



**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*Satisfaction with Open Sexual Agreements in  
Australian Gay Men's Relationships: the Role of  
Perceived Discrepancies in Benefit*

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Hosking, Warwick (2013) Satisfaction with Open Sexual Agreements in Australian Gay Men's Relationships: the Role of Perceived Discrepancies in Benefit. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 42 (7). pp. 1309-1317. ISSN 0004-0002 (print) 1573-2800 (online)

The publisher's official version can be found at  
[http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/466/art%253A10.1007%252Fs10508-012-0005-9.pdf?auth66=1393634611\\_651b73610b1b49d69ae34bc1c37b0946&ext=.pdf](http://download.springer.com/static/pdf/466/art%253A10.1007%252Fs10508-012-0005-9.pdf?auth66=1393634611_651b73610b1b49d69ae34bc1c37b0946&ext=.pdf)  
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/23412/>

Satisfaction with open sexual agreements in Australian gay men's relationships: The role of  
perceived discrepancies in benefit

Warwick Hosking<sup>1,2</sup>, PhD

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

<sup>2</sup>To whom correspondence should be address at School of Social Sciences and Psychology,  
Victoria University, P.O. Box 14428, Melbourne, Victoria 8001, Australia; Tel: +61 (0)3  
9919 2620; Fax: +61 (0)3 9919 2218; email: [Warwick.Hosking@vu.edu.au](mailto:Warwick.Hosking@vu.edu.au)

**ABSTRACT**

This study investigated whether satisfaction with open sexual agreements in gay men's relationships is associated with perceptions of discrepancies in the benefit experienced from those agreements. Three types of perceived discrepancy between the self and the relationship partner were examined: frequency of casual sex, attractiveness of casual partners, and "overall" benefit. Results from a survey conducted in 2010 of 685 Australian gay men in relationships with open agreements showed that men perceiving discrepancies in benefit, particularly those representing "under-benefit", were less satisfied with their agreement than were men perceiving equal benefit. These results support hypotheses derived from equity theory and provide insight into factors associated with gay men's satisfaction with open agreements. These findings also have important practical implications. Professionals counselling gay men or couples experiencing low satisfaction with open agreements may consider raising issues of unequal benefit, and work with their clients towards achieving equality.

**KEY WORDS:** Sexual agreements; gay men; relationships; discrepancies in benefit

## INTRODUCTION

Many gay male couples have an agreement that sex with men outside the relationship is acceptable (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004a; Prestage et al., 2008; Wagner, Remien, & Carballo-Diéguez, 2000). Research efforts in this area have produced several important findings regarding these non-monogamous or “open” sexual agreements. For instance, it has been shown that most are characterized by various implicit or explicit rules defining which extra-dyadic sexual activities are permitted (e.g., Hickson et al., 1992; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hosking, in press; LaSala, 2004b), and that men who have explicit rules about their open agreements are more satisfied than those who do not (Ramirez & Brown, 2010). Importantly, the majority of studies on open agreements indicate that, in comparison with monogamous agreements, they are equally satisfying (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Hoff, Beougher, Chakravarty, Darbes, & Neilands, 2010; Kurdek, 1988; see also Bonello, 2009, for a review), and are characterized by similar levels of relationship quality, including dyadic adjustment, intimacy, and commitment (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Hosking, in press; LaSala, 2004a; Wagner et al., 2000). Although some research has revealed lower relationship quality among open agreements (e.g., Hoff et al., 2010), in general, the emergent view is that gay couples with an open sexual agreement are just as capable of maintaining a satisfying, successful relationship as those who conform to the more conventional model of monogamy.

However, there is clearly variation in how satisfied gay men are with their relationship’s particular sexual agreement. Previous qualitative research has indicated that couples with a monogamous agreement may experience difficulty suppressing their desires for outside sex (Worth, Reid, & McMillan, 2002), whereas couples with open agreements may struggle with feelings of jealousy (LaSala, 2004b). More recently, research has shown that men breaking the rules of their sexual agreement are less satisfied with and invested in their agreement (Mitchell, Harvey, Champeau, Moskowitz, & Seal, in press; Neilands,

Chakravarty, Darbes, Beougher, & Hoff, 2010), and that lower agreement satisfaction is associated with breaking rules more frequently (Hosking, in press). Rule breaking itself is associated with lower relationship quality, in terms of characteristics such as intimacy, partner trust, and relationship satisfaction (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hosking, in press; Mitchell et al., in press). Thus, as low sexual agreement satisfaction may be a risk factor for breaking agreement rules, which in turn is associated with poorer relationship quality, it is important to identify factors that are associated with gay men's satisfaction with their sexual agreements.

There are several possibilities. For instance, Neilands et al. (2010) found that various relationship factors, including intimacy, satisfaction, and dyadic adjustment, were positively correlated with a measure of sexual agreement investment, which incorporates agreement satisfaction. This correlation presumably occurred regardless of agreement type (i.e., monogamous or open), though the authors did not directly test this. However, there may be factors which influence satisfaction with open agreements specifically, and which do not apply to other kinds of agreements, such as monogamy. The present study was designed to examine such factors; namely, gay men's perceptions of discrepancies regarding how much benefit they and their relationship partner derive from their open agreement.

There are several theoretical perspectives in the close relationships literature which describe the negative effects of various kinds of (perceived) discrepancies in relationships, such as the ideal standards model (Fletcher & Simpson, 2000) and relational discrepancy theory (Boldero et al., 2009; Robins & Boldero, 2003). Most relevant to the present research is equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). This theory proposes that people are dissatisfied when they are either under-benefitted or over-benefitted, relative to their partner, with respect to some aspect of their relationship. A sexual agreement is arguably an aspect of a relationship which one partner may subjectively benefit from more or less than the other

does. As gay couples are motivated to establish equality in their relationships in general (Haas & Stafford, 1998), men perceiving discrepancies in the benefit they and their partner derive from their sexual agreement may experience less satisfaction with the agreement compared with those who perceive no discrepancy. This general premise forms the basis of the present research.

Partners with an open sexual agreement may evaluate the benefit they derive from it on several dimensions. Two which may be particularly important are the frequency with which each partner engages in casual sex with outside partners, and the attractiveness or desirability of their casual partners; in simple terms, how often and with what kind of person each partner in the relationship has casual sex. Perceived discrepancies on these dimensions may arise where one partner believes he has more or less frequent casual sex, or attracts more or less desirable casual partners, than the other does. In addition to specific aspects of benefit, men may also make more global judgments regarding whether one partner “over-benefits” while the other “under-benefits” from the agreement, overall. These global judgments may take into account both the frequency of casual sex and the attractiveness of casual partners, as well as any other factors that may be important to the individual, such as the extent of their own drive for casual sex.

Following the principles of equity theory, both perceptions of under-benefit *and* of over-benefit, either with respect to specific aspects of benefit or more globally, are likely associated with lower satisfaction with the sexual agreement compared with perceptions of equal benefit. Perceptions of unfairness inherent in the discrepancy may contribute to this, as well as negative affect that may arise from these perceptions. For example, a man who feels under-benefitted by believing he has less frequent casual sex than his relationship partner does may resent his partner for getting more out of the agreement, whereas an over-benefitted partner may experience a sense of guilt as a result of this. It should be noted, of course, that

discrepancies in benefit may occur for several reasons and may not always reflect unfairness; for instance, not all men may expect to receive equal benefit from an open agreement, a point which is revisited in the discussion. Nevertheless, consistent with the broader literature demonstrating the negative consequences of discrepancies in relationships, one would expect discrepancies in benefit *generally* to be associated with lower agreement satisfaction.

Research also consistently shows that it is not only the presence of discrepancies in relationships, but also their magnitude, that influences emotional and relational outcomes (Boldero et al., 2009; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006). Regarding discrepancies in benefit, larger discrepancies are likely to be associated with more dissatisfaction than smaller ones. For instance, a man who believes his partner has considerably more frequent casual sex than he does himself is likely to be less satisfied with the agreement than one who believes his partner has only slightly more casual sex.

The above arguments pertain to individuals' *subjective* judgments about their relationship partner's extra-dyadic sexual activities. Although some couples with open agreements may discuss their extra-dyadic sexual encounters, others may not. Indeed, some have an implicit understanding or explicit rule which proscribes such discussion (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hosking, in press). Therefore, as men in these relationships may have little *objective* evidence or knowledge of their relationship partner's extra-dyadic sexual activities, it is reasonable to argue that their *assumptions* regarding this would be associated with their satisfaction with the agreement.

In summary, the aim of the present study was to examine, using an online survey, whether gay men's satisfaction with open sexual agreements in their relationships varies as a function of perceived discrepancies in the benefit that each partner receives from the agreement. Three types of benefit were considered: the frequency of casual sex and attractiveness of casual partners, which are two specific aspects of benefit which are

potentially important; and global judgments of overall benefit. Consistent with equity theory, it was hypothesized that men subjectively experiencing either under-benefit *or* over-benefit would be less satisfied with their open agreement than those perceiving no discrepancy. The same pattern was expected for all three types of discrepancy in benefit. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that men reporting larger discrepancies in benefit would be less satisfied than those reporting smaller discrepancies.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

This study was part of a larger project examining sexual agreements in gay men's relationships, including monogamous, open, and threesome-only agreements (see "Measures" for a description of these). Recruitment for the online survey took place in two phases. First, advertisements inviting Australian gay men in relationships to participate in the survey were placed in GLBT community newspapers in Melbourne and Sydney. These print advertisements included the URL for the online survey. Similar banner advertisements were placed on two national GLBT community websites ([www.samesame.com.au](http://www.samesame.com.au) and [gaynewsnetwork.com.au](http://gaynewsnetwork.com.au)), which contained a direct link to the survey. This initial strategy resulted in a low response rate from men in relationships with open agreements.

Consequently, advertisements specifically inviting gay men with open agreements to participate in the survey were placed on "Manhunt" ([www.manhunt.net](http://www.manhunt.net)), a popular gay men's social networking and dating website. An invitation to participate containing a direct link to the survey was also sent to all Manhunt members in Australia. Several hundred more men with open agreements in their relationships (as well as some with threesome-only and monogamous agreements) were recruited through this strategy. No incentives to participate in the survey were used during either phase of recruitment.

Of the 3494 men who began the survey, 1279 completed the parts of the survey relevant to the current study (a completion rate of 37%). Of these, 685 men in relationships with open agreements comprised the total sample for the present study. They ranged from 18 to 77 years of age, and were significantly older on average ( $M = 38.73$ ,  $SD = 10.92$ ) than the other men in the larger project who had monogamous or threesome-only agreements ( $M = 33.90$ ,  $SD = 11.54$ ),  $t(1277) = 7.69$ ,  $p < .001$ . The men with open agreements had also been in their relationships, ranging from 0.5 to 43.5 years in duration, for significantly longer than those with other agreements (respectively,  $M = 8.45$ ,  $SD = 7.03$ , and  $M = 6.03$ ,  $SD = 6.03$ ),  $t(1276.823) = 6.56$ ,  $p < .001$  (equal variances not assumed).

Three-quarters of the men with open agreements lived with their relationship partners. Most were from the east coast of Australia (32% New South Wales, 27% Victoria, 15% Queensland), with smaller proportions coming from other Australian states (7% Western Australia, 5% South Australia, 1% Australian Capital Territory, 2% Tasmania, and 11% did not specify). The majority were White or Caucasian (88%); others were East Asian (5%), South Asian (1%), and Latino/Hispanic (1%). The remaining 5% reported various other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Two-thirds of the participants had a partner of the same racial/ethnic background. Cohabitation status, state of residence, and racial/ethnic background of participants and partners did not vary substantially between the three different sexual agreements in the larger project.

Note that bisexual men were not recruited for this study. Although some bisexual men may be in relationships with open agreements, either their relationship partner or casual partners (or both) could be women, and this may entail a different set of expectations and issues from those experienced by gay male couples with open agreements. Furthermore, recent research shows important differences between gay men's and bisexual men's sexual behavior (Lyons et al., in press), suggesting the two groups should be treated as distinct.

## Measures

Before proceeding to the main part of the survey, participants were asked to provide the following demographic information about themselves and their partners: age, racial or ethnic background (free response which was later coded by the author), relationship duration, cohabitation, and state of residence. Participants then completed the below measures.

Using classification schemes from previous research (e.g., Hosking, in press; LaSala, 2004a; Shernoff, 1995), participants indicated which of three descriptions *best* described their current sexual 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”). The wording of these three options was identical to that used in previous research (e.g., LaSala, 2004a). The “threesome-only” category has recently been characterized as “monogamish” (Parsons, Starks, DuBois, Grov, & Golub, in press), as it retains some elements of monogamy (i.e., both partners must be present during any sexual encounter) but allows the inclusion of outside sexual partners. Thus, the threesome-only category is referred to hereafter as “monogamish”. Participants indicated how long their agreement had been in place (since the beginning of the relationship or otherwise), and whether the agreement was “unspoken” or had been reached through explicit discussion.

Only the 685 men who indicated they had open agreements were included in the present study. Although the monogamish and open categories have been combined for analysis in some previous research (e.g., LaSala, 2004a), this was not possible in the present study, as men with monogamish agreements were not asked the below questions about perceived discrepancies in benefit. Arguably, it does not make much sense to ask men with

this kind of agreement whether they believe their partner has more frequent casual sex or more attractive casual partners than they do themselves, as both members of the couple are supposed to be present during any sexual encounter with outside partners. However, as discrepancies in “overall” benefit can potentially be perceived in the context of any kind of sexual agreement, the fact that only men with open agreements were asked about this is a limitation of the study which is discussed later.

Participants with open agreements used a 7-point scale to indicate how often they think their relationship partner has casual sex, compared with how often they do themselves (-3, -2, or -1 = *much more, somewhat more, or a little more often*, respectively; 0 = *just as often*; +1, +2, or +3 = *a little less, somewhat less, or much less often*, respectively). Similarly, participants indicated how attractive or “appealing” they thought their relationship partner’s casual partners were, compared with their own, using a 7-point scale (-3, -2, or -1 = *much more, somewhat more, or a little more attractive*, respectively; 0 = *just as attractive*; +1, +2, or +3 = *a little less, somewhat less, or much less attractive*, respectively). Finally, they indicated who they believe benefits the most from their open agreement overall, using a 7-point scale (-3, -2, or -1 = *my partner benefits much more, somewhat more, or a little more than I do*, respectively; 0 = *my partner and I benefit equally*; +1, +2, or +3 = *my partner benefits a little less, somewhat less, or much less than I do*, respectively). These questions were developed by the author for the present study, as no prior research has examined these variables. Responses to these questions represented participants’ perceptions of discrepancy with regard to frequency of casual sex (“frequency”), attractiveness of casual partners (“attractiveness”), and overall benefit (“overall”).

Participants used 5-point scales to indicate their level of agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with 5 items designed to assess sexual agreement satisfaction: “I am happy with my current sexual agreement”, “My current sexual agreement satisfies my

needs”, “I would prefer to have a different sexual agreement” (reverse-scored), “Any other sexual agreement would NOT work for me”, and “I sometimes wish my sexual agreement was different” (reverse-scored). Like the questions regarding discrepancies in benefit, these items were developed by the author for the present study, as the “Sexual Agreement Investment Scale” (Neilands et al., 2010), which includes a measure of sexual agreement satisfaction, was not publicly available when data collection for the present study began. Responses to these items were averaged to obtain total sexual agreement satisfaction scores. This scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ).

Two additional variables were measured as potential covariates of satisfaction with sexual agreement: sexual satisfaction with relationship partner and sexual satisfaction with casual partners. These were measured with 3 items each: “My sex life with my relationship partner [casual partners] is satisfying”, “My sex life with my relationship partner [casual partners] satisfies my needs”, and “I am happy with the sex life I have with my relationship partner [casual partners]”. For each item, participants indicated their level of agreement using 5-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), and overall scores were obtained by averaging the relevant items. Internal consistency was high for both sexual satisfaction with relationship partner (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .92$ ) and with casual partners (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ).

## **Procedure**

Approval to conduct this research was obtained from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. Upon accessing the survey, participants were informed that they must identify as homosexual or gay (not bisexual), have been in their current relationship at least 6 months, be at least 18 years of age, and be an Australian citizen or permanent resident, to participate in the study. Following this, a brief description of the study aims, definitions of

key terms, and information about anonymity and confidentiality of responses were provided. Participants then completed the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Responses to each of the three questions about discrepancy in benefit (i.e., frequency, attractiveness, and overall) ranged from -3 to +3. In order to differentiate discrepancy *valence* from discrepancy *magnitude*, two new variables were created for each of the three types of discrepancy. The first represented discrepancy valence regardless of its magnitude, whereby negative scores were assigned a value of -1, representing “under-benefit”; positive scores were assigned a value of +1, representing “over-benefit”; and scores of 0 retained their original value, representing no discrepancy. The second new variable represented the magnitude of the discrepancy regardless of its valence, whereby scores of -1 and +1 were assigned a value of 1, representing a small discrepancy; scores of -2 and +2 were assigned a value of 2, representing a moderate discrepancy; and scores of -3 and +3 were assigned a value of 3, representing a large discrepancy. Again, scores of 0 retained their original value, representing no discrepancy.

To test the first hypothesis, that discrepancies representing either under-benefit or over-benefit would be associated with less sexual agreement satisfaction compared with no discrepancy, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed for each type of discrepancy, with discrepancy valence as the independent variable and sexual agreement satisfaction as the dependent variable. To test the second hypothesis, that larger discrepancies would be associated with less satisfaction than smaller ones, 2 (discrepancy valence: under-benefit, over-benefit)  $\times$  3 (discrepancy magnitude: small, moderate, large) ANOVAs were performed for each type of discrepancy, again with sexual agreement satisfaction as the dependent variable. These analyses also tested whether any effects of discrepancy magnitude differed as a function of discrepancy valence. Note that the 2  $\times$  3

ANOVAs did not include men who reported equal benefit (i.e., no discrepancy) in relation to the type of discrepancy being examined, as a discrepancy valence value of 0 entails a discrepancy magnitude value of 0. Fisher's least-significant-difference (LSD) test was used for all post-hoc comparisons.

The analyses described above were initially conducted with sexual satisfaction with the relationship partner and sexual satisfaction with casual partners included as covariates. Although both significantly and positively covaried with sexual agreement satisfaction (all  $ps < .05$ ), the patterns regarding the significant effects of discrepancies were identical to those reported below. Thus, these two covariates were not retained in the analyses involving interactions and post-hoc comparisons.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive Summary**

To reiterate, all analyses reported herein included only the 685 men with open sexual agreements in their relationships, who were drawn from the larger sample of 1279 men. Just over half these participants (52%) reported having had open agreements since the beginning of their relationship. For the remaining participants, the length of their agreement in years was recalculated as a proportion of their entire relationship duration, which on average was 0.51 ( $SD = 0.26$ ). The majority (83%) reported having reached their agreement through explicit discussion with their partner. On average, participants reported moderate levels of satisfaction with their sexual agreement ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), sexual satisfaction with their relationship partner ( $M = 3.47$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), and sexual satisfaction with casual partners ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ).

### **Sexual Agreement Satisfaction as a Function of Perceived Discrepancies in Benefit**

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants reported having more frequent casual sex themselves compared with how often they believed their relationship partner did. In

contrast, the majority reported having equally attractive casual partners to those they thought their relationship partner had, and receiving equal overall benefit from their agreement.

Means and standard deviations of sexual agreement satisfaction as a function of the valence of perceived discrepancies are also shown in Table 1. Each of the one-way (discrepancy valence: under-benefit, equal benefit, over-benefit) ANOVAs on sexual agreement satisfaction revealed significant main effects of discrepancy valence in frequency of casual sex, in attractiveness of casual partners, and in overall benefit (see Table 1). Post-hoc tests indicated that men believing they had less frequent casual sex than their partner (i.e., under-benefit) were significantly less satisfied with their agreement than were those who believed they had either equally frequent (i.e., equal benefit) or more (i.e., over-benefit) casual sex compared with their partner. In contrast, men believing their own casual partners to be equally attractive as those of their relationship partner were more satisfied with their agreement than those believing they had *either* more *or* less attractive casual partners. Finally, regarding perceptions of overall benefit, all three groups were significantly different from each other, with men experiencing equal overall benefit being the most satisfied with their agreement, followed by men experiencing overall over-benefit, and lastly by men experiencing overall under-benefit.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of sexual agreement satisfaction as a function of the valence and magnitude of the three types of discrepancy in benefit. The main effects of discrepancy valence in the  $2$  (discrepancy valence: under-benefit, over-benefit [equal benefit excluded])  $\times$   $3$  (discrepancy magnitude: small, moderate, large) ANOVAs on sexual agreement satisfaction effectively duplicated the post-hoc comparisons in the analyses reported above, so they are not reported again. The main effect of the magnitude of discrepancies in frequency of casual sex was significant, such that men reporting either a moderate or a large discrepancy in frequency of casual sex were significantly less satisfied

than those reporting a small discrepancy (see Table 2). This effect was qualified by a significant valence  $\times$  magnitude interaction,  $F(2, 510) = 7.28, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . Analyses of simple effects showed that the effect of discrepancy magnitude on sexual agreement satisfaction was not significant for discrepancies reflecting over-benefit, but was significant for discrepancies reflecting under-benefit. Specifically, men reporting a large degree of under-benefit in frequency of casual sex were significantly less satisfied with their agreement than men reporting a moderate degree of under-benefit, who in turn were less satisfied than men reporting a small degree of under-benefit (see Table 2).

The main effect of the magnitude of discrepancies in casual partner attractiveness was not significant, nor was its interaction with discrepancy valence. Thus, analyses of simple effects were not conducted for these discrepancies. Finally, the main effect of the magnitude of discrepancies in overall benefit on sexual agreement satisfaction was significant, with men reporting either a moderate or a large discrepancy being significantly less satisfied than men reporting a small discrepancy. This was qualified by a significant valence  $\times$  magnitude interaction,  $F(2, 340) = 12.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ . Analyses of simple effects revealed that the effect of discrepancy magnitude on sexual agreement satisfaction was significant for discrepancies reflecting overall under-benefit, but not for discrepancies reflecting overall over-benefit. Sexual agreement satisfaction differed significantly as a function of all three magnitudes of overall under-benefit, being lowest for large discrepancies, followed by moderate discrepancies, and finally by small discrepancies (see Table 2).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined whether gay men's satisfaction with open sexual agreements in their relationships is associated with perceived discrepancies in how much benefit they and their partner receive from the agreement. Three forms of discrepancy were examined: frequency of casual sex, attractiveness of casual partners, and overall benefit. In general,

men perceiving discrepancies in benefit were less satisfied with their open agreement than were men perceiving no discrepancies, supporting the hypotheses based on equity theory (Walster et al., 1978). However, the roles of discrepancy valence (i.e., whether the discrepancy represented under-benefit or over-benefit) and of discrepancy magnitude varied according to the specific type of unequal benefit represented by the discrepancy.

Men reporting under-benefit in the frequency of casual sex, particularly if this discrepancy was large, were less satisfied than those reporting no discrepancy. However, this was not the case for those reporting over-benefit, among whom discrepancy magnitude also was not associated with differences in satisfaction. This asymmetry may be explained in a number of ways. First, men who experience under-benefit in terms of casual sex frequency may feel resentment towards their partner for having casual sex too often, or for having more opportunities for casual sex than they do themselves. Such resentment may arise from the perception of unfairness inherent in the discrepancy, or if a partner's indulgence in frequent casual sex somehow interferes with the relationship (e.g., if it intrudes upon the couple's social life; LaSala, 2001). It is also possible that under-benefit in frequency of casual sex poses a threat to self-esteem. Research has shown that people experience self-esteem threat when they are "outperformed" by close others (e.g., Tesser, 1988; Tesser, Millar, & Moore, 1988). Having a partner be more successful than oneself in finding opportunities for casual sex effectively constitutes being outperformed, which may result in feelings of inadequacy. These feelings may also be associated with less satisfaction with the open agreement, as the discrepancy connected with the agreement serves as a reminder of perceived inadequacy. In contrast, over-benefit in terms of casual sex frequency poses no obvious threat to self-esteem, which may explain why men in this position reported no less satisfaction with their agreement than did those who perceived no discrepancy.

However, consistent with equity theory, men reporting *either* under-benefit *or* over-benefit in terms of casual partner attractiveness were less satisfied with their agreement than those reporting no discrepancy. This again may be due to the perception of inequality itself (i.e., the belief that it is simply unfair for one partner to enjoy casual sex with more attractive men than the other partner does), or to negative affect that may be associated with the discrepancy. For men who experience under-benefit, beliefs that their relationship partner attracts more desirable casual sex partners than they do themselves may again represent a threat to self-esteem. Men who experience over-benefit, in contrast, may experience guilt or uneasiness from their beliefs that they have sex with more attractive casual partners than their own relationship partner does.

Finally, and again consistent with equity theory, men perceiving a discrepancy of *either* valence in terms of overall benefit were less satisfied with their agreement than those perceiving no discrepancy. However, this was particularly so for men experiencing under-benefit, for whom larger discrepancies were associated with less agreement satisfaction than were smaller ones. Thus, although the general pattern of results is consistent with equity theory, in that both under-benefit *and* over-benefit tend to be associated with reduced agreement satisfaction, it seems that believing that one is under-benefitted by open agreements, particularly to a large extent, is especially problematic.

### **Limitations, Future Directions, and Implications**

The present findings should be interpreted in light of a number of limitations. First, the present sample was Australian, mostly white, and largely (though not exclusively) recruited through an online social networking site. Thus, the present findings may not generalize to gay men or couples of other racial or ethnic backgrounds in other countries, or to individuals who do not have a profile on websites such as Manhunt. In addition, although online surveying has several benefits, such as ensuring anonymity of respondents and the

ability to recruit large samples within a short timeframe, there are also disadvantages. For instance, in the present study there was no way to verify that all participants were actually gay men in a current relationship, although the same could be said for other recruitment methods used in studies on sexual agreements, such as the street-intercept method (Parsons et al., in press). Nevertheless, future studies should recruit gay men and couples from the broader community, and use methods other than online surveying, to obtain a more representative sample.

Perhaps a more important limitation is that only individuals, rather than couples, were recruited for this survey. Consequently, the present findings do not account for the relationship partner's perspective. This raises a number of important issues. For instance, although it was argued earlier that individuals' subjective judgments of discrepancies should influence their satisfaction with the sexual agreement, it is possible that their partner's perceptions of these discrepancies are also associated with individuals' agreement satisfaction (i.e., that there are "partner effects" on agreement satisfaction; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Further, the degree to which relationship partners' perceptions of discrepancies in benefit concur (i.e., whether both partners agree that one benefits more from the agreement than the other) may also bear an important relation to agreement satisfaction. Future research on couples is needed to address these issues.

From a theoretical standpoint, it is important to acknowledge that the kinds of discrepancies examined in this study are only some of the many variables which may be related to satisfaction with open sexual agreements. For instance, there may be other aspects of perceived benefit not considered in this study which may contribute to partners' agreement satisfaction. Various aspects of relationship dynamics, such as communication and trust, and individual difference factors, such as dispositional jealousy, may also be important influences.

Discrepancies in benefit may not be problematic for all gay couples with open agreements. For example, there may be cases where the decision to have an open agreement is driven primarily by one partner who has extra-dyadic sex while the other feels no desire to do this (Ramirez & Brown, 2010), or is even prohibited from it (Hickson et al., 1992). Alternatively, one partner may be allowed to have extra-dyadic sex because the other partner is too physically ill to be sexually active (LaSala, 2004b). Thus, in some relationships with open agreements, discrepancies between partners in some forms of benefit, such as casual sex frequency, may be expected and tolerated, and have little effect on agreement satisfaction. Future researchers may investigate the specific conditions under which discrepancies in benefit do or do not relate to satisfaction with open agreements.

Despite its limitations, this study offers an important insight into gay men's satisfaction with open sexual agreements. The present results are generally consistent with the broader relationships literature showing that perceptions of varying kinds of discrepancies or imbalances in relationships are associated with negative emotional and relational outcomes (Boldero et al., 2009; Fletcher et al., 2000; Overall et al., 2006). More importantly, these findings add to the growing body of literature on the role and functioning of sexual agreements in gay men's relationships (e.g., Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hosking, in press; Mitchell et al., in press; Neilands et al., 2010). This study is unique, however, in revealing factors relating to satisfaction with open agreements which do not clearly apply to other agreement types. Specifically, most men with monogamous or monogamish (Parsons et al., in press) agreements would be unlikely to think about discrepancies in frequency of casual sex or casual partner attractiveness. Monogamous agreements preclude casual sex, and partners with monogamish agreements should theoretically experience all sexual encounters with the same outside partners together. Of course, men with either of these agreements may still engage in casual sex independently of their relationship partner, but this represents a

broken agreement rather than a discrepancy in benefit *per se*. However, as stated earlier, it is conceivable that discrepancies in “overall” benefit may be perceived in relation to any kind of sexual agreement, not just open ones. For instance, some men with monogamish agreements may not experience as much enjoyment from threesomes or group sex as their partners do, if the decision to establish this agreement was primarily driven by their partners. Similarly, some men with monogamous agreements may experience more fulfilment from sexual exclusivity than their partners do. Such discrepancies may be associated with lower satisfaction with monogamous and monogamish agreements, a possibility not examined in this study but which should be explored in future research.

The present findings have implications for counsellors and other professionals working with individuals or couples experiencing low satisfaction with open agreements. Counsellors may first determine whether their clients’ low satisfaction is due to perceptions of discrepancies in benefit. To the extent that these perceptions are “accurate”, the clients may be encouraged to renegotiate the terms of the agreement. For instance, where one partner engages in casual sex so frequently that it intrudes too much on the time he and his relationship partner spend together as a couple, a new rule placing limits on casual sex (e.g., no more than once a month, not on the weekends, etc.) may be established. Alternatively, a couple may consider changing from an open to a monogamish agreement, so that both partners are included in, and therefore benefit from, all extra-dyadic sexual encounters.

Future research efforts could be directed towards addressing some of the limitations of the present study, as well as identifying other factors that influence gay men’s satisfaction with the sexual agreement of their relationship. Although the body of knowledge regarding gay men’s sexual agreements has grown steadily in recent years, there remains much to be understood about how gay couples successfully manage their sexual agreements and what factors may lead them to break down. Such an understanding is crucial, as the breaking down

of a sexual agreement may threaten relationship quality and possibly lead to relationship dissolution. Empirically informed intervention efforts, therefore, may arm gay couples with strategies both to arrive at an appropriate sexual agreement and to maximize agreement satisfaction, thereby promoting healthy, stable, and satisfying relationships.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This research received funding from the School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Victoria University. The author would like to thank the men who participated in the survey, Stuart Todd for his invaluable research assistance, and Anthony Lyons and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript.

**REFERENCES**

- Blasband, D., & Peplau, L. (1985). Sexual exclusivity versus openness in gay male couples. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 14*, 395-412.
- Boldero, J. M., Robins, G. L., Francis, J. J., Williams, B. J., Hampton, A., & Fourie, A. J. (2009). Relational discrepancies and emotion: The moderating roles of relational mode and relational discrepancy valence. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 12*, 259-273.
- Bonello, K. (2009). Gay monogamy and extra-dyadic sex: A critical review of the theoretical and empirical literature. *Counselling Psychology Review, 24*, 51-65.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., & Simpson, J. A. (2000). Ideal standards in close relationships: Their structure and functions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9*, 102-105.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., & Thomas, G. (2000). Ideals, perceptions, and evaluations in early relationship development. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*, 933-940.
- Haas, S. M., & Stafford, L. (1998). An initial examination of maintenance behaviors in gay and lesbian relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 15*, 846-855.
- Hickson, F. C., Davies, P. M., Hunt, A. J., Weatherburn, P., McManus, T. J., & Coxon, P. (1992). Maintenance of open gay relationships: Some strategies for protection against HIV. *AIDS Care, 4*, 409-419.
- Hoff, C. C., & Beougher, S. C. (2010). Sexual agreements among gay male couples. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*, 774-787.
- Hoff, C. C., Beougher, S. C., Chakravarty, D., Darbes, L. A., & Neilands, T. B. (2010). Relationship characteristics and motivations behind agreements among gay male couples: Differences by agreement type and couple serostatus. *AIDS Care, 22*, 827-835.

- Hosking, W. (in press). Agreements about extra-dyadic sex in gay men's relationships: Exploring differences in relationship quality by agreement type and rule breaking behaviour. *Journal of Homosexuality*.
- Kenny, D. A., Kashy, D. A., & Cook, W. L. (2006). *Dyadic data analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kurdek, L. A. (1988). Relationship quality of gay and lesbian cohabiting couples. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 15, 93-118.
- LaSala, M. C. (2001). Monogamous or not: Understanding and counselling gay male couples. *Families in Society*, 82, 605-611.
- LaSala, M. C. (2004a). Extradynamic sex and gay male couples: Comparing monogamous and nonmonogamous relationships. *Families in Society*, 85, 405-412.
- LaSala, M. C. (2004b). Monogamy of the heart: Extradynamic sex and gay male couples. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 17, 1-24.
- Lyons, A., Pitts, M., Grierson, J., Smith, A., McNally, S., & Couch, M. (in press). Sexual behavior and HIV testing among bisexual men: A nationwide comparison of Australian bisexual-identifying and gay-identifying men. *AIDS and Behavior*. doi: 10.1007/s10461-012-0148-7
- Mitchell, J. W., Harvey, S. M., Champeau, D., Moskowitz, D. A., & Seal, D. W. (in press). Relationship factors associated with gay male couples' concordance on aspects of their sexual agreements: Establishment, type, and adherence. *AIDS and Behavior*. doi: 10.1007/s10461-011-0064-2
- Neilands, T. B., Chakravarty, D., Darbes, L. A., Beougher, S. C., & Hoff, C. C. (2010). Development and validation of the sexual agreement investment scale. *Journal of Sex Research*, 47, 24-37.

- Overall, N. C., Fletcher, G. J. O., & Simpson, J. A. (2006). Regulation processes in intimate relationships: The role of ideal standards. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*, 662-685.
- Parsons, J. T., Starks, T. J., DuBois, S., Grov, C., & Golub, S. A. (in press). Alternatives to monogamy among gay male couples in a community survey: Implications for mental health and sexual risk. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. doi: 10.1007/s10508-011-9885-3
- Prestage, G., Jin, F., Zablotzki, I., Grulich, A., Imrie, J., Kaldor, J., ... Kippax, S. (2008). Trends in agreements between regular partners among gay men in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, Australia. *AIDS and Behavior, 12*, 513-520.
- Ramirez, O. M., & Brown, J. (2010). Attachment style, rules regarding sex, and couple satisfaction: A study of gay male couples. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy, 31*, 202-213.
- Robins, G., & Boldero, J. (2003). Relational discrepancy theory: The implications of self-discrepancy theory for dyadic relationships and for the emergence of social structure. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 7*, 56-74.
- Shernoff, M. (1995). Male couples and their relationship styles. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 2*, 43-58.
- Tesser, A. (1988). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 21, pp. 181-227). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Tesser, A., Millar, M., & Moore, J. (1988). Some affective consequences of social comparison and reflection processes: The pain and pleasure of being close. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 49-61.

Wagner, G. J., Remien, R. H., & Carballo Dieguez, A. (2000). Prevalence of extra-dyadic sex in male couples of mixed HIV status and its relationship to psychological distress and relationship quality. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 39, 31-46.

Walster, E., Walster, G. W., & Berscheid, E. (1978). *Equity: Theory and research*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Worth, H., Reid, A., & McMillan, K. (2002). Somewhere over the rainbow: Love, trust, and monogamy in gay relationships. *Journal of Sociology*, 38, 237-253.

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of Sexual Agreement Satisfaction as a Function of the Valence of Perceived Discrepancies in Benefit*

Type of discrepancy	Discrepancy valence									Test statistic <sup>d</sup>
	Under-benefit <sup>a</sup>			Equal benefit <sup>b</sup>			Over-benefit <sup>c</sup>			
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Frequency of casual sex	164	3.41 <sub>ab</sub>	1.03	169	3.80 <sub>a</sub>	0.91	352	3.68 <sub>b</sub>	0.93	$F(2, 682) = 7.49, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$
Attractiveness of casual partners	113	3.48 <sub>a</sub>	0.94	402	3.76 <sub>ab</sub>	0.90	170	3.50 <sub>b</sub>	1.07	$F(2, 682) = 6.43, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .02$
Overall benefit	126	3.08 <sub>a</sub>	1.08	339	3.92 <sub>a</sub>	0.81	220	3.55 <sub>a</sub>	0.95	$F(2, 682) = 40.75, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$

*Note:* Means with shared subscripts within the same row are significantly different from each other.

<sup>a</sup>Perception of having *less* frequent casual sex, *less* attractive casual partners, or *less* overall benefit relative to the relationship partner.

<sup>b</sup>Perception of having *equally* frequent casual sex, *equally* attractive casual partners, or *equal* overall benefit relative to the relationship partner.

<sup>c</sup>Perception of having *more* frequent casual sex, *more* attractive casual partners, or *more* overall benefit relative to the relationship partner.

<sup>d</sup>One-way (discrepancy valence: under-benefit, equal benefit, over-benefit) ANOVAs on sexual agreement satisfaction for each type of discrepancy in benefit (i.e., frequency, attractiveness, overall).

Table 2

*Perceived Discrepancies in Benefit: Means and Standard Deviations of Sexual Agreement Satisfaction as a Function of Discrepancy Valence and Discrepancy Magnitude*

Type and valence of discrepancy	Discrepancy magnitude									Test statistic <sup>c</sup>
	Small			Moderate			Large			
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<i>Frequency of casual sex</i>										
Under-benefit <sup>a</sup>	72	3.84 <sub>a</sub>	0.83	57	3.30 <sub>a</sub>	1.01	35	2.69 <sub>a</sub>	1.03	$F(2, 161) = 18.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$
Over-benefit <sup>b</sup>	83	3.88	0.88	84	3.68	0.90	185	3.60	0.96	$F(2, 349) = 2.61, p = .075$
<i>Total</i>	155	3.86 <sub>ab</sub>	0.86	141	3.53 <sub>a</sub>	0.96	220	3.45 <sub>b</sub>	1.03	$F(2, 510) = 19.84, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$
<i>Attractiveness of casual partners</i>										
Under-benefit <sup>a</sup>	46	3.66	0.87	41	3.36	0.89	26	3.36	1.11	–
Over-benefit <sup>b</sup>	85	3.55	0.99	50	3.47	1.13	35	3.41	1.21	–
<i>Total</i>	131	3.59	0.95	91	3.42	1.03	61	3.39	1.16	$F(2, 277) = 1.37, p = .257$
<i>Overall benefit</i>										
Under-benefit <sup>a</sup>	46	3.72 <sub>a</sub>	0.96	34	3.00 <sub>a</sub>	0.89	46	2.49 <sub>a</sub>	0.98	$F(2, 123) = 19.46, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$
Over-benefit <sup>b</sup>	88	3.55	0.91	62	3.55	1.02	70	3.56	0.94	$F(2, 217) = 0.01, p = .99$
<i>Total</i>	134	3.61 <sub>ab</sub>	0.93	96	3.35 <sub>a</sub>	1.01	116	3.14 <sub>b</sub>	1.09	$F(2, 340) = 11.94, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$

*Note:* Means with shared subscripts within the same row are significantly different from each other. The “equal benefit” category within discrepancy valence was not included in these analyses, as a valence value of 0 necessarily entails a magnitude value of 0.

<sup>a</sup>Perception of having *less* frequent casual sex, *less* attractive casual partners, or *less* overall benefit than the partner.

<sup>b</sup>Perception of having *more* frequent casual sex, *more* attractive casual partners, or *more* overall benefit than the partner.

°For each row titled “under-benefit” and “over-benefit”, the test statistics are from the analyses of simple effects examining differences in sexual agreement satisfaction as a function of discrepancy magnitude *within* discrepancy valence. For each row titled “total”, the test statistics are the main effects of discrepancy magnitude (i.e., regardless of discrepancy valence) from the omnibus ANOVA. Note that analyses of simple effects were not conducted for discrepancies in attractiveness of casual partners, as the interaction of the valence and magnitude of these discrepancies in the omnibus ANOVA was not significant.