



Consensual Non-Monogamy Relationship Rules Among Young Gay and Bisexual Men: A Dyadic Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationship rules, the boundaries and understandings partners have about acceptable behaviors related to their CNM relationship, are associated with relationship functioning and sexual health risk among gay and bisexual men. Partnered young gay and bisexual men (YGBM) experience unique relational challenges and sexual health disparities. Thus, understanding the nuances of relationship rules among YGBM in CNM relationships is of particular importance. However, few studies have examined relationship rules specifically among YGBM. The current study sought to explore relationship rules among YGBM in CNM relationships, including both those explicitly discussed and those implicitly assumed. We also assessed concordance and discrepancies in partners' reports of their relationship rules, as well as rule violations. Partners from 10 CNM couples ($n=20$; $M_{age}=25.3$) completed separate semi-structured interviews that included questions about their relationship rules. Individual- and dyad-level analyses were conducted using a modified version of the consensual qualitative research method. Three main themes of relationship rules emerged from the data: extradyadic partner criteria, conditions regarding extradyadic sex, and conditions regarding maintenance of the primary relationship. While 39% of participants reported rules that were not endorsed by their partner, few clearly contradictory discrepancies in partners' reports were observed. Nine participants reported having at least one implicit rule and 70% of participants (from 8 of 10 couples) reported that they and/or their partner violated at least one rule. Explicit rules and rule concordance may be associated with improved relationship functioning. Common violations of sexual risk reduction rules may contribute to YGBM's increased HIV/STI risk.

Keywords Consensual non-monogamy · Young gay and bisexual men · Relationship rules and agreements · Sexual orientation

Introduction

Precise definitions and practices of consensual non-monogamous (CNM) relationships vary considerably within the literature. For the purposes of the current research, which focuses on young gay and bisexual men (YGBM) with primary partners,

CNM relationships can be generally defined by an explicit agreement allowing for extradyadic sexual and/or romantic relationships (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, 2013). YGBM in CNM relationships may form specific CNM relationship structure agreements, such as “monogamish” or “openish” (i.e., partners are permitted to pursue extradyadic sexual relationships only when both main partners are present, as in threesomes), open (i.e., partners are permitted to pursue extradyadic sexual relationships with or without each other present), or polyamorous (i.e., partners are permitted to pursue extradyadic romantic relationships which may or may not include sex) (Hosking, 2013; Parsons, Starks, DuBois, Grov, & Golub, 2013; Starks et al., 2019; Stults, 2018). However, CNM relationships are not only characterized by particular relationship structure agreements, but also by specific relationship rules, or the unique relational contexts, behaviors, and attitudes that partners negotiate to delineate the precise bounds of their CNM relationship. Whereas the overall CNM relationship agreement must be

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explicitly established to constitute a CNM relationship (versus a non-consensual non-monogamous relationship) (Moors, Matsick, & Schechinger, 2017), CNM relationship rules may operate on an implicit or unspoken basis (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hosking, 2013).

CNM relationships are common among gay and bisexual men (GBM). Prevalence estimates vary across studies, but approximately 47–60% of partnered GBM are estimated to have a CNM relationship agreement (LaSala, 2004; Mitchell, Harvey, Champagne, Moskowitz, & Seal, 2012; Parsons et al., 2013; Starks et al., 2019). A recent study of a U.S. national cohort of HIV-negative GBM ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.23$) found that, among those who reported being in a partnered relationship ($n = 530$), approximately 45% were in open relationships and 10% were in monogamish relationships (Starks et al., 2019). However, few studies report the prevalence of CNM relationship agreements specifically among YGBM. One study of 40 partnered YGBM ($M_{\text{age}} = 22.5$) found that 80% reported having sexual agreements (Greene, Andrews, Kuper, & Mustanski, 2014). Although the majority of these participants (78%) classified their relationship as monogamous, nearly one-fifth (19%) reported an agreement that they could have sex with extradyadic partners with rules specifying limits to these encounters, and one participant reported an agreement in which he could have extradyadic sex without restrictions.

Examples of specific relationship rules commonly endorsed by GBM in CNM relationships include those pertaining to communication mandates (e.g., requiring disclosure of extradyadic activities to main partner), sexual risk reduction (e.g., requiring condom use with extradyadic partners), emotional distinctions between main and extradyadic partners (e.g., separating romantic relationship with main partner from casual sex with extradyadic partners), and restrictions on extradyadic partners (e.g., not allowing friends as extradyadic partners) (Groves, Starks, Rendina, & Parsons, 2014; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hoff et al., 2009; Ramirez & Brown, 2010). One study among 191 partnered GBM in non-monogamous relationships ($M_{\text{age}} = 43.0$) found that 62% of participants endorsed a clear set of rules that included various forms of sexual risk reduction, while 37% of participants did not endorse a clear set of relationship rules (Groves et al., 2014). Additionally, as many as 20% of participants in this study reported violating one of their relationship rules in the past three months (Groves et al., 2014), which was mirrored in another study that found that 20% of GBM reported violating their relationship structure agreement (i.e., monogamous, monogamish, open) (Mitchell et al., 2012).

Mutually recognizing and upholding relationship rules and agreements is associated with increased relationship functioning (Hosking, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012). In one study, the majority (77%) of participants reported a sexual agreement that was explicitly discussed in detail; however, only 60% of participants who reported a sexual agreement had partners who mutually endorsed the same sexual agreement (Mitchell et al., 2012). Furthermore, a recent study of male couples found only weak-to-moderate concordance between partners about their specific

rules regarding extradyadic sex, suggesting an elevated risk for HIV/STI infection and potential relational difficulties (Sharma et al., 2019). In line with the concept of negotiated sexual safety between relationship partners (Kippax et al., 1997), the degree to which GBM abide by their relationship rules and agreements also influences their sexual health risks (Mitchell et al., 2012, 2016).

Although CNM relationship rules have been studied in samples of older GBM, considerably less is known about CNM relationships among YGBM (Stults, 2018). In general, emerging adulthood is characterized by increased independence, identity confusion, relationship exploration, heightened self-focus, and creation and revision of personal goals (Arnett, 2000, 2018). Risk-taking, including sexual experimentation and substance use, also peaks during this period and can have implications for both short- and long-term mental, physical, and relational health (Arnett, Žukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014; Sandberg-Thoma & Kamp Dush, 2014). Emerging adults navigating the complexities of CNM relationships may confront distinct challenges, such as stigma aimed at CNM relationships (Conley et al., 2013), which may compound the general difficulties associated with this important developmental period. For YGBM in CNM relationships specifically, these challenges may be further exacerbated by experiences of discrimination and minority stress related to their sexual minority identity and relationship status (Meyer, 1995, 2003). Uncovering the nuances of CNM relationship rules among YGBM may yield information to help optimize their relational, mental, and physical health.

Understanding sexual rules formed by YGBM in CNM relationships is also critical, as they may relate to the heightened risk for HIV and STIs documented in this population. GBM accounted for approximately 70% of new HIV diagnoses in the United States in 2017, with rates highest among YGBM ages 13–34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Further, up to 68% of HIV transmissions among sexual minority men occur between primary relationship partners, versus casual or anonymous partners (Goodreau et al., 2012; Sullivan, Salazar, Buchbinder, & Sanchez, 2009). Such rates are further elevated among emerging adult YGBM, with as many as 79–84% of HIV transmissions occurring within the context of a primary relationship (Sullivan et al., 2009). The increased risks of main partner transmission are largely attributed to more frequent condomless anal sex among primary partners (Sullivan et al., 2009). These risks may be pronounced among YGBM, as emerging adults are more likely to take health risks and have a series of short-lived primary relationships (Arnett, 2018; Arnett et al., 2014).

The rules that YGBM in CNM relationships implement regarding extradyadic sexual activities are critical for contextualizing their unique strategies for mitigating HIV risk. These risk reduction strategies are often initiated through relationship rules made among primary partners, such as agreeing to always use condoms or prohibit drug use with extradyadic partners (Groves et al., 2014; Parsons & Starks, 2014). Through the lens

of couples interdependence theory (Rusbult & Lange, 2003), sexual rules and agreements reflect partners' joint goals, and each partner's sexual safety is influenced by mutual adherence to their sexual agreements. Couples Interdependence Theory also connects partners' adherence to their relationship rules to their broader relationship functioning (Starks et al., 2019). As such, obtaining a closer view of YGBM's CNM relationship rules—including those that function implicitly, rule violations, and discrepancies with partner reports of rules—not only provides clarity about YGBM's distinctive risks for HIV, but also their relational health. Moreover, research has identified several behavioral and relational differences between YGBM and their older counterparts, such as higher rates of drug use and condomless anal sex with primary partners among YGBM (Closson et al., 2017; Crepaz et al., 2000; Salomon et al., 2008). Thus, YGBM's CNM relationship rules may present unique characteristics worthy of targeted inquiry.

Study Aims

The current study sought to fill a gap in the literature on CNM relationship rules by focusing on emerging adult YGBM, an understudied and vulnerable population. Using a qualitative approach, the primary aim of this study is to explore the rules formed and practiced by YGBM in CNM relationships, including both those explicitly discussed and those implicitly assumed. Additionally, although research on consensual non-monogamy has proliferated in recent years, relatively few studies have taken a dyadic approach that includes the perspectives of both partners in a primary relationship. As such, we sought to obtain dyadic data to examine rule concordance and discrepancies, as well as rule violations, in a racially/ethnically diverse sample of YGBM in New York City.

Method

Participants

The research approach for the current study has been described in detail elsewhere (Halkitis et al., 2013). Participants were recruited from a longitudinal parent study of young men who have sex with men in New York City. To be eligible for the parent study, participants had to (1) be 18 or 19 years of age, (2) have been assigned male at birth, (3) have had sex with a male partner in the previous 6 months, and (4) report an HIV-negative serostatus at the time of enrollment. The IRB at New York University approved all parent study and substudy procedures (Halkitis et al., 2013).

At the time this substudy took place between June and July 2015, participants recruited from the parent study were age 23 or 24.¹ Parent study participants who were interested in participating in this substudy completed an interviewer-administered eligibility screener in-person or by phone. If deemed eligible, participants' primary partners were screened for eligibility, during which they provided the name of the parent study participant with whom they were in a relationship. The eligibility criteria for the current substudy required all participants to report during the screener that they were age 18 or older, in a relationship with a male partner for at least 6 months, and currently in a CNM relationship. The latter criterion was determined from the relationship type they selected from the following options: (1) Monogamous (i.e., you and your main partner have explicitly agreed not to have any other sexual or romantic partners); (2) Monogamish/Openish (i.e., you and your main partner have explicitly agreed to have sex with casual partners, but only with your main partner present); (3) Open (i.e., you and your main partner have explicitly agreed to have sex with casual partners with or without each other present); (4) Polyamorous (i.e., you and your main partner have explicitly agreed to have other romantic partners which may or may not include sex); or (5) Other relationship type.

Of the 113 parent study participants screened for the substudy, 28 were eligible to participate. Due to funding limitations, 10 participants and their primary partners were enrolled in the study on a first-come, first-serve basis. Thus, the current study's sample of $n = 20$ participants comprised $n = 10$ YGBM from the parent study and their $n = 10$ primary partners.

Table 1 shows individual and dyad-level sample characteristics. Of note, most participants in the present study were age 23 and 24 ($M_{\text{age}} = 25.3$, $SD = 6.67$) and identified as gay ($n = 18$). The sample was racially/ethnically diverse, and half of the participants were partnered with someone of a different race/ethnicity. Of the 10 couples, most identified as being in an open relationship ($n = 6$), while the other couples identified as being in a monogamish relationship ($n = 4$). No couples in this study identified as being in a polyamorous or other type of CNM relationship.

Measures and Procedure

Eligible participants and their primary partners were scheduled for semi-structured individual interviews lasting approximately one hour. Appointments were not initiated until both partners confirmed their separate appointments. Partners' interviews were conducted an average of 3.1 days apart (range 0–9 days). Participants provided written informed consent

¹ Data collection occurred prior to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP; i.e., a daily medication that can be taken to prevent HIV-infection) being widely disseminated to YGBM in New York City, though there was limited availability during this time.

Table 1 Participant and dyad-level characteristics

	<i>n</i> (%)
<i>Participant characteristics</i>	
<i>Total (n = 20)</i>	
Age, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	25.3 (6.67)
Race/ethnicity	
White	6 (30)
Black/African American	5 (25)
Hispanic/Latinx	4 (20)
Biracial/multiracial	4 (20)
Other	1 (5)
Sexual orientation	
Gay	18 (90)
Bisexual	2 (10)
<i>Dyad-level characteristics</i>	
<i>Total (n = 10)</i>	
Partners' age difference, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	4.8 (8.64)
Partners of same race/ethnicity	
White	5 (50%)
Black/African American	2 (20%)
Hispanic/Latinx	1 (10%)
Partners of other race/ethnicity	
Biracial/multiracial and Hispanic/Latinx	5 (50%)
Biracial/multiracial and White	2 (20%)
Biracial/multiracial and Black/African American	1 (10%)
Other race/ethnicity and White	1 (10%)
CNM relationship type	
Open	6 (60%)
Monogamish	4 (40%)
Length of relationship	
1–2 years	5 (50%)
3–5 years	5 (50%)
CNM relationship developed within	
First year	3 (30%)
Between years 1 and 2	4 (40%)
Between years 2 and 3	3 (30%)

prior to beginning the interview and were compensated \$35 for their participation. All interviews were conducted by the second author and audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

Interviews began with several questions about participants' sociodemographic characteristics and current relationship type (i.e., open, monogamish, polyamorous, monogamous, other). All participants answered these questions with responses that reverified the eligibility criteria. Next, all interviews included the following open-ended questions about participants' relationships: (1) "What rules do you have about having romantic relationships with other people?"; (2) "What rules do you and your partner have, if any, regarding sex with other people?"; (3) "To what extent have you violated the rules of your relationship?"; and (4) "To what extent has your partner violated the rules of your relationship?" The semi-structured interview protocol enabled the interviewer to

probe for additional information (e.g., if rules were implicit), clarify participants' responses, and follow relevant lines of inquiry prompted by the participants. In addition to the questions about relationship rules, participants were asked open-ended questions about their relationship history, relationship satisfaction (Stults, 2018), CNM-related stigma, HIV/STI-related behaviors, extradyadic partners, mental health, substance use, and overall concluding thoughts about CNM relationships.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Each audio recorded interview was independently transcribed and verified for accuracy by two members of the research team. The analysis team consisted of the three authors and an additional team member, all of whom participated in either the interview or transcription process. While all team members are White, the team was diverse with respect to sexual orientation, gender, and experience with consensual non-monogamy. The team included member(s) of the population being studied (i.e., young gay/bisexual men in CNM relationships), as well as allies.

The data were analyzed using a modified version of the consensual qualitative research (CQR) method (Hill et al., 2005, Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). As per CQR protocol, the team first met to bring awareness to and discuss potential biases that could affect the coding and analysis of the data, such as those pertaining to non-monogamous relationships or gay and bisexual men. During this meeting, the team primarily discussed common stereotypes and stigmatized attitudes towards CNM relationships and/or gay and bisexual men (e.g., "CNM relationships are less committed than monogamous relationships," "Gay men are promiscuous"). Though the members of the team did not identify any biased beliefs or attitudes overtly held within themselves, we acknowledged these common stereotypes and attitudes could influence coding and analysis and committed to maintaining awareness of that potential.

Next, the team developed a preliminary codebook corresponding to the content of the semi-structured interview protocol (e.g., relationship rules, stigma). ATLAS.ti (Version 7) software was used to facilitate coding and analysis of the data. Transcripts were coded in small batches and the team met regularly to discuss the addition, deletion, and revision of codes, based on the content of the interviews. Once the codebook was finalized, the team reached consensus on how the codes would be organized thematically (e.g., "ex-boyfriends" being within the larger domain of "extradyadic partner criteria"). Our primary modification to the CQR method was in our use of an internal auditor, rather than an external auditor, in the coding and analysis process. Specifically, two team members independently coded each transcript and then met to reach consensus on all codings. In the event of an impasse, a third team member was consulted to assist in reaching consensus. At the end of the coding process, each transcript was

reviewed by a third team member to ensure that the finalized codebook was consistently applied. Finally, the frequencies of participants who endorsed each code were tabulated using ATLAS.ti (Version 7). This method was detailed in a previously published manuscript stemming from this study, as well as in a similar study conducted by this study's principle investigator (Stults, 2018; Stults et al., 2020).

Results

Three main themes of relationship rules emerged from the data: (1) extradyadic partner criteria (i.e., rules guiding the selection of extradyadic partners), (2) conditions regarding extradyadic sex (i.e., rules stating the requirements of or restrictions on sexual encounters with extradyadic partners), and (3) conditions regarding maintenance of the primary relationship (i.e., rules surrounding emotional and/or communication needs between primary partners). Table 2 displays the individual- and dyad-level frequencies of rule endorsements. In terms of rule concordance, over half (61%) of all 151 stated rules were endorsed by both partners, while approximately 39% were endorsed by one partner (see Table 2). Additionally, 21 rules were reported to have been violated and six within-dyad discrepancies in partners' reports of rules were identified. Further, 11 reports of rules being unspoken or implicit in nature were observed.

Table 3 presents within-dyad illustrations of all relationship rules endorsed by both partners and those reported by only one partner. Reports from at least one partner of rule violations are indicated in bold, unspoken/implicit rules are indicated with italics, and within-dyad discrepancies are indicated with asterisks. Table 3 provides a confidential view of rule reports within-dyads; aggregate detail about rule reports from the full sample is as follows: each participant endorsed between five to 11 rules, with an average set of 7.55 rules. Nine participants (45%) reported that one rule was violated, five participants (25%) reported that two to three rules were violated, and six participants (30%) did not report any rule violations. At least one rule violation was observed in eight dyads, whereas the partners in two dyads did not report any rule violations. Additionally, nine participants from eight dyads reported at least one implicit or unspoken rule.

In the following sections, the various rules subsumed by each theme are discussed and illustrated with exemplar participant quotations. Participant quotations are identified only by their CNM relationship type (in parentheses) to protect participants' confidentiality. To assist with readability, brief interjections from the researcher (e.g., "mhm," "I see"), as well as the participants' non-verbal utterances, extraneous words (e.g., "like," "you know"), and repeated words were removed from the quotations and replaced with [...] to denote this. Additionally, vague words (e.g., "he," "it") are clarified in brackets based on relevant information surrounding the quotation in the transcripts.

Extradyadic Partner Criteria

All participants discussed rules regarding the selection of acceptable extradyadic partners. Many of these rules centered around a theme of limiting intimacy with extradyadic partners, which for many participants was restricted via a general rule against pursuing other romantic relationships. This theme was further reflected in participants' reports of specific rules about ex-boyfriends, friends and acquaintances, and repeated partners. However, the theme of limiting intimacy with extradyadic partners was contrasted by some participants' rules designed to establish a certain level of rapport with extradyadic partners (e.g., no strangers).

Other Romantic Relationships Not Allowed

The majority of participants believed that romantic feelings and experiences were exclusively reserved for their primary relationship, and thus reported that extradyadic romantic partners were not permissible ($n = 15$). This distinction between the primary relationship and extradyadic relationships was clearly drawn in the reports from the following three participants. "I don't want a polyamorous relationship... I don't want a second boyfriend" (Open). "I'm just not looking for anything romantic other than him" (Monogamish). "There has always been a distinction between [sex with extradyadic partners] just being sex versus something more" (Open). The concept of other romantic relationships was often associated with concerns about anxiety, insecurity, and jealousy. Although both he and his partner reported a rule prohibiting other romantic relationships, the following participant maintained concerns about the possibility of fostering a romantic connection with an extradyadic partner.

I guess the biggest concern is always that whole, what if we end up hooking up with someone and what if he ends up liking them more than just in that moment? Or me liking them more in that moment?... I wouldn't want him to hold back anything for any feeling of duty he might feel towards me. Or feel like he should stay with me, even though now he has these feelings for someone else or vice versa. (Monogamish)

In contrast to most participants who reported this rule, one participant reported that other romantic relationships were not currently allowed, but expressed some openness to exploring such relationships in the future.

I think we have an understanding of we'll probably meet someone that we would have those kind of feelings for, but we're not seeking that at the moment. But if it does present itself, I think we'll have that conversation when we get there. (Open)

Table 2 Frequency of relationship rules by individual and dyad among (n = 20) YGBM in CNM relationships

Rules within three main themes	Individuals (n = 20)			Dyad-level concordance (n = 10)		
	Endorsed	Implicit	Violation	Both partners	One partner	Within-dyad discrepancy
<i>Extradyadic partner criteria</i>						
Other romantic relationships not allowed	15	2	1	5	5	–
Allowed	1	–	–	–	1	–
Not allowed	6	–	2	3	–	–
Friends and acquaintances						
Allowed	10	–	–	4	2	–
Not allowed	5	–	–	1	3	–
Repeated partners						
Allowed	2	–	–	–	2	–
Not allowed	2	1	–	–	2	–
Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps						
Allowed	16	–	–	8	–	–
Not allowed	3	1	–	1	1	–
Strangers not allowed	2	–	–	–	2	–
<i>Conditions regarding extradyadic sex</i>						
Condom use required with extradyadic partners	20	3	9	10	–	–
Other sexual risk reduction rule	7	1	2	2	3	–
Substance use, not allowed	4	–	–	1	2	–
Play together only	3	2	–	–	3	–
Play separately only	2	–	–	1	–	–
No kissing	2	–	2	–	2	–
No sleepovers	3	–	1	–	3	–
Travel only	2	–	–	–	2	–
<i>Conditions regarding primary relationship</i>						
Disclosure						
Required before	5	–	4	1	3	1
Required after	2	–	–	–	2	2
Required if asked	2	–	–	–	2	–
Not required	3	–	–	–	3	3
Transparency	14	–	–	5	4	–
Prioritization of primary relationship	9	–	–	2	5	–
Veto power	7	–	–	2	3	–
Respect for each other's boundaries/autonomy	4	1	–	–	4	–
Totals	151	11	21	46	59	6

All rules are defined and described in detail in the results section of the manuscript. Brief explanations of the following rules are provided here. Other sexual risk reduction rule: includes rules regarding PrEP use, restrictions on anal sex (in general) and receptive anal intercourse (specifically), ejaculation, and transactional sex; Travel only: rule that extradyadic partners can only be pursued outside of main partners' home(s); Disclosure: rules that refer to requirements and timing of disclosing extradyadic sexual activity to main partner; Transparency: rules around creating and maintaining a general sense of transparency within the primary relationship; Prioritization of primary relationship: rule that the primary relationship must be prioritized over any extradyadic relationships; and Veto power: rule enabling main partners to veto specific choices of extradyadic partners

Ex-boyfriends

Some participants suggested extradyadic sex with ex-boyfriends posed a unique threat to their primary relationship. For this reason, six couples established firm rules that ex-boyfriends were

off limits, thus helping to limit intimacy with extradyadic partners. "There was a few basic ground rules right off the bat, like there was no screwing around with each other's exes because we felt like...that may in a way rekindle something that should not happen" (Open). However, while most participants stated that

Table 3 Within-dyad illustrations of CNM relationship rules among young gay and bisexual men

Dyad	Rules reported by both partners	Rules reported by one partner
Dyad 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ex-boyfriends not allowed 2. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 3. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 4. Transparency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances allowed 2. Other romantic relationships not allowed 3. No sleepovers 4. Travel only 5. Disclosure not required* 6. Disclosure required before* 7. Prioritization of primary relationship
Dyad 2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 2. Other romantic relationships not allowed 3. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 4. Transparency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances allowed 2. Repeated partners allowed 3. Strangers not allowed 4. Substance use not allowed 5. Other sexual risk reduction rule 6. <i>Play together only</i> 7. No kissing 8. Disclosure required if asked 9. Prioritization of primary relationship 10. Veto power
Dyad 3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances allowed 2. <i>Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps not allowed</i> 3. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 4. <i>Other sexual risk reduction rule</i> 5. Disclosure required before 6. Transparency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ex-boyfriends allowed 2. Other romantic relationships not allowed 3. Veto power 4. Prioritization of primary relationship
Dyad 4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ex-boyfriends not allowed 2. Friends and acquaintances allowed 3. Other romantic relationships not allowed 4. <i>Condom use required with extradyadic partners</i> 5. Veto power 6. Prioritization of primary relationship 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps not allowed 2. Repeated partners not allowed 3. Strangers not allowed 4. <i>Play together only</i> 5. Transparency 6. Respect for each other's boundaries/autonomy
Dyad 5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ex-boyfriends not allowed 2. Friends and acquaintances allowed 3. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 4. Other romantic relationships not allowed 5. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 6. Transparency 7. Veto power 8. Prioritization of primary relationship 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Disclosure not required* 2. Disclosure required after* 3. <i>Respect for each other's boundaries/autonomy</i>
Dyad 6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 2. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 3. Substance use not allowed 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances not allowed 2. <i>Repeated partners not allowed</i> 3. Other romantic relationships not allowed 4. Play together only 5. Veto power 6. Respect for each other's boundaries/autonomy
Dyad 7	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances not allowed 2. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 3. Other romantic relationships not allowed 4. <i>Condom use required with extradyadic partners</i> 5. Play separately only 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Repeated partners allowed 2. Other sexual risk reduction rule 3. No kissing 4. Disclosure required after* 5. Disclosure not required* 6. Transparency 7. Respect for each other's boundaries/autonomy

Table 3 (continued)

Dyad	Rules reported by both partners	Rules reported by one partner
Dyad 8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances allowed 2. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 3. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Other romantic relationships not allowed</i> 2. No sleepovers 3. Other sexual risk reduction rule 4. Disclosure required if asked 5. Transparency 6. Prioritization of primary relationship
Dyad 9	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 2. <i>Other romantic relationships not allowed</i> 3. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 4. Other sexual risk reduction rule 5. Transparency 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances not allowed 2. Substance use not allowed 3. Disclosure required before
Dyad 10	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps allowed 2. Condom use required with extradyadic partners 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Friends and acquaintances not allowed 2. Other romantic relationships not allowed 3. No sleepovers 4. Travel only 5. Disclosure required before 6. Transparency 7. Prioritization of primary relationship

To protect participants' confidentiality, no other identifying information (e.g., CNM relationship type, demographic characteristics) is included in this table. All rules are defined and described in detail in the results section of the article. Brief explanations of the following rules are provided here. Other sexual risk reduction rule: includes rules regarding PrEP use, restrictions on anal sex (in general) and receptive anal intercourse (specifically), ejaculation, and transactional sex; Travel only: rule that extradyadic partners can only be pursued outside of main partners' home(s); Disclosure: rules that refer to requirements and timing of disclosing extradyadic sexual activity to main partner; Transparency: rules around creating and maintaining a general sense of transparency within the primary relationship; Prioritization of primary relationship: rule that the primary relationship must be prioritized over any extradyadic relationships; and Veto power: rule enabling main partners to veto specific choices of extradyadic partners

Bold = At least one participant reported the rule was violated by participant or participant's partner

Italics = At least one participant described the rule as an unspoken or implicit rule

Asterisk (*) = Partners' reports of this rule were clearly discrepant

ex-boyfriends were not permissible, one participant discussed successfully proposing the idea of a threesome with his ex-boyfriend to his partner. He suggested that while preventing intimacy with extradyadic partners is important, he also felt that enough time had passed since dating this ex-boyfriend that it would not be an issue.

My boyfriend has always kind of made funny comments on how he thought my ex was cute... So I kind of posed to my boyfriend, 'would you be interested in having a threesome with my ex? Is that weird? Because now it's been years and years so it doesn't feel like an emotional thing.' And he was like, "yeah, actually, that might be fun."
(Open)

Friends and Acquaintances

Friends and acquaintances were often preferred when choosing extradyadic partners, versus strangers and partners not well-known. Half of the participants allowed friends and acquaintances to be extradyadic partners, owing to a certain level of comfort, safety, and trust. "It wasn't going to be anything awkward—we know each other" (Monogamish). Additionally, the goal to restrict unwanted intimacy also guided some participants' decisions to allow ($n = 10$) or not allow ($n = 5$) friends and acquaintances as extradyadic partners. "That person we hooked up with... he's not clingy... so we knew with him things would be okay and be safe. [He and my partner] knew each other for a long time... they never dated, so there was no threat there" (Monogamish). Conversely,

another participant discussed how developing a friendship with an extradyadic partner became problematic and led to implementing a rule not to allow friends and acquaintances. “We ended up befriending the person we had a threesome with, which became very complicated and wrong. And so then we were like, ‘we need to have threesomes with people we don’t befriend’” (Monogamish). Some participants who reported not allowing friends and acquaintances discussed other reasons for this rule, such as being uncomfortable with the idea of interacting with an extradyadic partner in other areas of life. “Because that’s somebody who I may constantly see. And, just even knowing that, yeah, that would bother me” (Open).

Repeated Partners

Some participants also perceived extradyadic activity with repeated partners to have the potential to generate unwanted intimacy, thus prohibiting them ($n = 2$). One participant suspected that his partner viewed repeatedly having sex with the same extradyadic partner could potentially lead to a more serious relationship. Thus, he had an implicit understanding not to hook up with repeat partners.

Something that we haven’t ever spoken about and agreed on but has happened is that we have never...done a repeat. It’s always been new partners...he’s never said it but...I’m not sure if he doesn’t want them because we’ve already done it with them and maybe he doesn’t want there to be a relationship growing or something. (Monogamish)

In contrast, two participants reported rules permitting repeatedly hooking up with the same extradyadic partner(s). One participant suggested that he views unknown, “random” partners as less desirable than familiar repeated partners. “[My primary partner’s] sex drive is higher than mine, so [he has] probably like, double [the amount of extradyadic sex I have]. That doesn’t mean just random people, it could be the same person or same two people” (Open).

Meeting Extradyadic Partners on Dating Apps

Almost all participants ($n = 19$) discussed rules about meeting extradyadic partners on dating and/or sexual networking apps (e.g., Grindr, Scruff, Adam4Adam). All 16 participants who permitted meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps were from dyads in agreement about this rule. Some participants suggested that meeting extradyadic partners on dating apps offers a preferable sense of anonymity and social distance, thus preventing unwanted intimacy from developing. “If it’s a totally new person, someone totally novel that neither of us know, like someone from Grindr, it’s never a big deal because it’s just—a person” (Open). Another participant suggested that dating apps

can facilitate communication with extradyadic partners about the nature of his primary relationship to ensure full consent prior to having sex. “I think it gets trickier with in-person type stuff, it’s hard to be explicit about threesomes and that kind of stuff in-person. It’s good to have Grindr as sort of a way to have people consent” (Open). Thus, conversations online had in advance may help to establish boundaries and ensure that extradyadic partners do not expect a more intimate relationship. While most participants permitted dating apps, three participants prohibited their use due to hesitations about sex with unknown partners.

When I was single I never really did Grindr and stuff like that. I have trust issues when it comes to sex...I don’t like really having sex with random people and it’s never been something that has been very hot for me. And so [dating apps are] not really where we go to do that. (Open)

Strangers Not Allowed

Two participants reported a rule prohibiting strangers in general as extradyadic partners, for reasons similar to some participants who permitted friends and acquaintances and repeated partners. One participant specified that although the use of dating apps to meet extradyadic partners was allowed, strangers were not. Rather, it was important to him and his partner to befriend all potential extradyadic partners before having sex. “We first get to know the person, hang out with the person, be friends with the person. We get to know the person as a person, and not just some random invisible person that’s just going to fuck him.” (Monogamish)

Conditions Regarding Extradyadic Sex

All participants described at least one rule pertaining to the requirements of or restrictions on their extradyadic sexual encounters. Many of these rules, such as those about condom and substance use, were put in place to reduce sexual and physical health risks. Other rules within this main theme furthered the goal of limiting intimacy with extradyadic partners, such as rules around kissing and sleepovers.

Condom Use Required with Extradyadic Partners

All 20 participants reported a rule that condom use was required for sex with extradyadic partners. However, nine participants reported that they and/or their partner violated this rule, and three reported this rule was unspoken or implicit. Many participants discussed this rule as a strict requirement of having sex with extradyadic partners, as seen with the following two participants. “Condoms were a must. Condoms would be used” (Monogamish). “We ask everyone now if they use condoms and if they say ‘sometimes,’ if they say anything other than ‘yes, always’ or just ‘yes’

then we don't pursue anything further and we always use condoms (Monogamish). In contrast, some participants reported that their rule about condom use operated on an unspoken or implicit level. "I'm sure in the back of our mind we did talk about condoms, protection with people who we don't know sexual history with. But we didn't actually bring it up in conversation, which is kind of the unspoken rule" (Monogamish). One participant described how a sense of trust with certain partners led to breaking an implicit rule he shared with his partner around condom usage.

There is a spoken but unspoken rule like don't bring anything home...don't catch anything...there were some instances when I did mess up...have penetrative sex without a condom...I wish I was more on top of my condom usage, I really do. But, I don't know, sometimes you just don't want to use a condom. Some people you just trust. (Open)

Of note, despite that a number of condom use rule violations were reported, many participants also discussed these violations with their primary partner, thus creating an opportunity to manage the physical and emotional risks of that violation together.

I have definitely had sex with at least one person without a condom in the past three years that wasn't my boyfriend and it was something that I had told him and he was upset and I ended up not being sick so it was fine, but it was like, "oh you fucked up" and I'm like, "yeah." (Open)

Other Sexual Risk Reduction Rule

In addition to condom use rules, seven participants reported rules involving other sexual risk reduction strategies. These included rules about PrEP use, restrictions on anal sex (in general) and receptive anal intercourse (specifically), ejaculation, and transactional sex. For example, one participant, who disclosed he is HIV-positive, reported the following rule only applied to his partner: "For someone else being involved in the sexual experience, they wouldn't cum inside of [primary partner]. That's one of our rules together" (Open). Another participant in a serodiscordant relationship described how taking PrEP led him to have condomless sex on occasion, thus violating an implicit rule with his partner about condom use.

I'm on PrEP so it's a matter of [using] condoms to cut down the [likelihood] of getting an STD...I don't think [our rule] is set in stone, but we prefer to use condoms with outside people. But I kinda slip up because I'm on PrEP (*laugh-*

ing)...so I do slip up and be like, condom on or no condom, so what? (Monogamish)

Substance Use Not Allowed

To further decrease their sexual and physical health risks, both partners in one dyad and two participants in different dyads reported a rule that they did not allow substance use during extradyadic encounters. The following participant described how any indication that an extradyadic partner had used substances would prevent him and his partner from engaging with that person. "No poppers, no alcohol, nothing, nuh-uh! Not in my body, I'm sorry, no place here. No drugs, no nothing, so I don't smoke, don't drink, no nothing. I don't sniff nothing either...we have a zero-tolerance policy against that." (Monogamish)

Travel Only

Two participants from different dyads reported a rule that they would only travel to have extradyadic sex, as opposed to allowing extradyadic partners in their home. One participant implied this was a rule designed to promote physical safety.

A big rule we had was don't give them our cross streets 'cause I don't want somebody sitting outside waiting for us, do you know what I mean? (Monogamish)

Play Together/Separately Only

For reasons revolving around intimacy and navigating complex emotional dynamics in CNM relationships, several participants established rules about playing together ($n = 3$) or separately only ($n = 2$). One participant with a rule to play together only perceived that a fully open relationship would invite increased emotional stress. "It was explicit that neither of us really wanted an open relationship...for me it's like, I don't wanna have to do that much emotional management" (Monogamish). Another participant described how the rule to play separately only helped to distinguish the intimacy he had with his primary partner versus extradyadic partners.

We don't do things together. I'm a little selfish. And competitive...I don't even think [playing together] would work with our dynamic...I hate to say this, it sounds so cliché, but when I have sex with [primary partner], we make love.

That's different than if I meet somebody on Jack'd and I go over their house...I can't really fathom me, him, and somebody else. It just wouldn't really make sense to me. It's too different. It's like apples and oranges. (Open)

No Kissing or Sleepovers

Several participants implemented rules banning specific behaviors with extradyadic partners that were perceived to promote intimacy. For example, two participants reported having and personally breaking a rule against kissing extradyadic partners.

I don't wanna say I reported back every time someone gave me a peck on the cheek or something. But if it was really a good kiss, and it got a little intimate or stuff like that, I would feel as if I would have to tell him. (Open)

Similarly, three participants from different dyads reported rules prohibiting sleepovers with extradyadic partners; one participant reported violating this rule. For the following participant, the rule banning sleepovers was especially important. "Our biggest rule was: Don't stay over anybody's house. No sleepovers. That was the big one... You can do what you want, you can have fun, but they gotta get out. Or you gotta leave, you gotta come back home" (Open).

Conditions Regarding Maintenance of the Primary Relationship

Nearly all participants reported at least one rule pertaining to how non-monogamous activities would be emotionally or communicationally managed within their primary relationship. In general, the rules within this theme were designed to either reiterate the centrality of the primary partnership or preserve the autonomy or individuality of the primary partners. In some situations, participants described rules that integrated or balanced both of these values (e.g., veto power).

Disclosure

The majority of participants ($n = 12$) reported specific rules around the disclosure of extradyadic sexual activities to their primary partner, either requiring it before, after, if asked, or not at all. Of note, six clearly contradictory discrepancies in partners' reports of their disclosure rule were identified. Among those requiring disclosure, this rule offered a sense of collaboration and transparency between primary partners around extradyadic activities. One dyad and three participants required disclosure to occur before any extradyadic encounters took place; four participants reported violations of this rule. One participant discussed how the rule to disclose beforehand presented difficulties in his primary relationship, as his partner was prone to breaking it. This participant did not describe this rule violation as a serious source

of conflict within their relationship, but rather as an evolving rule that he grew to be flexible with.

We've had arguments about [our disclosure rule], we've been very up and down about that sort of specific one. And as far as it's set now, we're supposed to tell each other what we're going to do with who we're supposed to do it. But, my partner tends to not be so great at that. He's gotten more into the habit of telling me after it's already happened. But at the same time, I'm not getting mad at him anymore about it because it's like, as long as you're staying safe. (Open)

Conversely, two participants required disclosure about extradyadic encounters, but allowed this to occur retroactively. One participant aligned the rule to disclose after an encounter occurred with the importance of being able to discuss it with his partner in-person.

If we're away from each other, then we're probably not going to tell each other immediately after it happens. The next time we talk or when we're back in the same city we'll talk about, "oh did you hook up with anyone?" (Open)

A few participants reported a rule that disclosure of extradyadic encounters was required if they or their partner asked about them.

Going by my gut feeling I just simply asked and he was like, "yes, that happened" and I was like, "ok"...it was a fine discussion...I would like that idea of him just coming forward and simply saying [he had sex with someone], but I'm just practicing speaking up more quickly, so I just make it a point to say it first, or ask first. (Open)

Additionally, some participants reported that disclosure was not required at all, potentially to safeguard partners' privacy. One participant reported that disclosure may actually make him uncomfortable, depending on the circumstances.

We never talk about [sex with extradyadic partners]. I don't think there's a reason to... Ideally, you're supposed to come back and talk about it. I don't know, in my head, like I'm somebody that's comfortable with that. But at the same time, on the other end, I wouldn't be comfortable hearing about him going on a date or something. (Open)

Transparency

In addition to having specific rules about the disclosure of extradyadic activities, the majority of participants (five dyads and four participants) described how they sought to foster a sense of

total transparency in their primary relationship as an expression of intimacy. One participant discussed communicating openly with his partner about their attractions to others. “I live in the reality of it, that people have feelings, you’re a human being and you’re gonna see other things or other people that you’re attracted to, so just share it with me” (Monogamish). Another participant described how transparency led to a sense of camaraderie with his primary partner and promoted trust within their relationship.

We can talk about and sometimes I can actually laugh about the experiences I’ve had or that he’s had...it kind of brings more of a friendship to it. Especially since we have the open dialogue. Not just the open relationship part, but the open dialogue. I think if there was no open dialogue it would probably be a hinderance because then I would perceive it as sneaking. (Open)

Others discussed the emotional benefits of transparency, suggesting it can prevent feelings of jealousy or insecurity.

It was always sort of, “okay, we did this. Let’s sit in bed, let’s talk about it, are there any hurt feelings? Did you do something wrong that like I didn’t want? ...Did I get too much attention and that bothered you?” (Monogamish)

Prioritization of Primary Relationship

A number of participants (2 dyads and 5 participants) emphasized the ways in which they prioritized their primary relationship above any extradyadic relationships. Some participants who endorsed this rule spoke of it as a foundational understanding enabling the success of their CNM relationship. “The reason why our open relationship works out is because, at the end of the day, though we can have sex with other people, my main priority is him and his main priority is me” (Open). Another participant emphasized the centrality of his primary relationship.

I’ve always been in the mindset that if you’re meant to be together, if you really wanna be together, you’ll make it work...regardless of who else is or isn’t in the equation. The relationship is about me and him. It’s not about who we bring in, who we don’t bring in. (Monogamish)

Both participants in one dyad discussed this rule in terms of not allowing extradyadic activities to interfere with quality time spent together.

If we’re sleeping with other people it should be just for the purpose of sex...But, that shouldn’t mean that we are...avoiding the other person or going out to meet

other people when you could be with the other person. Like seeking an alternative, actively. (Open)

Some participants also expressed prioritizing the primary relationship with regard to how they interacted with each other versus with extradyadic partners during shared sexual encounters.

It’s gonna sound kind of bad to say about that other person, but it’s like they’re there for our pleasure almost... we would be smiling at each other and the other person was kinda not there...going down on someone else together was probably my favorite part, just because I could kiss [my primary partner] in between. (Monogamish)

Veto Power

Two dyads and three participants described a rule in which they and/or their partner were allowed to veto potential extradyadic partners. This rule allowed for the flexibility of extradyadic relationships while ensuring the primary partners’ boundaries. “There are a few people who [he] is like, ‘absolutely no way, you can’t get physical with them’” (Monogamish). Some participants discussed their veto power rule in the context of seeking prospective partners for threesomes, highlighting the collaboration between primary partners. “He’ll just either text me images of prospective people, or if during the day at work or if he’s looking at it when we’re at home he’ll just show me, and both of us obviously have veto power” (Monogamish).

Respect for Each Other’s Boundaries or Autonomy

Four participants from different dyads reported a rule to respect their primary partner’s boundaries or individual autonomy; one participant characterized this rule as unspoken or implicit. For some participants, this rule involved respecting a need for personal space and privacy.

That’s another thing about our relationship that I like because we’re not the kind of people to be like “I read all your texts!”... We both agree on that, we would never read other people’s emails, we would never read other people’s messages. That’s so paranoid and ridiculous...there’s a degree of privacy. (Open)

Lastly, another participant discussed the way this rule applied to their shared extradyadic encounters given his partner’s differing sexual preferences.

I would describe him as less sexually adventurous than I am. He only wants conventional sex. So, if there’s any

sort of whiff of fetishes or them wanting to be rough or even if they are using poppers it's a no go for him. So, respecting each other's sexual boundaries I guess is a boundary that is in place. (Monogamish)

Discussion

Using a dyadic qualitative approach, the current study examined CNM relationship rules among YGBM, an understudied population. We also aimed to assess rule violations and within-dyad discrepancies, as well as to explore rule implicitness. Overall, more than half of all rule reports were concordant between both partners, while 39% of rule reports were given by only one partner. Only six within-dyad discrepancies were identified. The majority of participants (70%) from eight of the 10 dyads reported either personally violating and/or that their partner violated at least one rule. Additionally, nine out of 20 participants reported having at least one implicit or unspoken rule.

All participants reported various rules about extradyadic partner criteria, many of which were designed to limit intimacy or establish rapport with extradyadic partners. Among the most common reports, 75% of participants prohibited other romantic relationships, drawing clear distinctions between the intimacy with their primary partner and the strictly sexual roles of extradyadic partners. Despite this boundary, many participants reporting this rule also described feelings of insecurity surrounding the possibility of other romantic relationships. Next, most participants reported that it was acceptable to meet casual partners on dating apps, describing benefits of a sense of anonymity, facilitated communication, and the ease of meeting extradyadic partners. However, a few participants restricted the use of apps, citing preferences to choose extradyadic partners who were better known to them. Similarly, half of participants reported that friends and acquaintances were permitted for reasons of trust, comfort, and safety, and two participants prohibited strangers altogether for similar reasons. Fewer participants reported that friends and acquaintances were not permitted as extradyadic partners, as they preferred to keep friendships and extradyadic relationships separate. Finally, 30% of participants reported that ex-boyfriends were not permitted to be extradyadic partners due to a perceived threat that ex-boyfriends uniquely posed to their primary relationship, though two participants reported violations of this rule. In contrast, one participant reported that ex-boyfriends were permitted and described how he incorporated an ex-boyfriend into his sexual relationship with his primary partner.

Participants reported several rules that contextualize their unique sexual health risks. All couples concordantly required condom use with extradyadic partners; however, nine participants reported that they and/or their partner violated this rule, potentially conferring HIV/STI risk. Three participants reported that this rule was implicit. Participants described various reasons

for violating their condom use rule, including a sense of trust with certain extradyadic partners, a preference for occasional condomless sex, and PrEP use. Of note, these data were collected in 2015 when PrEP dissemination was considerably more limited than it is currently (Sullivan et al., 2018). Indeed, only one participant discussed PrEP use at the time of this study. It is possible that increased PrEP awareness and use in recent years have resulted in fewer condom use rules, increased condom use rule violations, and/or PrEP-specific condom use rules among YGBM in CNM relationships. Additionally, several couples described other sexual risk reduction rules, including restrictions on anal sex, transactional sex, ejaculation, and substance use with extradyadic partners, though some violations and implicit rules were observed.

Other conditions regarding extradyadic encounters generally encompassed rules related to the emotional management of extradyadic sex. These included rules to only play together or separately, as well as prohibiting kissing, sleepovers, or extradyadic sex in participants' personal spaces (i.e., travel only). Nearly all participants reported at least one rule pertaining to how non-monogamous activities would be managed within their primary relationship. These rules generally emphasized the centrality and unique intimacy of the primary relationship. Over half of participants reported a rule about disclosure of extradyadic sexual activities, which varied from being required before sexual activities, after sexual activities, if their partner asked, or not being required at all. Several disclosure violations were observed, and disclosure was the only rule in the study that elicited six clearly contradictory discrepancies in partners' reports. Despite this, half of the couples and four participants reported a rule about maintaining an overall sense of transparency within the primary relationship. Many participants described how transparency promoted relationship functioning and helped to temper their insecurities regarding extradyadic relationships. Nearly half of participants reported a rule to prioritize their primary relationship, which was also discussed as benefitting their relationship functioning. Several participants discussed veto power rules that enabled partners to enact boundaries related to the selection of extradyadic partners. Similarly, four participants reported that respecting their partner's boundaries or autonomy was an important rule that may be related to relationship functioning.

Results of the current study both align and contrast with previous research on CNM relationship rules among older GBM. Mirroring previous research, rules related to communication mandates, sexual risk reduction, emotional distinctions between primary and extradyadic partners, and restrictions on extradyadic partners emerged in the current study, along with several novel rules regarding the primary relationship (e.g., Grov et al., 2014; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hoff et al., 2009; Ramirez & Brown, 2010). Also as in previous research, many participants in the current study identified rules that operated on an implicit or unspoken basis (e.g., Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hosking, 2013). Further, while previous studies noted that only approximately

20% of GBM reported rule violations (Groves et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012), the current study identified that 55% of participants reported they and/or their partner violated their condom use or sexual risk reduction rule, and a majority (70%) of participants reported a violation of at least one rule overall. Though these findings only represent one sample of 20 YGBM, they may point to increased rates of rule violations among YGBM compared to older GBM. It is possible that increased sexual risk reduction rule violations among YGBM may contribute to their heightened risk for HIV. Examining age-related differences in rule endorsements and violations among GBM would be a worthy aim of future research.

In terms of rule concordance between partners, the finding that 61% of all reported rules were endorsed by both partners is consistent with those of Mitchell et al. (2012). However, Sharma et al. (2019) found high rates of clearly contradictory reports about rules pertaining to sexual behavior among partnered men. In the current study, such discrepancies were only identified in six instances related to disclosure rules. This finding suggests that successfully establishing and practicing disclosure rules may be particularly challenging for YGBM.

While it is possible that the 39% of participants who solely reported a relationship rule may indicate moderate discordance in partners' reports, this finding may also be a function of the open-ended qualitative design used in the current study. Certain relationship rules may be more salient for one partner than the other. Thus, some participants may have failed to mention certain relationship rules due to a lack of importance of a particular rule for that person. This possibility may be supported by reports which suggest both partners would likely recognize a given rule if asked about it, as in the case of the participant who reported that ex-boyfriends were permitted to be extradyadic partners (i.e., this participant described a scenario in which he and his partner mutually agreed to propose a threesome with his ex-boyfriend). Although many rules were reported by only one partner, true rule discordance between partners in this study may actually be relatively low compared to prior research. Future research should draw upon the rules that emerged in this study to quantitatively determine the extent of true rule discordance in a sample limited to partnered YGBM.

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for efforts to promote relationship functioning and prevent HIV/STIs among partnered YGBM. Importantly, both rule violations and within-dyad discrepancies are linked with decreased relationship functioning in previous studies (Hosking, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2012). Couples interdependence theory (Rusbult & Lange, 2003) suggests that couples with better relationship functioning would more successfully create, implement, and adhere to their relationship rules (Starks et al., 2019). Thus, YGBM in CNM relationships may benefit from targeted support to increase clarity and true concordance about relationship rules. Though findings from one

qualitative study suggested that implicitness did not negatively impact how couples understood or adhered to their rules (Hoff & Beougher, 2010), relationship functioning may be strengthened by having explicit discussions about each rule (Starks et al., 2019). Further, though all participants in the current study created rules requiring condom use with extradyadic partners, many fell short of these expectations. As such, interventionists, health educators, and other practitioners should consider acknowledging and normalizing violations in risk reduction rules as a potential entry point for PrEP uptake among YGBM in CNM relationships. Similarly, while some participants reported rules about other risk reduction strategies, encouraging YGBM in CNM relationships to incorporate a variety of sexual risk reduction rules, such as strategic positioning and frequent HIV/STI screening, would be apt from a harm reduction perspective.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study has key strengths. First, this study makes an important contribution to the literature on CNM relationship rules, as it is the first to focus specifically on emerging adult YGBM. Compared to older GBM, YGBM experience unique relational and mental health challenges associated with emerging adulthood, as well as noteworthy sexual health disparities (Arnett et al., 2014; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). YGBM in CNM relationships navigate additional complexities, including efforts to form and successfully adhere to sexual rules. Thus, the current study provides novel information about CNM relationship rules among YGBM. Further, our methodological approach provided a significant strength to the study. Our qualitative inquiry facilitated a more detailed and nuanced understanding of relationship rules than can be captured by quantitative methods. Though many participants endorsed the same rule, their motivations for implementing them, as well as their satisfaction with them, varied widely. Similarly, these data also shed light on the many reasons why different couples adopt diametrically opposed rules, such as allowing versus prohibiting friends and acquaintances as extradyadic partners. Additionally, this study provides valuable information about the complete set of rules operating in 10 CNM relationships as reported by each partner. Our use of dyad-level analyses further enabled us to obtain important information about rule concordance and discrepancies within dyads.

The findings of this study should be considered in light of its limitations. First, although the sample is racially/ethnically diverse, it is a small, geographically homogenous sample of YGBM from the greater New York City area. The findings of this study may not generalize to YGBM in non-urban regions, where CNM relationships may be less socially acceptable (Stults, 2018), which could impact relationship rules through decreased relationship functioning. Second, it is possible that participants' reports about their rules (especially those about sexual risk reduction) were influenced by social desirability bias, which may be

of particular concern with face-to-face interviewing (Kaushal, 2014). However, given that many participants also reported rule violations, we do not expect that any effects due to social desirability bias were large. Third, given that many participants described their rule prohibiting other romantic relationships as a guiding feature of their CNM relationship, the findings of this study likely do not generalize to YGBM in polyamorous relationships. Finally, participants were required to enroll in the study with their primary partner. Thus, the study sample only comprised participants from intact relationships and did not include YGBM from dissolved, or potentially even distressed, CNM relationships.

Conclusion

The current study examined relationship rules among YGBM in CNM relationships. All participants reported a variety of relationship rules, which included rules pertaining to extradyadic partner criteria, extradyadic sexual encounters, and management of the CNM relationship with the primary partner. While a sizeable minority of participants reported rules that were not mutually endorsed by their partner, few clear rule discrepancies between partners' reports were observed. The majority of participants reported that they and/or their partner violated at least one rule and over half of participants reported having at least one implicit or unspoken rule. A substantial proportion of participants reported violations of condom use and other sexual risk reduction rules. These violations may suggest YGBM experience increased rates of rule violations compared to older GBM, which may contribute to their elevated risks for HIV. Efforts to increase clarity and concordance of CNM rules among partners, as well as to reduce the health impact of rule violations, are worthwhile directions for future research.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional Review Board at New York University (IRB # 10–6802) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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