

Relationships, sex and values: meaning-making around relationships by queer young men in Aotearoa

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Aim: Queer young men in Aotearoa grow up in heterocentric and heteronormative contexts (Egan and Flavell, 2006), with little modelling of their sexual and romantic lives. This paper looks at these men's experiences seeking love, companionship and sex as an andragogic (Knowles, 1980) process.

Method: This ethnographic study (Bernard, 2012; Chambers; 2000) examines how 16-29 year-old queer-identified men understand their lived experience in the context of elevated HIV vulnerability. Data collection included participant observation and key informant interviews. Thirty-one participants completed up to three interviews on a broad range of topics. These data have been analyzed using Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Mezirow 1996; 1997; 1998) via Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software.

Results: The predominant social justice discourses around LGBTQ+ rights focuses on the non-sexual actor in the context of individual and familial rights, where monogamous partnership with one other person is framed as the norm: what these men experience in queer community is much more diverse. Much of their meaning-making is based on heteronormative and homophobic ideas around sex, love and pleasure. All participants understood the rudiments of sexual harm reduction, but often their values were an impediment for implementing this knowledge consistently.

Conclusion: These men's experiences have implications for sexual health promotion. Rather than assuming sexual harm reduction is technical or procedural, educators need to help young queer men to examine—and challenge—their beliefs around sex, love and relationships to craft knowledges that are queer-centric and celebratory.