a party and um, and then that turned into a kind of dating situation... We hooked up a couple of times and then we started doing things besides sex obviously. Ah, and we started hanging out.” (White, 20 years old)

In this sequence of events, hooking up served as the interactive foundation for hanging out on a more personal level. Having sex allowed them to garner enough intimacy with one another to initiate dating—thereby rewriting the hooking up relationship type from which they started. For others this shift occurred more spontaneously as they tried to initiate a hook up experience.

Unexpected Redirection—Some young men in this study discussed circumstances where they walked into a hook up and unexpectedly in the moment had it turn into a date. As one participant reported,

“It was really, it was kind of really weird at first. We’d, um, just got together and, um, I had met him online and didn’t even expect, like, to follow through with it, like um go there and just pass him to the left and leave. He ended up being really interesting, we just sat and talked for hours and hours when we were supposed to be fooling around and...It was really surprisingly just, like, meet some stranger where your goal is to just have sex and then you end up having a lot in common and just getting distracted by the conversation and I think we ended up dating for like two or three months. Yeah, not something that I was expecting.” (White, 22 years old)

Rather than enacting the hook up relationship type and modifying it accordingly, in this instance the intended interaction was scrapped once they perceived an interpersonal connection. Although they met under a sexual pretext, once they were face-to-face the hook up narrative wasn’t able to accommodate their dialogue so they switched course and started to date. For other young MSM in this study, however, this unanticipated trajectory took place in the reverse.

Date that turned into a Hook up—Rather than discovering an emotional connection through a sexual encounter, other participants described going out on what they thought was a date and walking away with a hook up. As one young man recollected,

“Um, yeah I guess I’ve had it before where like I guess I’ve just had the wrong notions about a date before going in and it just like, I was expecting someone looking for something a little deeper than just a hookup and like we went out and we talked for awhile and had coffee and then I really liked him so we just went back to his place and had sex and then it was like alright you can head out now, bye. And it was kind of this like wave of realization washed over you, oh gosh.” (White, 22 years old)

While talking over coffee initially signified a date-like situation, once they went home together the dynamic altered. Having sex transformed the behavioral expectations for his partner from potentially continuing romantic contact to simply parting ways. Yet, as discussed in the following section, sex did not always make or break romantic connections, it also had the power to create more friendly dynamics.

Hooking up that turned into Friends-with-benefits—Through hooking up, some young men in this study developed friendly relationships with their sexual partners. As one participant stated,

“Actually we sort of have a chummy relationship. Where I mean because we kinda met in this, we thought we were going to have [sex] with someone else and he’s not typically a receptive partner. So yeah, so we just kinda had this friendship I guess based on that. And I use the term friendship really loosely because it’s not like we’ve hung out in any other, any other time but ya know we chat somewhat often.” (White, 22 years old)

Neither romance nor full-on friendship, over the course of hooking up this young man cultivated a more friendly connection with his partner. In this scenario, repeated chatting fostered enough rapport to modify their hook up arrangement and become the foundation of their “loosely” defined friendship. While this trajectory flowed from impersonal sex to friendly engagement, other participants experienced more romantic twists on friends-with-benefits.

Friends-with-benefits that turned into Semi-dating—With time, some young men in this study saw a friends-with-benefits situation drift into ambiguous romantic territory or as one participant explained,

“When it [friends with benefits] becomes more than that then it’s like in that gray area right, where there’s like, it’s like this pseudo dating thing. But yeah that’s something that’s like a gray thing that would need to be case by case specific, I’d say.” (White, 21 years old)

Later while reflecting about a recent partner, the participant offered a real-life example,

“It was this guy here, he, I had just gotten out of a relationship and we met and it was like an emotionally, I guess an inconsistent time for me. and like there was some chemistry there and given that I wasn’t emotionally in a position to like casually date anybody given that I still have ya know baggage in other areas, but ya know part of that inconsistency involves like poor sexual choices aka we ended, we hooked up several times and became friends like throughout this and like that constant hooking up and friendship turned into like this semi monogamous but not full blown relationship type thing. It was like dating.” (White, 21 years old)

Here as his friends-with-benefits situation started to gain more familiarity, their dynamics strayed into foggy terrain. Not fully a relationship nor strictly monogamous, he and his partner interwove elements of both dating and friends-with-benefits such that they arrived at this semi defined space. Similar to this scenario, when asked what kind of dynamic he ended up having with a friend-with-benefits, another participant responded, “Somewhere in between friends with benefits and dating partners.” (Black, 19 years old). The relative obscurity of this interpersonal transition was derived from the hybridization of these two relationship types, resulting in a dynamic could only be described as “somewhere in between.”

Breaking up with Strings—Another interpersonal trajectory that young MSM in this study highlighted was breaking up with strings experiences. These situations entailed ending a romantic relationship while still interacting on a sexual basis. Participants described these

experiences in one of three ways, 1) as convenient sex, 2) as sex with baggage, or 3) as an effort to understand if they and their partner were taking a break or breaking up.

Convenient Sex—Some participants discussed continuing to have sex with their ex-boyfriends as purely a matter of convenience. Sexual history and past intimacy made transitioning into casual sex an easy adaptation devoid of emotional commitment. As one participant described,

“Um, probably like my longer relationship have, like upwards of like two years when they would start to get like really rocky or ahm, when I would be out of the city out of the city for the summer, like it was basically like, “oh I might be swinging by town for the day” or something and essentially it was a day indoors usually (laughs)...it just kind of like, yeah eventually fizzled I guess where it was like, we’re both really busy and not seeing each other a whole lot anyways, but the sex is really convenient and it’s not altogether bad (laughs).” (White, 22 years old)

Due to busy life circumstances, this young man and his partner did not have sufficient time available to accommodate their original romantic relationship, but their shared history with one another provided the opportunity for intermittent casual encounters. As their romantic connection waned, their interpersonal dynamic shifted to more impersonal sexual episodes. While this arrangement centered on sexual utility, other young MSM experienced more emotionally complicated situations.

Sex with Baggage—Rather than pure sexual convenience, other young men in this study described continuing to have sex with their ex-boyfriends despite harboring lingering emotional ties. As one participant explained,

“We were together for about a year and we’ve gotten out of the relationship, there’s still some emotional like baggage there, but we do not have like a commitment to be monogamous. Like we, it’s encouraged to like go do other things, coincidentally neither of us have probably because we just don’t feel comfortable doing other things. But we do end up hooking up, like quite a bit. Unintentional, ya know, so I think there’s just that comfort level there, so.” (White, 21 years old)

Even after his exclusive relationship had ended, the dynamic with his partner persisted in a modified form with lingering sexual and emotional components. Although there was no expectation of monogamy, they continued having sex out of familiarity. Similar to this situation, another young man described,

“Well, um, there was uh, there was a little while ago, um, D he and I he, actually met at work... Um, everything was going great and I don’t know something as far as our relationship has changed and it had become just that. Um, we still found one another sexually enticing, but the relationship portion of it, I guess it just wasn’t there, still love each other but not in love.” (Black, 24 years old)

Even after their relationship ceased, they still interacted on the basis of their original sexual attraction. Despite no longer being in love, they still brought enduring emotional affection into their sexual arrangement. Meanwhile for other participants breaking up left them in more ambiguous interpersonal circumstances.

Break or Breaking up—The last way in which young MSM experienced breaking up was characterized by trying to understand whether or not they were actually broken up or simply taking a break. As one young man described,

“And then with the last boyfriend it’s, it’s been less dramatic but so much harder because like we still hang out we still have sex and stuff, which is obviously bad and we’ve been trying not to. And we broke up for like purely emotional reasons like from, I’m still not exactly clear as to why we did... Kinda like I dunno, it’s just not exactly sure like where that stands now even. Like we’re still, we are no longer dating. However, I know for a fact that we’re both exclusive with one another still. But we only talk like once a day and then we will like hang out and it’s so easy to like fall back into old patterns.” (White, 19 years old)

While he and his ex were technically both single, their continued sexual engagement brought into question where their break up stood. Behaviorally their dynamic appeared to become a specter of what they once had—confusing the boundaries of what it meant to be single and what it meant to be together. Whether the terms of their relationship were falling back into place or slowly unraveling, this young man was left making sense of a blurred narrative. Comparable to this experience another participant recounted,

“So ‘cause we had-we were together three times. So then I broke up with him that time. But in the third time, I guess this was along the lines of an ope-the closest I’ve had to an open relationship. Um, we pretty much got to this whole thing where it’s like we were together but we weren’t together type thing but we were exclusive. I really don’t know what it was... So when he [moved away] and I um, you know I called him up, he was like, “well in order for us to have a open-you know an open relationship that means we’d have to be together” and that was a slap to the face to me, because I’m like, then what are we?” (Black, 20 years old)

Again, upon breaking up, the behavioral expectations associated with multiple relationship types converged. Elements of exclusivity and proximity came together to create a dynamic that wasn’t covered by conventional relationship types leaving this young man to wonder what exactly they were. Similar to this relative obscurity, other young MSM in this study more explicitly explored relational possibilities with their romantic and sexual partners.

Ambiguous Exploration—The final fluid relationship type that participants discussed was marked by *ambiguous exploration*. These experiences were particularly vague because they occurred in moments where participants were still investigating what some romantic and sexual affiliation may become. For example, when trying to explain his relationship with a current partner living with HIV one young man stated,

“He found out in December so it’s very new and it’s very, it’s a, it’s a very messy relationship as it is right now. I mean not in a, and not in a messy we’re fighting with each other kind of way, it’s just, it’s you know I don’t even like using the term complicated because it has such a negative connotation with it, but um you know, that’s one of those things where I just always assumed that, you know, if I met someone who’s HIV positive I would lose interest in them. But, you know it’s like, you know, he fits the bill perfectly as to everything I am attracted to. So, it’s

working itself out, and we'll see you know, it might fizzle out and we might just remain really close friends. You know, who knows what's going to come out of this." (White, 21 years old)

In this instance, he was confronted by the prospect of a relationship he had always imagined he wouldn't be interested in, but to his surprise key romantic elements were there. Because he was exploring his ability to date a man living with HIV, the romantic connection was nascent and formless; taking shape only through time. Likewise another participant explained,

"So to give you a bit of background, he and I met in November of last year before Thanksgiving break. He had just got out of a two year relationship a couple months before we met and so he was stuck between this place where he really liked me but also wanted to explore and go out and date and hook-up and what not. And so I said ok I understand that that's fine, we can kinda do this dating partner, open relationship-esque thing so long as you're just honest with me." (Black, 19 years old)

Recognizing the potential for a romantic relationship, yet being concerned that labeling their exchanges would jeopardize their ability to date or hook-up with other people, they kept their affiliation fairly undefined so that their interaction could be written in the context of other romantic and sexual possibilities.

DISCUSSION

Young MSM did not define their romantic and sexual experiences statically, but instead under changing emotional and interpersonal circumstances. Participants actively edited their available relationship typologies in order to fit their dynamic experiences of interpersonal transition. Thematically, we identified six different fluid relationship types that participants highlighted: 1) hooking up that turned into dating, 2) date that turned into hooking up, 3) hooking up that turned into friends-with benefits, 4) friends-with-benefits that turned into semi-dating, 5) breaking up with strings, and 6) ambiguous exploration. For some, the transitional possibilities between various partner types was something they anticipated, while for others the resulting affiliation was unexpected. Particular narratives (i.e. ambiguous exploration) also demonstrated how some young MSM may strategically keep their relationships undefined in order to retain other outside romantic and/or sexual prospects. Lastly, some experiences (i.e. friends-with-benefits that turned into semi-dating, breaking up with strings) did not fall neatly within available relationship types, but rather hybridized components of multiple partner types at once.

Our findings gain relevance within the HIV prevention literature surrounding young MSM and relationships. While research has documented higher HIV sexual risk behavior (i.e. condomless anal sex) among young MSM with serious partners (Mustanski, Newcomb, Bois, Garcia, & Grov, 2011; Newcomb et al., 2014), young MSM in our study did not describe their relationship experiences as being stably serious or casual. Young MSM in our study emphasized the pathways by which more serious partners could become more casual (i.e. date that turned into hooking up, breaking up with strings) and more casual partners

could become more serious (i.e. hooking up that turned into dating, friends-with-benefits that turned into semi-dating). There were additional fluid relationship types that combined elements of both serious and casual partnerships (i.e. friends-with-benefits that turned into semi-dating, breaking up with strings) or were yet definable in those terms (i.e. ambiguous exploration). In this way, our findings illustrate the permeability of young MSM relationship types and suggest the need to consider the complexity of their shifting nature within HIV prevention research.

Our study has additional implications for sexual agreement literature. Sexual agreements refer to mutually understood rules between two partners that detail the kinds of sexual behavior that is allowed within and outside of their relationship (Hoff & Beougher, 2010). In terms of sexual risk behavior, exhibiting higher commitment to a sexual agreement has been associated with lower reported condomless anal sex with outside partners among adult MSM couples (Darbes et al., 2014; Mitchell, Harvey, Champeau, & Seal, 2012). Specifically, our study suggests that relationship changes among young MSM may take place without notice. Being unaware of shifting relationship rules – particularly in regards to permissible sexual behavior – may make periods of relationship transition key moments of vulnerability to HIV among young MSM. Moreover, some young MSM in our study purposefully kept their relationships undefined in order to preserve alternative romantic and sexual possibilities. This finding highlights a potential motivation for why some young MSM may consciously choose not to form a sexual agreement with their partners. While further quantitative research is needed to examine how young MSM's sexual risk behavior may be associated with sexual agreement formation, our findings suggest relationship clarification tools and sexual agreement interventions may be beneficial for some young MSM (Mustanski, 2015; Purcell et al., 2014; Stephenson, Chard, Finneran, & Sullivan, 2014; Stephenson, Rentsch, & Sullivan, 2012).

Within the body of sexual behavior research among young MSM, our study raises several important interpretative and methodological considerations. As previously discussed, young MSM have been shown to exhibit higher primary partner turnover over time than adult MSM (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Clerkin, 2011; Mustanski, Newcomb, Bois, Garcia, & Grov, 2011). Aligning with this behavioral characteristic, our analysis underscores the volatility of young MSM relationships as they form under fluctuating romantic and sexual conditions. Higher observed primary partner turnover among young MSM may be in part attributable to the alternating relationship trajectories that young MSM in our study described. Furthermore, our findings lend support to the developmental understanding of young relationships. Characterized by socio-sexual exploration and neuro-cognitive maturation, emerging adulthood is a pivotal developmental period for young MSM as their partner preferences and relationship skills begin to crystalize through experience (Harper, 2007; Mustanski, Newcomb, Bois, Garcia, & Grov 2011; Wong et al., 2013). Accordingly, young MSM in our study discovered multiple romantic and sexual pathways to various relationship types and explored these relational possibilities with their partners. In this way our research may offer a small glimpse into the development of formative relationship seeking strategies among our sample of young MSM.

Our study also has implications for current and future measurement of young MSM relationship types. The shifting and at times ambiguous relationship states that our sample of young MSM described draws important considerations for cross-sectional data that assesses young MSM partnerships at a single point in time. In recent review of young sexual minority health literature, Mustanski (2015) argues that more longitudinal designs are needed in order to capture the developmental implications of young MSM health disparities. Similarly, longitudinal research examining young MSM partner typologies at multiple time points may be able to provide more insight into how different partner types and their attending relational change over time may alter HIV risk (Bauermeister, 2014).

When interpreting our results, it is important to recognize the limitations of our analysis. Our data are derived from a small sample of single young MSM who were asked to reflect on past relationship experiences. We are therefore not able to determine whether or not our participants' partners would agree or disagree with their understanding of how their relationship transformed. Future dyadic research may help identify important discrepancies between each partners' understanding of their relationship and the motivating forces driving relational transition (Mustanski, Starks, & Newcomb, 2014). While our participants recounted thick descriptions of changing romantic and sexual typologies, they were not explicitly asked how if at all these dynamic experiences related to engagement in sexual risk behavior such as condomless anal sex. In this light, we are unable to assess how our sample's experiences of relational transition may have played into their reported sexual risk behaviors. Lastly, due to the qualitative nature of our study, our results are not generalizable beyond our sample of predominantly gay identified young men residing in Southeast Michigan. Despite these constraints, our study uses a solid theoretical and interpretive framework to explore the complexities of young MSM's fluid relationship types.

CONCLUSION

This analysis helps contribute to an appreciation of how young MSM partnerships develop and change over time. Young MSM in our study did not ascribe static definitions to their relationship experiences, but instead negotiated and modified available relationship typologies to fit their evolving the romantic and sexual circumstances. Recognizing the shifting and at times ambiguous nature of young MSM relationships may help elucidate some of the mechanisms of HIV risk at play with their romantic and sexual partners. Our findings provide a starting point for intervention research to investigate how understanding young MSM's changing romantic and sexual ties may help tailor prevention responses to the interpersonal contexts where young MSM may experience HIV risk.

Acknowledgments

Data for this study come from a Career Development Award from the National Institute of Mental Health (K01-MH087242; PI: Bauermeister). Dr. Bauermeister was supported by a R34 grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health (R34MH101997-01A1). Views expressed in this manuscript do not necessarily represent the views of the funding agency.

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