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GAY MASCULINITIES

Gay Masculinities

Edited by
PETER NARDI

RESEARCH ON MEN AND MASCULINITIES

Published in cooperation with the Men's Studies Association,
A Task Group of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism



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MASCULINITIES IN GAY RELATIONSHIPS

2

Seeking Sexual Lives

Gay Youth and Masculinity Tensions

MATT G. MUTCHLER

Revealing Gay Sexualities

Few activities elicit as much anxiety, pleasure, or confusion as sex. Even in the age of prolific public debates about sex "scandals" and talk shows depicting shocking sexual deviants, surprisingly little is known about some sexualities. This research reveals some of the unarticulated complexities of gay male youth's sexual lives and gives young gay men the rare opportunity to speak about their sexual stories in great detail.

Consider the following interview excerpt with Todd, a 19-year-old white gay man studying music and theater at a college in a medium-sized city on the West Coast:

Todd: The first time I had sex was when I was 16 and sadly enough, it was in a bathroom, and basically it was me getting a blow job.

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Matt: So, how did this happen?

Todd: Oh, actually, I was there one day going to the bathroom. And, oh, there was writing all over the stalls . . . about sticking it under the stalls, and that's how it happened. Actually, I was pissed at myself for doing that. That's one of the reasons why anal sex is going to wait until I'm in a relationship, because I fucked up with my first sexual experience. . . . At the time, I was hurting and I thought it would make me feel better. It didn't at all, it made me feel worse. I was thinking, this will make me feel better about who I am, and what I am, and it didn't like I thought it would.

Todd's story introduces the themes of anonymous sex, relationships, and emotional tensions regarding sex explored in this chapter.

The stories these young men tell reveal how four dominant sexual scripts guide and frame their sexual experiences.¹ These scripts are romantic love, erotic adventure, safer sex, and sexual coercion. My purpose is to show how these young men learn and use sexual scripts; I also explore how their erotic lives are accomplished through learning and innovating sexual scripts and behaviors in complex, diverse social contexts. I highlight ambiguous and problematic stories as well as those narrated by these dominant patterns.

This work draws on recent developments in sexual scripts theory (Laumann & Gagnon, 1995), theories of gender (Connell, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and research on ethnicity and sexuality (Almager, 1991; Diaz, 1998). My theoretical approach is informed by social constructionist and queer theorists' assertions that sexuality is socially and culturally produced in complicated and pluralist ways (Duggan, 1992; Plummer, 1981; Weeks, 1986). I analyze how these men practice erotic lives shaped and constrained by gendered sexual scripts and by *masculinity tensions*. Through the process of analyzing these data, I develop and define the concept of masculinity tensions as sites at which gay men experience conflicts, contradictions, ambiguities, and struggles in and between their experiences of gendered sexual scripts. I examine significant differences between white and Latino young gay men and discuss implications for HIV-prevention policies. My aim is to make the sexual experiences of young gay men less obscure and shameful and more available to youth forming their sexual lives and to others wishing to help them do it safely.

Thirty Sexual Stories

The stories that follow are from interviews I conducted with 30 (15 white and 15 Latino) gay youth between the ages of 18 and 24.² Respondents were drawn from the cities of Modesto, Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara (all in California) through a snowball sampling procedure.³ To ensure a diverse set of interviews, contacts were made at a variety of venues (gay cafes, parks, gay restaurants, and youth shelters) and through social networks.⁴ I met these young men at their convenience and asked them to tell me their stories in confidential interviews.⁵ Some of the respondents were referred to me by the young men I interviewed and by friends. All respondents identify as gay men, and the sample includes men from a range of class backgrounds. The Latino men were selected to represent various facets of gay male Latino populations, including recent immigrants from Mexico, first- and second-generation Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Rican Americans, and Cuban Americans.

Sexual Scripts

This chapter explores the scripts found in gay male youth's stories about their sexual desires and behaviors. The narratives young gay men told about their sexual experiences compose the sexual stories in this project. They were free to elaborate on the raw material of these stories; they described contextual details, supporting actors, and personal reflections about their sexual experiences without identifying sexual scripts per se. The use of the sexual scripts metaphor is an analytical tool I imposed on their stories to clarify the ways in which scripts produce their sexual stories and to examine how young gay men revise and edit scripts in the context of their own experiences. Plummer (1995) argues that sexual stories are the conceptual link between people's lives and their society or culture. Thus, this effort examines intersections between gay youth's everyday sexual lives and the historical, social, and cultural forces shaping these lives.

A sexual script is a type of sexual discourse focused at the level of examining sexual behaviors. Scripts are conceptually useful for getting at how sex is accomplished in specific interactions. Sexual script theory posits that individuals construct sexualities in direct collaboration with the social and cultural structures shaping their lives (Gagnon & Simon, 1973;

Parker & Gagnon, 1995; Simon & Gagnon, 1984). These theorists view scripts as metaphors for conceptualizing the social production of sexual behavior. Sexual scripts exist at three related, yet distinct levels:

cultural scenarios (the instructions for sexual and other conduct that are embedded in the cultural narratives that are provided as guides or instructions for all conduct), *interpersonal scripts* (the structured patterns of interaction in which individuals as actors engage in everyday interpersonal conduct), and *intrapyschic scripts* (the plans and fantasies by which individuals guide and reflect upon their past, current, or future conduct). (Laumann & Gagnon, 1995, p. 190)

Cultural scripts exist at the collective level; they guide interpersonal scripts and proscribe patterns of sexual conduct (with whom, what, why, when, and where sex is done). Recent developments in the field leave room for individual "sexual actors" to actively change and innovate sexual scripts at every level in light of shifting local social/sexual environments and complex (sometimes contradictory) cultural norms (Laumann & Gagnon, 1995). I use script theory with the assumption that individuals actively learn, employ, and innovate scripts for their own sexual behavior.

Traditional cultural scripts for sex derived from dominant sexual discourses in Western, industrialized countries are based on assumptions about heterosexual relationships. For example, a model of such scripts includes procreative, recreational, and relational sex. These dominant cultural scripts prescribe and proscribe how sex should be practiced. The procreative script for sex mandates that sex be done for the purpose of procreation with a husband or wife. Recreational sex is marked by a pattern of sexual behaviors with casual or anonymous partners practiced primarily for its intrinsic pleasurable sensations. Sex in a committed relationship (practiced for a number of reasons) is the relational script. These scripts are culturally available to most individuals growing up in the United States. For instance, some Catholic officials advocate sex for the purpose of procreation only, and family planning classes in public schools sometimes advise students to stay abstinent until they are married. At the same time, adolescents are potentially exposed to multiple messages about relational and recreational sex through the media in television programs, song lyrics, and popular movies in which characters enact procreative, recreational, and relational scripts sometimes simultaneously. These scripts are potentially available at the level of culture for heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals to draw on.

The traditional sexual scripts model presumes the heterosexuality of sexual actors, since lesbians and gay men cannot legally marry and do not procreate when they are engaging solely in same sexual encounters, but these scripts can be adapted and modified by gay men and other sexual minorities. Gay youth, for instance, may pick up on relational, recreational, or procreative scripts for sex found in movies or books in dominant heterosexual culture or gay male subcultures, although they necessarily must rewrite the scripts to account for two male sexual actors. The fact that heterosexual, gay, and lesbian couples report high levels of affairs and nonmonogamy indicates that traditional scripts, such as relational sex, are not followed uniformly by heterosexuals, gay men, or lesbians (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994). Traditional sexual scripts fail to adequately theorize the complexities and contradictions in the erotic lives of gay and straight individuals.

Scripts for sexual behaviors are further gender based. The traditional script for doing "feminine sex" is referred to as romantic love. In line with this script, girls are encouraged to save sexual intercourse for a special person. Women are also expected to take responsibility for birth control, reproduction, child care, pleasing their sexual partners, and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Women are expected to play the passive role, saving sex for romance and marriage. The traditional script for men is referred to as the adventure script. Men are expected to play the active role, seeking sex for adventure. Young males and females are also exposed to multiple, contradictory sexual scripts during their socialization experiences, however. For example, young men are simultaneously expected to settle down in a monogamous marriage and to prove their manhood by "sowing their oats."

These gender-based sexual scripts are culturally institutionalized for gay men as well as heterosexuals. Gay men, much like their straight counterparts, are taught in self-help books that seeking out sex for pleasure is an integral part of being a man (Rose, 1996). The assumption of heterosexuality, however, is that the gendered scripts for women and men will eventually converge in a marriage in which a husband and wife will procreate and live happily ever after. The gaps in heteronormative scripts, supposedly filled by a wife, are left open for gay men to fill in. When women are absent from the picture, how do gay men improvise scripts for sex? Traditional scripts for sex provide the basic building blocks for gay men to form their own intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts for sex, but the question of what forces drive their actual sexual practices remains.

Doing Gender and Sexuality

Connell's (1995) conception of masculinity assumes that gender is an institutional structure that is recreated through social practices. Among other practices, this arena includes sexual activities. Connell's notion of masculinity is linked closely to West and Zimmerman's (1987) theoretical reconceptualization of gender as an accomplishment embedded in daily interactions and as a dynamic process. Recasting gender as something that is *done* in social interactions provides a conceptual bridge between thinking about gender as an institution existing somehow outside of real people and thinking of gender as practiced by people. Doing gender is unavoidable because individuals are held accountable to "gendered" behavior appropriate to their sex. As West and Zimmerman point out, "to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment" (p. 136).

Whereas women may be stigmatized for indulging their sexual desires, men are rewarded for sexual accomplishments. Adolescent men who do not have sex with women are held accountable (stigmatized as fags or losers). At the same time that individuals do gender on a daily basis, gender is also done to individuals. Individuals with more power or gender status may be in positions to force others to do gender in relation to their own desires (as in the case of rape). In the case of two gay men having sex with each other, both partners learn to be accountable to some masculinity scripts for sex such as romantic love and erotic adventures. Gay men's sexualities are done in the context of socially and culturally produced masculinity expectations.

Gay and bisexual men are subordinated in the hegemonic masculine hierarchy because they violate the explicit requirements of heterosexuality (Connell, 1992). Even though gay men fundamentally fail to be "masculine" men, they may still engage some aspects of masculine sexual scripts. For instance, *what* gay men can do (having sex for love or pleasure) reflects masculine scripts for men in general, but *who* they do it with and thus *how* they do it is unique to gay men. It is difficult to sustain a feminine model of sex for gay men without losing a sense of gay men's experience of the world as men. Gay men are not accountable to feminine scripts. For instance, they are not expected to procreate or "save it" until marriage. At the same time, it remains true that heterosexuality is a fundamental feature of masculine sex. Holding this paradox of gay men and sex in mind, I sug-

gest that the rich array of young gay men's sexualities can be viewed as complicated gay masculinities marked by masculinity tensions.

Some gay men, known as "gay clones," played out the hypermasculinized adventure script for sex (focused on anonymous, recreational sex with multiple partners) during the sexual liberation era (Levine, 1998); "clones" composed one primary cultural model for what and who gay men were. In that context, gay men in romantic relationships were largely absent from popular representations and public discussion. Nevertheless, data on gay men's sexual behaviors during the pre-AIDS, gay liberation era document dating patterns and romantic love relationships quite distinct from the mythic "clone" image (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Adam (1992) notes, "AIDS has drawn upon and developed a cultural trend which has made visible the gay men engaged in caring relationships who had often been overlooked" (p. 181).

Contemporary sociological research on popular images and discourses of gay men and lesbians reveals that their social support networks and interpersonal relationships became more acknowledged during the AIDS era (Nardi, 1997), but the complexities and implications of gay men's sexual lives during the 1970s have never been fully theorized. Sociological studies of gay youth thus far primarily examine sexual *identity* formation processes (Trolden, 1988). The rich array of sexual *behaviors* enacted by gay males growing up in the era of AIDS is only now being documented by sociologists (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). There is still a great need to understand the diverse range of sexual patterns encountered and lived by gay male youth, especially those outside of formal youth groups. In this chapter, I analyze a broad range of gay male youth's sexual stories.

Race and Ethnicity Matter

What counts as appropriate femininity and masculinity varies across circumstances and among actors situated differently in terms of their social positions. Race and class intersect with gender to produce hierarchically situated, multiple genders (Collins, 1989; hooks, 1984). Notions of appropriate sexual behaviors for individuals situated as Mexican men, for example, look different from the expectation in the United States that sex between men is always suspect. The white men and a few of the Latino men I interviewed grew up accustomed to the assumption in the dominant U.S. model for homosexuality that men who have insertive or receptive anal sex with other men *are gay*. In some cases, however, men

growing up in Mexico or in Mexican American families may engage in sex with men as long as they are in the *activo* role (insertive anal sex) without facing social stigma. Men who are in the *pasivo* role (receiving anal sex) are considered to be unmasculine and may be stigmatized as *jotos* (fags).

Complex cultural factors such as machismo, religion, and family loyalty shape the scripts for sex encountered by many Latino gay men (Diaz, 1998). The Latin scripts for sex, though, vary across regions, countries, and time (Murray, 1995). Gay white men are accountable to similar social pressures to be heterosexual, especially those from families abiding by Western religious dogmas. Many gay Latino men in the United States are accountable to particular "raced" scripts for sex deriving from Latin cultures *and* to the U.S. models for sex. Studies document that Latino gay men believe they are under more extreme pressures from their families and ethnic cultural backgrounds to live out the heterosexual procreative scripts for sex—at least in the public eye (Diaz, 1998). Indeed, there are many rich and diverse ways in which masculinities are constructed, enacted, and resisted among men who are differently situated with respect to race or ethnicity, class, and age (Kimmel & Messner, 1995). This research adds to the body of work documenting these diverse masculinities in the arena of sexualities.

Gay Youth in the AIDS Era

Gay youth growing up during the AIDS era, referred to as the AIDS generation, come out and form their sexual lives in the context of a social world already changed by AIDS, the gay and lesbian movement, and reactions to these (Adam, 1987; Altman, 1986; D'Emilio, 1983). They must deal with the specter of AIDS on top of the web of problems associated with heterosexism, homophobia, and coming out (Mutchler, 1994). The safer sex script is an ideal-type example of a cultural script for sex produced purposely by gay men to guide sexual behaviors during the era of AIDS. Safer sex scripts, focused on avoiding behaviors that could transmit HIV (such as unprotected anal sex), while emphasizing the erotic aspects of safer behaviors (such as anal sex with condoms, hot oil massage, and oral sex) continue to drive HIV-prevention efforts targeting gay youth. Safer sex scripts do not proscribe recreational sex between men as long as condoms are used for anal sex. In fact, eroticizing safer sex campaigns are explicit about asserting that safer sex allows for sexual liberation and sex for pleasure. AIDS, nonetheless, requires gay men to take safety and cau-

