

RUNNING HEAD: Relationship agreements and breaking rules

*Published in Journal of Homosexuality*

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00918369.2013.773819>

**Agreements about extra-dyadic sex in gay men's relationships: Exploring differences in relationship quality by agreement type and rule breaking behaviour**

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**Abstract**

Research comparing the quality of monogamous and non-monogamous (“open”) relationships among gay men has produced mixed findings. In addition, little is known about the consequences of breaking the rules of relationship agreements about extra-dyadic sex. Results from a survey of 229 gay men in a romantic relationship showed that open relationships were less passionate, but no less intimate or committed, than monogamous or “threesome only” relationships. However, men who broke rules reported lower relationship quality overall, regardless of relationship agreement. Thus, it is less the nature of the agreement itself than adhering to the conditions of it that influences relationship quality.

(Word count: 100)

**KEYWORDS:** Relationship agreement, relationship quality, open relationships, rules

For most heterosexual romantic couples, sexual monogamy is implicitly expected and viewed as an essential ingredient for a successful, satisfying, and committed relationship. Although behaviour that violates this expectation is remarkably common (Laumann, Ellingson, Mahay, Paik, & Youm, 2004; Smith, 1991), sexual infidelity is nonetheless disapproved of (Lieberman, 1988), stigmatized (Treas & Giesen, 2000), seen as a major rule violation (Sheppard, Nelson, & Andreoli-Mathis, 1995), and is associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobsen, 2001; Glass & Wright, 1985). In contrast, the expectation of monogamy is far from universal among gay male couples. Studies have shown that although some gay men expect and desire their romantic relationships to be monogamous (Adam, 2006; LaSala, 2001; Worth, Reid, & McMillan, 2002), a sizeable proportion of them are “open”; that is, they are based on either an implicit or explicit agreement that both partners are free to engage in extra-dyadic sexual encounters (Hickson et al., 1992; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004a, 2004b; Wagner, Remien, & Carballo-Diéguez, 2000).

As open relationships deviate from the socially imposed heterosexist norm of monogamy, various studies on gay men’s relationships over the decades have investigated whether open relationships are as satisfying, fulfilling, and well adjusted as monogamous ones. Some early studies found that open relationships were characterised by lower levels of happiness (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) and satisfaction (Saghir & Robins, 1973), as well as less favourable attitudes towards the relationship (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1985). Other early studies, in contrast, found no differences between open and monogamous relationships in levels of liking and loving, satisfaction, commitment, and adjustment (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Kurdek, 1988). More recent studies have continued to yield mixed findings. In quantitative studies of gay male couples in the United States, both Wagner et al. (2000) and LaSala (2004a) found no difference in levels of dyadic adjustment between open and monogamous

relationships. However, a recent quantitative study of 566 gay male couples in San Francisco revealed that although monogamous and open relationships were equally satisfying, men in monogamous relationships reported higher levels of various other relationship characteristics, such as intimacy, commitment, and trust, than those in open relationships (Hoff, Beougher, Chakravarty, Darbes, & Neilands, 2010). Thus, given that more recent studies have not resolved the mixed findings reported in earlier research, it is still unclear whether open and monogamous relationships are equivalent in terms of a range of relationship characteristics, with the possible exception of satisfaction (see also Bonello, 2009, for a review).

This issue is not only of theoretical interest, but it also has important practical implications. Any relationship interventions, such as couple therapy, need to be sensitive to the diversity of relationship models adopted by gay couples (LaSala, 2004a). If, as some research suggests, it is the case that relationship quality does not differ between monogamous and open relationships, it is imperative for counsellors and other professionals not to assume automatically that a given relationship agreement is the cause of relationship problems. Rather, it may be more appropriate to target specific aspects of the agreement (such as negotiating the boundaries of an open agreement) that may be improved or changed to the benefit of the relationship. In contrast, if open and monogamous relationships are systematically different with respect to relationship quality, professionals should take this into account where appropriate. Thus, further research examining the quality and functioning of monogamous and open relationships among gay men is required.

Largely absent from previous research in this area is the use of a formal theoretical framework through which to conceptualise and assess relationship quality. Past studies have operationalised relationship quality in terms of satisfaction, commitment, liking, loving, or dyadic adjustment, but few have provided a solid theoretical justification for selecting these as the dependent variables for examination. Although open relationships are no less

satisfying than monogamous ones (Bonello, 2009), the fact that they differ in one crucial aspect (i.e., outside sex is allowed), and potentially on other dimensions of relationship quality such as commitment and intimacy (Hoff et al., 2010), suggests they may fit a somewhat different profile of relationship characteristics. To examine this possibility, the present research draws on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love.

### **Triangular Theory of Love**

Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory provides a useful framework for examining different aspects of relationship quality in gay men's relationships, as it describes distinct kinds of "love" in relationships that differ according to the relative presence or absence of three dimensional elements. *Intimacy* refers to feelings and behaviours associated with warmth, affection, interpersonal trust, and a sense of emotional connectedness in a relationship. *Passion*, in contrast, draws on motivational arousal and is largely associated, though not completely synonymous, with physical arousal and sexual fulfilment. Finally, *commitment* is the decisional component of love characterised by a subjective attachment to the relationship and the long-term orientation towards maintaining it. This conceptualisation of commitment is similar to others that have been advanced in the literature (e.g., Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The relative presence or absence of each of these three components determines the particular *kind* of love that may characterise a given relationship. For instance, a relationship fuelled only by passion is considered *infatuated* love, whereas the combination of high intimacy and commitment with relatively low passion is considered *companionate* love (Sternberg, 1986).

Although Sternberg (1986) proposed that these three dimensions may be correlated, they are nonetheless independent. In particular, Diamond (2003) argued that the processes underlying sexual desire and affective bonding (which essentially manifest in passion and

intimacy, respectively) have evolved as separate biological systems that have different underlying goals. As such, Diamond argued that it is possible for individuals to experience romantic love without sexual desire, and vice versa. This perspective explains how individuals can engage in sexual encounters without any emotional involvement. Thus, with this in mind, Sternberg's triangular theory provides a useful framework that describes three functionally independent dimensions of relationship quality.

Research on heterosexual romantic couples shows that passion wanes over time (Tucker & Aron, 1993), and this is likely true for gay male couples as well. Indeed, preventing the relationship from becoming stifling or "stale" has been cited in qualitative studies as a reason why some gay couples open their relationship (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004b), although open agreements do not always come about after a period of monogamy (Blasband & Peplau, 1985). Given the independence of passion and intimacy, being consensually non-monogamous appears to be a solution to declining passion (or especially high needs for passion) that allows gay male partners to satisfy their desires for sexual diversity whilst maintaining a close emotional bond within the primary relationship. Research consistently shows that men are more able than women to view sex and emotional attachment as separate things (Banfield & McCabe, 2001; Duncombe & Marsden, 1999; Glass & Wright, 1985, 1992; Lawson, 1988), and that men have a greater propensity to engage in extra-dyadic sexual encounters without emotional involvement (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Townsend, 1995). It is not surprising, then, that this solution of non-monogamy is adopted more frequently by gay male couples than by lesbian or heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005).

Of course, not all gay male couples have an open agreement; many instead choose monogamy. In a qualitative study, LaSala (2004b) reported that some gay men adopted

monogamy because they viewed it as inseparable from intimacy and commitment.

Monogamy has also been cited as a strategy for preventing the transmission of HIV and other infections, by both American (Hoff et al., 2010) and Australian (Prestage et al., 2008) gay men. Whatever the reason for choosing monogamy, it is possible that in monogamous relationships, generally speaking, men are motivated to sustain sexual passion with their partners. This is because, according to their agreement, they have no other outlet for satisfying their sexual needs other than to resort to infidelity, which can threaten the wellbeing of the relationship (LaSala, 2004a; Wagner et al., 2000). Of course, not all men have strong needs for passion or even for sex at all, but to the extent that men in monogamous relationships do have these needs, their agreement is such that they can only realistically be fulfilled by their relationship partners. In contrast, men in open relationships may be motivated to sustain relationship passion to a lesser degree, as they can satisfy their needs for sexual fulfilment with extra-dyadic partners. Thus, in the context of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory, one would expect levels of passion in open relationships, on average, to be lower than those in monogamous relationships.

However, it is not clear whether to expect open and monogamous relationships to differ in terms of intimacy and commitment, the other two components of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory, as there are conflicting findings on this in the literature. Early research showed no differences in commitment (Blasband & Peplau, 1985), and it has been found more recently in qualitative research that engaging in outside sex can even renew and strengthen partners' sense of closeness in and commitment to their primary relationship (LaSala, 2001, 2004b). In contrast, Hoff et al. (2010) found that open relationships were less committed and intimate than monogamous ones, and suggested this may be because men in monogamous relationships have more at stake if their agreement breaks down. However, one could also argue that a relationship allowing casual extra-dyadic sex while providing the

emotional fulfilment and security of having a long-term romantic partner represents similarly high stakes for men who desire sexual diversity. In addition, it likely requires a high degree of trust, which is an essential element of intimacy, for partners to decide upon an open agreement in the first place. It is reasonable to argue that partners would need to feel secure in their relationship to be comfortable with the idea of not being sexually exclusive, and to trust that extra-dyadic involvements will not pose any threat to their relationship. Indeed, some men in Hoff and Beougher's (2010) study mentioned that having an open agreement made them feel secure in their relationship. Therefore, one may expect similar levels of intimacy and commitment in open and monogamous relationships. Nevertheless, the somewhat conflicting findings in the literature call for further research on this issue.

### **Rules in Relationships**

Qualitative research in both the United States (e.g., LaSala, 2004b) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Hickson et al., 1992) has revealed that gay men in open relationships establish rules regarding what is acceptable extra-dyadic sexual behaviour. Such rules include not bringing a casual partner into the house, limiting the number of times it is acceptable to see the same casual partner and, mostly commonly, disallowing emotional involvement with casual partners (Hickson et al., 1992; LaSala, 2004b). In some open couples, partners emphasise the importance of being open and honest about their activities with casual partners, or, conversely, keeping it secret (Hickson et al., 1992). There is a large degree of idiosyncrasy in the exact nature of the rules within individual open relationships; however, all are established in an effort to preserve the primacy of the main relationship and to provide boundaries that define the relationship (Hickson et al., 1992; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004b).



LaSala (2004a) showed that cheating is linked to lower relationship quality in monogamous gay relationships. However, very little research has directly examined the whether there is a similar association between breaking rules in open relationships and reduced relationship quality. In a recent qualitative study of gay couples in San Francisco, Hoff et al. (2009) found that men in open relationships did not break the rules of their agreement any more frequently than men with monogamous agreements, but they did not report whether there were any differences in relationship quality as a function of breaking rules. Hoff and Beougher (2010) addressed this issue in further qualitative research, also in San Francisco, which showed that men breaking their agreements reported emotional distress and perceptions of decreased closeness and trust in the relationship. Given that rules are intended to protect the integrity of an open relationship, it is not surprising that breaking them has a negative impact on the relationship, or perhaps is symptomatic of a relationship that is already distressed. However, no research to date has systematically examined the particular dimensions of relationship quality that are negatively affected by breaking rules in relationships, or directly compared the magnitude of such effects in monogamous and open relationships.

Strong commitment to a relationship is associated with a concern for the wellbeing of that relationship and an orientation towards pro-relationship behaviours (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Van Lange et al., 1997). Research has shown that highly committed individuals are less likely to be unfaithful to their partners (Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999), and this pattern likely extends to breaking rules in open relationships. Specifically, one may expect men who are highly committed to their relationships to be unlikely to break agreed rules regarding extra-dyadic sex, as it may undermine the wellbeing of their primary relationship. In contrast, men who are less committed to their relationships may be more likely to break

rules, as they may be more interested in fulfilling their personal desires than adhering to agreed relationship boundaries.

A similar argument applies to intimacy. Key aspects of intimacy include emotional bonding and mutual trust (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Sternberg, 1986). Therefore, men who are highly intimate with their romantic partners may be more inclined to resist temptations to break a relationship rule, for fear of betraying their partner's trust and causing them distress. Intimacy also involves close communication and mutual self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Thus, partners who regularly self-disclose to each other may review and renegotiate the rules of their open relationship when they feel the current rules are no longer appropriate, rather than break an existing rule first if the opportunity arises. In contrast, men who do not readily self-disclose to their partners may feel more inclined to break a rule if the opportunity presents itself, rather than discuss changing the rules with their partners first. Of course, some decisions to break rules may be made spontaneously without consideration of their consequences; in these situations, men may subsequently regret their actions and experience reduced intimacy, as was the case for men breaking agreements in Hoff and Beougher's (2010) qualitative study. Thus, in short, men breaking rules in open relationships may be expected to report being less intimate with their partners than men who do not break the rules.

Given that having sex with any person other than a primary partner is a fundamental violation of expectations in monogamous relationships, doing so should be associated with reduced commitment and intimacy in these relationships, just as breaking other kinds of rules in open relationships is likely to be. As being sexually unsatisfied within a relationship is one reason why men break their agreements (Hoff et al., 2009), it is possible that searching for sexual satisfaction outside a monogamous relationship is associated with relatively low levels of passion within that relationship. However, given that one of the main reasons why gay

men have open relationships is to satisfy their needs for sexual diversity (LaSala, 2004b), relatively low passion in an open relationship may not, of itself, motivate the breaking of an agreed rule regarding the pragmatics or restrictions around sex with casual partners. Thus, while open relationships overall may be characterised by lower passion compared with monogamous relationships, as argued earlier, it is reasonable not to expect passion to vary as a function of breaking a rule in an open relationship as it may in a monogamous relationship. Whether or not any reduction in intimacy and commitment associated with breaking rules is of similar magnitude in both open and monogamous relationships, however, is a question of both theoretical and practical importance, and one which the present research was designed to explore.

It is important to acknowledge at this point that lower relationship quality may be the outcomes as much as the antecedents of breaking the rules in both monogamous and open relationships. However, establishing causality is beyond the scope of the present cross-sectional research.

One additional factor to consider in the context of breaking rules is satisfaction with the relationship agreement. In a recent quantitative study of 380 gay men in the San Francisco Bay area, Neilands, Chakravarty, Darbes, Beougher, and Hoff (2010) reported that men who were more invested in their relationship agreements (as determined by levels of commitment to, satisfaction with, and value attached to the agreement) were less likely to break them. This is not surprising, as people who are satisfied with their agreement should have little motivation to break a rule. For example, men who are completely satisfied having a monogamous agreement may be relatively unlikely to have sex with an outside partner, whereas others who are unsatisfied with this agreement, possibly because of feeling unfulfilled or stifled, may be more likely to take up any opportunities for casual sex that may arise. Similarly, men in open relationships who are perfectly happy with the boundaries they

have established with their partners should have little reason to cross them, whereas those who feel the boundaries are too restrictive may be more likely satisfy their desires in ways that do not fall within these boundaries. Thus, consistent with Neilands et al.'s (2010) findings, men who break relationship rules are expected to be less satisfied with their relationship agreement.

### **The Present Research**

The present study had several aims. The first of these, using Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love, was to compare levels of intimacy, commitment, and passion in monogamous and open relationships, in an attempt to resolve previously conflicting findings in the literature. The second main aim was to build on the work of Hoff and colleagues (Hoff et al., 2010; Hoff & Beougher, 2010) by examining whether these three specific dimensions of relationship quality vary as a function of breaking agreed relationship rules, and whether the magnitude of such variations differs between open and monogamous relationships. A further general aim of this research was to provide an Australian context to gay men's relationship agreements, as the vast majority of previous research in this area has taken place in the United States and may not apply in other countries and cultures.

The reasoning presented throughout led to several hypotheses. First, it was predicted that levels of passion, but not intimacy or commitment, would be lower on average in open relationships compared to monogamous relationships. Second, it was expected that intimacy and commitment would be lower in relationships in which men reported breaking a rule, regardless of the relationship agreement (open or monogamous), but that passion would only be lower for rule-breaking in monogamous relationships. Finally, it was predicted that men breaking a relationship rule would report lower satisfaction with their relationship agreement than those not breaking a rule.

## Method

### Participants

Two hundred and twenty nine Australian males ranging from 18 -70 years of age ( $M = 35.33$ ,  $SD = 11.15$ ) participated in this study. All self-identified as being gay or homosexual and reported being in an ongoing romantic relationship. The majority of participants were from New South Wales (39%) or Victoria (34%). The other participants were from Queensland (6%), Western Australia (3%), Australian Capital Territory (2%), South Australia (2%), or an unspecified location (14%).

Relationship duration ranged from 0.5 to 29 years ( $M = 6.51$ ,  $SD = 6.43$ ). Almost half the participants (47.2 %) reported being older than their partner, with 6.6% reporting no age difference. The largest age difference was 42 years ( $M = 6.11$ ,  $SD = 6.52$ ,  $Mdn = 4.00$ ). Three-quarters (75.1%) of the participants were in cohabiting relationships. Close examination of this demographic information revealed a possible eight couples among the 229 participants. This dependence in the data could potentially have affected the results. However, these 16 cases were retained, as excluding them yielded identical patterns of results to those ultimately reported herein.

### Measures

**Demographic characteristics.** The first section of the survey requested information regarding the age of the participants and their partners (in years), relationship duration (in years), cohabitation (living together or not), and state of residence.

**Relationship agreement.** Participants indicated which of three categories best described their relationship agreement: monogamous (“It is NOT okay for you or your

partner to have sexual contact with men outside your relationship”), threesome only (“It is okay for you and your partner to have sexual contact with men outside your relationship, but ONLY in threesomes or groups that include BOTH of you”), or open (“It is okay for you and your partner to have sexual contact with men outside your relationship”). A similar classification has been used in previous research (LaSala, 2004a). Following this, participants indicated whether this agreement was “unspoken” or had been reached through open discussion. Participants also indicated whether their agreement had been in place since the beginning of the relationship, and if not, how long (in months or years) it had been in place. Finally, participants indicated how satisfied they were with their relationship agreement using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all satisfied; 5 = completely satisfied). It is noted here that Neilands et al’s (2010) “Sexual Agreement Investment Scale”, which contains a measure of relationship agreement satisfaction, could not be used in the present study as it was not published at the time of data collection.

**Rules of open relationships.** Participants in open relationships were asked about the rules they believe apply to their agreement. This was to ensure that when being asked about rule breaking later in the survey, participants had an explicit notion of what constituted breaking a rule in their relationship. First, a 6-item checklist assessed the kinds of sexual activities permitted with casual partners: kissing, mutual masturbation, giving oral sex, receiving oral sex, insertive anal sex, and receptive anal sex. Space was given for participants to indicate whether any other sexual activities were or were not allowed.

Second, participants in open relationships were asked whether any of the following rules apply to their relationship: not seeing the same casual partner more than once; telling the relationship partner about all extra-dyadic sex; not searching actively for casual sex (e.g., finding casual partners online or at saunas, etc.); only having casual sex when either the participant or the partner is “out of town”; not having casual sex partners at home (whether or

not the relationship was cohabiting); not staying overnight at a casual partner's house; not having casual sex at sex-on-site venues; and not engaging in non-sexual activities (e.g., having "dates") with casual partners. These rules were drawn from qualitative research on the boundaries gay men typically set in open relationships (e.g., Hickson et al., 1992; LaSala, 2004b), and from informal discussion between the author and members of the gay community. For each rule presented, participants indicated whether it applied their relationship, and indicated using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all; 5 = completely) how certain they were that their partner shares their belief about the rule. Finally, participants answered 'yes' or 'no' to indicate whether they had discussed each rule explicitly with their partner. Because these eight rules are not exhaustive of the range of possible rules, space was given for participants to describe any additional rules that apply to their open relationship.

**Rule breaking in all relationships.** All participants indicated "yes" or "no" as to whether they had ever broken a rule of their relationship agreement (whether the rule of monogamy or any other rule that applied to their relationship agreement). If "yes", participants indicated whether it had occurred in the past 6 months. Those indicating "yes" to the latter were asked how frequently they had broken rules in the past 6 months (only once, a few times, about once a month, about once a week, more than once a week). As an additional measure of interest, the subjective seriousness of rule breaking was assessed. Participants breaking a rule (or rules) in the past 6 months were asked to indicate how serious they believed this transgression to be, using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all serious; 5 = extremely serious).

**Intimacy, passion, and commitment.** The Sternberg Triangular Love Scale (SLTS; Sternberg, 1997) was used to assess levels of relationship intimacy, passion, and commitment. The STLS comprises three 15-item subscales designed to measure each construct. Intimacy items include "I feel close to my partner"; passion items include "My

relationship with my partner is passionate”; and commitment items include “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”. Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on 7-point scales (1 = not at all true; 7 = very true). Scores for each subscale were taken as the mean of the relevant 15 items, with higher scores indicating higher levels of relationship intimacy, passion, and commitment. The scales had high internal consistency, Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .96, .95, \text{ and } .97$ , respectively.

### **Procedure**

The survey was advertised via notices and news articles in the GLBTI press in Melbourne and Sydney. These provided the URL for the online survey and specified that participants must identify as homosexual or gay (not bisexual), have been in their current relationship a minimum of 6 months, be at least 18 years of age, and be an Australian citizen or permanent resident. Banner advertisements on national GLBTI community websites contained direct links to the survey where eligibility criteria were restated. In addition, during interviews about the study on two Melbourne community radio stations, the first author referred interested listeners to the websites where they could find direct links to the survey.

Once participants accessed the online survey, they were given a brief description of the project aims and definitions of important terms used throughout the survey (such as “relationship partner”, “casual partner”, “relationship agreement”, etc.). As an ethical consideration, participants were advised not to discuss their participation in the survey with their partners, to avoid feeling pressured to disclose responses they would prefer their partners not to know (e.g., having a broken a rule). Basic demographic information, but no identifying information, was requested before participants completed the questions and measures in the order presented above.



## Results

### Descriptive Summary

**Relationship agreement.** One hundred and twenty-eight participants (56%) indicated they were in a monogamous relationship. Of the remaining participants, 61 (27%) were in open relationships and 40 (17%) were in threesome-only relationships. Open relationships were significantly longer in duration ( $M = 8.59, SD = 6.74$ ) than were monogamous relationships ( $M = 5.31, SD = 6.00$ ) but not threesome-only relationships ( $M = 7.14, SD = 6.55$ ),  $F(2, 226) = 5.81, p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ . The majority of men (73%) reported having reached their relationship agreement through explicit discussion with their partners, although a significantly greater proportion of monogamous relationships (40%) were unspoken than were open (10%) or threesome-only (10%) relationships,  $\chi^2(2, N = 229) = 25.90, p < .001$ . Most men (72%) reported having had their current relationship agreement since the beginning of the relationship, but this was the case for a significantly higher proportion of monogamous relationships (94%) than of open (54%) and threesome-only (28%) relationships,  $\chi^2(2, N = 229) = 78.36, p < .001$ .

**Rules in open relationships.** Each of the six listed sexual activities were allowed with casual partners in the vast majority of cases (kissing = 92%, mutual masturbation = 98%, giving oral sex = 100%, receiving oral sex = 98%, insertive anal sex = 92%, receptive anal sex = 90%). Further, 85% of men in open relationships indicated that *all* of the listed sexual activities were allowed with casual partners. No participant reported any additional restrictions on specific sexual activities with casual partners.

Table 1 displays the results pertaining to the eight rules about other aspects of extra-dyadic relations. For most rules, the majority of men reported that the rule did *not* apply to

their open relationship agreement. The only exception to this was not staying overnight with a casual partner, which was endorsed by just over half the participants. However, the majority (83%) indicated that at least *one* of the listed rules applied to their relationship. Further, almost all (97%) had discussed at least one of the listed rules with their partners, with six of the eight rules having been discussed between the majority of participants and their partners. Additional rules reported in response to the open-ended question included enforcing safe sex, *not* discussing sexual encounters with casual partners, terminating associations with casual partners if emotional involvement became an issue, and generally behaving in ways that are respectful to each partner.

> Table 1 about here <

On average, participants were very certain that their partners shared their beliefs about whether or not each rule applied to their agreement (see Table 1). Independent samples t-tests indicated that for all rules, those who said they had discussed the rule with their partner were more certain it applied ( $M_s = 4.52 - 4.90$ ) than those who had not ( $M_s = 3.31 - 4.19$ ), all  $p_s < .02$ .

**Relationship quality in all relationships.** Overall levels of the three Sternberg triangular love variables among the entire sample were quite high (intimacy:  $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ; passion:  $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ; commitment:  $M = 6.18$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). All three were significantly, though weakly, correlated with relationship duration. These correlations were positive for intimacy,  $r(229) = 0.14$ ,  $p = .034$ , and commitment,  $r(229) = 0.14$ ,  $p = .040$ , but negative for passion,  $r(229) = -0.20$ ,  $p = .003$ . In addition, participants reported being highly satisfied with their agreement ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ), but this was unrelated to relationship duration,  $r(229) = 0.03$ ,  $p > .05$ .

Given the correlations of the Sternberg variables with relationship duration, and the fact that open relationships were significantly longer than were monogamous ones, duration may have acted as a confounding variable. However, the patterns of findings reported below did not change as a result of including duration as a covariate; therefore, duration was not considered further.

### **Relationship Agreements and Relationship Quality**

Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations of intimacy, passion, commitment, and satisfaction with agreement as a function of relationship agreement. One-way ANOVAs revealed a significant main effect of relationship agreement on passion,  $F(2, 226) = 8.29, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ , but not on intimacy,  $F(2, 226) = 0.50, p > .05$ , commitment,  $F(2, 226) = 1.87, p > .05$ , or satisfaction with agreement,  $F(2, 226) = 2.57, p > .05$ . Post-hoc tests revealed that passion was significantly lower in open relationships than both monogamous and threesome-only relationships, but the latter two groups were not significantly different from each other.

> Table 2 about here <

### **Rule Breaking and Relationship Quality**

The majority (62%) of all participants reported never having broken a rule of their relationship agreement. Men in monogamous relationships were slightly more likely than those with other agreements to say they had never broken a rule, a finding which approached significance,  $\chi^2(2, N = 229) = 5.94, p = .051$ . Of those who had ever broken rules, 56% (accounting for 21% of the total sample) reported having done so in the past six months. Of these, 65% (accounting for 14% of the total sample) reported breaking a rule more than once.

Relationship agreement was not associated with either the likelihood of breaking a rule in the past six months,  $\chi^2(2, N = 87) = 1.06, p > .05$ , or with the frequency of rule breaking in the past six months,  $F(2, 46) = 0.78, p > .05$ . The latter variable was negatively correlated with satisfaction with agreement,  $r(49) = -0.36, p = .012$ , but unrelated to intimacy, passion, and commitment. Among those who had broken a rule in the past 6 months, the subjective seriousness of their “most serious” transgression was moderate ( $M = 3.33, SD = 1.20$ ). This did not vary significantly by relationship agreement,  $F(2, 46) = 0.39, p > .05$ , nor was it significantly correlated with any of the relationship quality variables, all  $r_s(49) < .19, p_s > .05$ .

To examine differences in relationship quality as a function of rule breaking, 3 (relationship agreement: monogamous, threesome-only, open)  $\times$  2 (ever broken rule: yes, no) ANOVAs were performed. The main effect of relationship agreement was only significant for passion, consistent with the finding reported above, but the main effect of having ever broken a rule was significant for intimacy,  $F(2,223) = 15.23, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ , passion,  $F(2,223) = 7.68, p = .006$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ , commitment,  $F(2,223) = 8.76, p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ , and satisfaction with agreement,  $F(2,223) = 41.92, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .16$ , which were all significantly lower for those who had ever broken a relationship rule (see Table 2). The ANOVA for passion also revealed a significant interaction between relationship agreement and ever broken a rule,  $F(2,222) = 4.33, p = .014$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ . An analysis of simple effects indicated, as expected, that passion did not differ as a function of rule breaking in open relationships. No other interactions were significant.

To investigate whether recent rule breaking is associated with lower relationship quality than rule breaking in the more distant past, a new variable for rule breaking history was computed, with participants classified as having broken a rule “never”, “more than six months ago”, or “within the past six months”. Due to small cell sizes, a 3 (relationship

agreement)  $\times$  3 (rule breaking history) ANOVA was not possible. Thus, one-way ANOVAs were performed on intimacy, passion, commitment, and satisfaction with agreement with rule breaking history as the sole between-subjects factor. These analyses revealed a significant effect of rule breaking on all four dependent variables: intimacy,  $F(2,226) = 20.27, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .15$ ; passion,  $F(2,226) = 6.40, p = .002$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ; commitment,  $F(2,226) = 14.24, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ; and satisfaction with agreement,  $F(2,226) = 29.86, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .21$ . Post-hoc tests indicated that recent rule-breakers reported significantly lower levels of all four variables than non-breakers (see Table 3). Further, recent rule-breakers reported significantly lower intimacy and commitment, but not passion or satisfaction with agreement, than did distant past rule-breakers. Finally, distant past rule-breakers reported significantly lower passion and satisfaction with agreement than non-breakers, but these two groups did not differ in levels of intimacy or commitment.

> Table 3 about here <

## Discussion

Many gay male couples choose not to conform to the conventional heterosexual model of sexual monogamy, and instead have an understanding that casual sex with men outside the relationship is acceptable. However, decades of studies examining the quality of open compared with monogamous relationships among gay men have yielded mixed findings. Furthermore, no prior research has established whether crossing agreed boundaries in open relationships is systematically associated with lower relationship quality in the same way as is “cheating” on a partner in a monogamous relationship. Finally, very little research on gay men’s relationship agreements has been conducted outside the United States, which possibly limits the extent to which many existing research findings apply in other parts of the

world. The present research involving Australian gay men in relationships was designed to fill these gaps in the research literature, and several hypotheses generated from both theory and prior research were supported by the findings.

First, open relationships were no less intimate or committed than were relationships with monogamous or “threesome-only” agreements. All three types of agreement were also equally satisfying. These findings are consistent with previous research showing open and monogamous relationships to be equally committed (Blasband & Peplau, 1985), and corresponds more generally with other research findings that open relationships are just as satisfying, loving, and well-adjusted as are monogamous ones (Kurdek, 1988; LaSala, 2004a). The lack of any differences in this respect suggests that allowing extra-dyadic sexual involvements does not signify partners’ waning interest in their primary relationship. Rather, it seems to reflect an act of strong trust and dedication to sustaining the emotional bond between primary partners while accommodating sexual variety with casual partners.

The results of this study do not, however, concur with those of Hoff et al. (2010), who found that open relationships were significantly less intimate and committed than their monogamous counterparts. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, Hoff et al. examined differences between relationship agreements as well as couple HIV serostatus, but did not explore differences between agreements *within* serostatus groups. It may be that concordant HIV positive couples, who were also less intimate and committed than the other serostatus groups, were overrepresented in the open agreements group, resulting in the apparently lower intimacy and commitment among open couples. In comparison, very few participants in the present study (4%) reported being in concordant positive relationships (of these, 38% were in open relationships). Alternatively, the inconsistency between the present findings and those of Hoff et al. may be due to various socio-geographical differences between the samples. Although the present findings from an Australian sample *generally*

concur with past research conducted elsewhere, there is clearly a need for further research examining how different geographical locations or cultural contexts may influence gay men's relationship issues.

As hypothesised, the one relationship dimension that distinguished open from monogamous and threesome-only relationships in the present study was passion, which was significantly lower in open relationships. Waning passion may result in an open agreement as a way of preserving the relationship while accommodating the sexual needs of the partners. However, as the majority of men in open relationships reported having had their agreement from the beginning, it seems more likely that the ability to satisfy sexual desires with casual partners somewhat reduces the motivation to maintain passion with their primary partners. Although men in threesome-only relationships are also able to partake in casual sex with other men, this is only allowed in the context of groups that include the primary partner. Thus, the passion these men experience with casual partners is shared, in a sense, with the primary partner, which may explain why there was no difference in passion between monogamous and threesome-only relationships.

The finding of lower passion, but not intimacy or commitment, in open relationships hints at an interesting theoretical notion that can be understood through the framework of Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory. Specifically, it may be that the kind of love experienced in open relationships is something like Sternberg's notion of "companionate" love. However, it is important to emphasise that even if the love in open relationships fits a slightly different "profile" to that in monogamous relationships, this by no means indicates that the former is any less satisfying or fulfilling. One of the main reasons why some couples decide to have an open agreement is to enable one or both partners to exercise freedom and explore physical and sexual possibilities with other people (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004b). To the extent that this agreement is satisfactory, experiencing somewhat less passion within the

primary relationship may be an acceptable trade-off. Indeed, our results indicated that men in open relationships were no less satisfied with their agreement than those in monogamous or threesome-only relationships.

What appears to play a more important role in relationship quality than the agreement itself is the adherence to the rules associated with it. The cardinal rule in monogamous relationships, of course, is not to engage in any outside sexual activity, whereas in open relationships, the rules dictate a variety of conditions regarding what is acceptable with casual partners. For the majority of open relationships in the present study, no boundaries were placed on the specific kinds of sexual activities that were acceptable with casual partners, but at least one rule regarding other kinds of behaviour applied, and had been openly discussed between partners. The most common of these were the conditions of not staying overnight with or “dating” a casual partner, which are most likely adopted as a precaution against becoming too involved with a casual partner. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Hickson et al., 1992; LaSala, 2004b), this suggests that open relationships are not a “free for all” where anything goes, but rather they are circumscribed by at least (and sometimes more than) one condition or rule which, for the most part, the members of the couple have discussed and agreed upon.

These rules appear not to be trivial. In support of the second hypothesis, and building on qualitative findings reported by Hoff and Beougher (2010), men in open relationships who had broken a rule, especially recently, reported lower intimacy and commitment than those who had not. Interestingly, this was to the same extent as men in monogamous relationships having cheated on their partner. The subjective seriousness of recently committed transgressions also did not differ between relationship agreements, although this may be due to insufficient statistical power, as only 21% of the sample broke a rule recently and reported on the subjective seriousness of it. Nevertheless, these findings together make a novel



contribution to the literature, and suggest that rules regarding extra-dyadic sex, no matter what they involve, effectively serve the same purpose in all relationship agreements, and that is to protect the integrity of the primary relationship. Violating these rules is considered serious and either reflects an existing disengagement from the relationship or results in this situation.

Because this research is cross-sectional, whether lower intimacy and commitment are the causes or the outcomes of breaking relationship rules cannot be established. Breaking rules is associated with subsequent emotional and couple distress (Hoff & Beougher, 2010), but low relationship quality may equally put partners at risk of breaking rules. Relationship commitment, in particular, is associated with devaluing alternative partners (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989) and resisting opportunities to be unfaithful (Drigotas et al., 1990). It follows, then, that individuals manifesting lower relationship commitment are less concerned about engaging in behaviours that may sabotage the wellbeing of their relationship, and find it difficult to resist opportunities to break rules as they arise.

For gay men in monogamous or threesome-only relationships, it may well be the lessening of passion that leads either to disengagement from the relationship or to rule breaking. Some men in monogamous relationships may feel sexually unsatisfied by their partners, and consider having an affair to fulfil their needs for passion. Similarly, for some men in threesome-only relationships, including a third person in sexual activities with their primary partner may still not be enough to satisfy what they desire in their sex lives. These unfulfilled desires may then translate into rule breaking behaviour. Of course, it is possible that reduced passion is also an outcome of breaking rules. Perhaps engaging in an exciting affair with a casual partner would make an established monogamous or threesome-only relationship seem dull and ordinary by contrast, and lead an individual to disengage from it.

As expected, there was no difference in passion as a function of rule breaking in open relationships. Because men in such relationships are already free, to an extent, to engage in passionate sexual encounters with casual partners, it seems unlikely that a lack of passion in the primary relationship would be the cause or outcome of crossing boundaries regarding the exact nature of what is allowed with casual partners. The most frequently occurring rules in the open relationships in this study related somehow to preventing an ongoing or emotional involvement with casual partners, consistent with previous research (Hickson et al.; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004b). Thus, breaking such rules is more likely due to a relative lack of intimacy or commitment in the primary relationship, rather than of passion, and this is what the present results seem to indicate.

In addition, rule breaking men in this study were less satisfied with their agreement, regardless of what the agreement involved, than those who had not broken a rule. Furthermore, although there was no difference in satisfaction between those who had recently broken a rule and those who had done so in the more distant past, lower satisfaction was associated with more frequent rule breaking in the past six months. These results clearly suggest that it is not the nature of the agreement itself that relates to the likelihood or frequency of rule breaking, consistent with findings from Hoff et al. (2009), but rather how satisfied an individual is with their agreement.

Taken as a whole, the findings of the present research have important practical implications. The fact that relationship quality was largely equivalent across relationship agreements suggests that counsellors and other professionals should focus their efforts on working with their clients to find the agreement that works best for them, rather than prescribing an agreement based on traditional norms (LaSala, 2004a). For monogamous couples experiencing desires that cannot be fulfilled within the confines of monogamy, a carefully negotiated threesome-only or open agreement may be advisable. Similarly, open

couples having difficulty managing their agreement may either be assisted with renegotiating the boundaries, or perhaps be encouraged to consider sexual exclusivity. The important thing is to identify and take into account the particular situation and needs of each individual couple. Furthermore, considering that rule breaking was the main factor influencing relationship quality, it is essential for both researchers and practitioners to consider the reasons that lead men to break the rules of their agreement, whether it be uncertainty regarding the rules or disengagement from the relationship.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

It is important to bear in mind a number of limitations to this research. Firstly, as mentioned previously, the cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow causal explanations to be made. Longitudinal research could establish whether rule breaking precedes reductions in relationship quality, or whether low relationship quality puts individuals at risk of breaking relationship rules (or both). This may help counsellors target their intervention efforts appropriately, whether to repair the damage done by crossing boundaries or to prevent it happening in distressed couples in the first place. Changes in relationship agreements over time could also be examined in longitudinal research.

Secondly, only individuals' reports of their relationship agreement were obtained. A small minority of men reported that their agreement was implicit, which could be problematic in cases where partners hold different beliefs about their relationship agreement. This certainly occurs (Hoff et al., 2010), and because it has potential implications both for relationship quality as well as sexual health, it is worthy of further investigation with couples rather than individuals. It is also important to take into account partner effects in reports of relationship quality, as other researchers have done (e.g., Hoff et al., 2010). Nevertheless,

examining individuals' perceptions of relationship quality is still worthwhile, as they likely inform decisions regarding relationship behaviour (such as whether or not to break a rule).

Thirdly, the present findings may be limited in how much they generalise to all gay relationships. The recruitment methods possibly resulted in a sample consisting largely of men who identify with the urban GLBTI community, and therefore the results may not apply easily to men or couples that are geographically or socially isolated. Future research employing broader sampling techniques may address this issue.

In the present study, the subjective seriousness of rule breaking did not differ between relationship agreements, and was unrelated to relationship quality. However, it is possible that breaking particular kinds of rules compared to others (e.g., in an open relationship, having an emotional affair with another man compared to having sex with the same casual partner more than once) has a systematically greater impact on relationship quality, independent of subjective seriousness. Future research could profitably investigate this issue.

More generally, it is worth examining other factors that either promote or hinder the success of open relationships. A range of variables, such as personality, may play a vital role. For instance, a disposition towards jealousy has been cited as a reason for *not* engaging in an open relationship, or leaving an open relationship in pursuit of a monogamous one (LaSala, 2001, 2004b). Therefore, for those currently in an open relationship, dispositional jealousy may be related to low satisfaction with the agreement. Various other factors that reduce agreement satisfaction may in turn lead to relationship conflict and possible dissolution, so it is important for future research efforts to pay closer attention to these factors.

## **Conclusion**

This study confirms and updates existing research showing that gay men are capable of maintaining intimate and committed relationships without conforming to traditional,

heterosexist expectations of monogamy. What seems to be important is for couples to reach an agreement that is satisfactory, and for each partner to respect the conditions of that agreement. Evidently, keeping within the boundaries of an open relationship by not seeing a casual partner repeatedly, for instance, or avoiding any kind of emotional involvement with a casual partner, are as important for maintaining relationship quality as is not sleeping with another man while in a monogamous relationship. The present findings challenge common notions held by society at large that monogamy is an essential ingredient for relationship success, and that deviations from this model are inherently problematic. It is time for acceptable (and for some, preferable) alternative models to become firmly entrenched in public consciousness.

### **Acknowledgments**

This research was supported by the Victoria University Research Development Grants Scheme 2009. The authors would like to thank the men who participated in the survey, Stuart Todd for his invaluable research assistance, and Leah Kaufmann and four anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

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Table 1

Rules About Extra-dyadic Encounters in Open Relationships

Rule	% Applies	Certainty <sup>a</sup>	% Discussed
No seeing same casual partner more than once	19.7%	4.26	72.1%
Must tell relationship partner about all extra-dyadic sex	37.7%	4.26	78.7%
No searching actively for casual sex	21.3%	4.25	67.2%
Only allowed casual sex when relationship partner or self out of town	9.8%	4.66	65.2%
No casual sex at own house	41.0%	4.36	72.1%
No staying overnight at a casual partner's house	52.5%	4.05	49.2%
No casual sex at sex-on-site venues	6.6%	4.57	73.8%
No non-sexual relations with casual partners	41.0%	4.00	45.9%

<sup>a</sup>Certainty that the partner shares one's belief about whether this rule applies to the relationship agreement.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Intimacy, Passion, Commitment, and Satisfaction with Agreement as a Function of Relationship Agreement and Ever Breaking a Rule

		Relationship Agreement				
		Ever Broken	Threesome-			
		a Rule?	Monogamous	only	Open	Total
Intimacy	Yes		5.87 (1.16)	6.17 (0.93)	5.98 (1.48)	5.97 (1.21)
	No		6.56 (0.63)	6.63 (0.44)	6.42 (0.73)	6.53 (0.63)
	<i>Total</i>		6.34 (0.89)	6.40 (0.75)	6.21 (1.14)	6.32 (0.94)
Passion	Yes		4.89 (1.29)	5.35 (1.39)	4.93 (1.42)	5.01 (1.35)
	No		5.85 (1.03)	6.11 (0.91)	4.75 (1.48)	5.62 (1.24)
	<i>Total</i>		5.55 (1.20)	5.73 (1.22)	4.83 (1.45)	5.39 (1.32)
Commitment	Yes		5.71 (1.34)	6.02 (1.42)	5.89 (1.52)	5.84 (1.41)
	No		6.47 (0.74)	6.69 (0.40)	5.98 (1.46)	6.38 (0.95)
	<i>Total</i>		6.23 (1.03)	6.36 (1.08)	5.94 (1.47)	6.16 (1.17)
Satisfaction	Yes		3.80 (0.88)	3.65 (0.88)	3.93 (1.21)	3.80 (0.99)
	No		4.67 (0.52)	4.45 (0.83)	4.53 (0.71)	4.61 (0.62)
	<i>Total</i>		4.40 (0.77)	4.05 (0.93)	4.26 (1.00)	4.30 (0.87)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Intimacy, Passion, Commitment, and Satisfaction with Agreement as a Function of Rule Breaking History

	Rule Breaking History		
	Never	More than 6 months ago	Within the past 6 months
Intimacy	6.53 <sub>a</sub> (0.63)	6.42 <sub>b</sub> (0.86)	5.63 <sub>a,b</sub> (1.33)
Passion	5.62 <sub>a,b</sub> (1.24)	5.12 <sub>a</sub> (1.19)	4.92 <sub>b</sub> (1.47)
Commitment	6.38 <sub>a</sub> (0.95)	6.37 <sub>b</sub> (0.95)	5.42 <sub>a,b</sub> (1.56)
Satisfaction	4.61 <sub>a,b</sub> (0.62)	3.95 <sub>a</sub> (1.04)	3.69 <sub>b</sub> (0.94)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. Means with shared subscripts within the same row are significantly different from each other.