

# Heteronormativity and the exploration of homosexual behavior in heterosexual men ...

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In the exploration of homosexuality and heterosexuality, certain binaries are often presented – if you have sex with a man, you can in no way be heterosexual. Despite this, there is a vibrant, substantial and highly prevalent subculture of men who identify as heterosexual, but nonetheless still have sex with men. To that end, questions abound regarding their real sexual orientation, the motivations behind labeling themselves heterosexual, and whether or not that really applies to them. The answer to this question lies in a complex plethora of factors, ranging from the construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality, issues of whiteness and masculinity, the heterosexual imaginary, and the imposition of outside social structures on individual psychology. The issue of men having sex with men (MSMs) lies both in the systemic stigmatizing of homosexuality due to heteronormativity, as well as a redefining of masculinity and heterosexuality as identification with a culture, instead of specific homosexual acts. In essence, MSMs have sex with men while still feeling like a part of the straight ‘ culture.’

There is a substantial subculture, particularly among straight men of color, in which men have sex with other men without labeling themselves as anything other than heterosexual (Ward 414). Many men who engage in homosexual behavior with other men still refuse to see themselves as homosexual, making use of a variety of actors that keep men from “ being ‘ honest’ about their ‘ real’ lives and desires” (414). This issue of honesty is one of the central components of how people examine this phenomenon, stemming from the assumption that sex acts mean something important and essential about those who commit them (415). Straight dudes, argues Ward, do not try to enter traditionally gay or queer spaces, but instead operate in their own

independent subculture, as they “ indicate a greater sense of belonging or cultural ‘ fit’ with heterosexual identity and heteroerotic culture” (416).

The anonymity of hookup culture helps to facilitate these encounters, whether they be attempts at sexual exploration or truly reconciled negotiations of their individual sexual identity - sites like Craigslist are full of ads for ‘ str8’ dudes who nonetheless ask for sexual activities with other men. To that end, the central issue becomes not one of identifying oneself by sex acts, but by identification with a certain culture; str8 dudes are not ‘ str8’ because they have sex with women, but because they identify with the corresponding culture; to identify with queer culture makes one queer (Ward 418).

This kind of classification helps many straight men to justify the sex acts they engage in, while still calling themselves ‘ straight.’ Other attributes of this specific MSM subculture includes using women as the central focus of sexual discourse; while these men are getting together to jerk off, or engage in oral (or even anal) intercourse, the pretense is that they will still be talking about the women they want to sleep with, or watching straight porn. These are the vehicles by which safe spaces are created for men to fool around while still feeling like they are straight.

White ‘ str8 dudes’ have an easier time of this, as there is not the assumption that men of color on the DL face; white str8 dudes are much more likely to be assumed to be working through a phase, or to use gay sex to bolster their own masculinity. Conversely, men of color on the DL are more likely to be considered closeted gay or bisexual men whose stereotypically homophobic home cultures would theoretically prevent them

from being who they really are. These kinds of questions inherently privilege white men to more freely experiment with men without consequence, whereas men of color face far greater challenges in openly expressing homosexual desires without sacrificing their own internalized masculinity. Much of this complex, allegedly 'confused' sexual identity comes from the way homosexuality and heterosexuality is constructed. From a poststructuralist perspective, individuals mostly act out the whims of larger social structures, as they hope to maintain a preferred status within the social order (Namaste 221). To that end, many people are victims to the social scenarios and norms that are established around them, including those related to sexual orientation.

The social construction of sexuality argues that sexuality is a product of one's social environment, and not something biologically innate - in the case of MSMs, this paradoxically means that these men either choose to be straight but have sex with men anyway, or are denying their essential desires for men by hiding it through the preferable veneer of heterosexuality (Namaste 222). To that end, MSMs exist because they recognize the 'undesirable' moniker of homosexual, and reject it in favor of maintaining their own privilege as the more positive, socially-coded heterosexual.

The use of strategic ambiguity is part of the aforementioned privilege that heterosexual men often enjoy, utilizing the anonymity of the hookup culture to explore desires and classify a sexual encounter with as much significance as one would like. In most sexual encounters in which a committed romantic relationship is not involved, a certain level of ambiguity occurs regarding what significance the parties involved assign to said encounter (Currier 705).

The 'hookup culture' of modern America, consequently, came about as a way to allow individuals to have these encounters without having to explain or truly classify them. Many MSM encounters could possibly be classified as 'hookups,' particularly as the sex act does not have to be classified in terms of whether or not a man having sex with another man means that they are gay (or bisexual).

Because of the strategic ambiguity of the hookup culture, participants are allowed to compartmentalize the encounter however they want. Men, in particular, benefit from this strategic ambiguity, as it allows them to reinforce the hegemonic masculinity inherent to culture, which says that men engaging in hookups are simply expressing their masculine drive for sex. In particular, many MSMs find the act appealing because of the mutually understood reinforcement of masculinity; in many cases, a man to man encounter between two ostensibly 'straight' MSMs is done as a reinforcement of their masculinity, celebrating manhood rather than creating a masculine/feminine binary for the encounter. With MSMs, both men are still men, while still receiving sexual gratification from the other.

Another issue with this phenomenon, particularly as it relates to men of color, is the imposition of white masculinity as the default, which makes it easier for white men to experiment with homosexuality than men of color. The phenomenon of being 'on the down low' (DL) is common amongst black males who engage in sex with other men, becoming a new subculture that attempts to reconcile hyper-masculinity and heterosexuality with their desires and actions with other men (Ward 415). The line between being a man who has sex with other men (MSM) and someone who is at least

bisexual, if not simply a closeted gay man, is quite blurred and complex, particularly given the strict notions of gender and sex that occur in many minority populations (415). Since the DL discussion tends to focus primarily on black men, the implication is that white men do not necessarily face as much of a stigma:

“ the lack of discussion about white men on the DL has reinforced stereotypes about Black male sexuality as dangerous and predatory, as well as provided ‘ evidence’ that African Americans are more homophobic than other racial groups” (415).

These easy justifications complicate the simple narrative that MSMs are just bisexual men afraid of giving up their privileged identity, as it also includes a component of hegemonic masculinity and casual racism regarding the perception of black men’s sexuality. In other words, black men are not allowed to stay as straight as other MSMs are, because of the inherent assumption that a black man on the DL is actually a closeted gay man who must be pitied because his homophobic street culture forbids him from coming out.

The heterosexual imaginary also plays a vital role in creating this cognitive dissonance between thinking of oneself as straight while also reconciling male desire for other men. The heterosexual imaginary is the idea that heterosexuality is the inherently natural way of being for a human individual, holding this sexual orientation as sacred to create societal norms that place anything outside heterosexuality on the fringes of ‘ normalcy’:

“ the heterosexual imaginary naturalizes heterosexuality and prevents us from seeing how it’s organization depends on the production of the belief or

ideology that heterosexuality is normative and the same for everyone-that the fairytale romance is universal” (Ingraham 6).

Culturally, men are conditioned to believe that they are, by default, heterosexual – to that end, men will do a great deal of psychological justification to make themselves still feel ‘ straight’ while also doing things many would consider ‘ gay.’

When a man chooses to engage in homosexual acts with another man, but still call himself straight, it is easy to dismiss this as cognitive dissonance; however, this may also be due to their subconscious reaction to the heterosexual imaginary – an understanding that, due to the social privileges of being heterosexual, they may want to remain heterosexual however possible while still having the ability to fulfill their desires. The fact that white men can accomplish this more easily than men of color only furthers the intersection of race into the equation, as white men can fulfill the heterosexual imaginary more easily than others.

In a much broader sense, there are other social constructions and factors that play into this need to hide one’s true identity and sexuality. The fear of the social stigma of being gay can certainly factor into a man’s decision to not let sexual encounters define them as being anything other than heterosexual. Many children of both sexes receive tremendous pressure to be heterosexual from their fathers, indicating a preference for heterosexuality that can bleed over into a protectiveness of their sexuality in later aspects of life (Solebello and Elliott 294). Fathers, in particular, can feel responsible for the sexuality of their son, which is something the sons pick up on in childhood.

The imposition of homosexual desire on maleness and masculinity (along with some issues of whiteness as well) comes about due to a variety of factors. Because of the anonymity of the internet and the use of other social signifiers like 'down low' or the use of 'str8' to signify sexual orientation, straight men allow themselves to engage in homosexual acts without thinking of themselves as anything other than 'normal,' which is socially defined by being white, masculine and heterosexual. This issue is an extremely complex one, full of contradictions and complexities that make clear the sheer difficulty inherent in trying to negotiate sexual identity in a world which privileges one group over another. If a man is able to successfully have sex with another man but hide it so he cannot be discriminated against (even from himself), it is easy to understand why it happens so often.

The central question then becomes: if a man has sex with another man, is he a closeted homosexual dealing with societal expectations for him to be heterosexual, or is he at peace with who he is, his encounters with men simply being part of his own individual sexual identity? The answers to these questions are continually complex and difficult to maneuver, leading to more discussions in the future regarding how accepting we are of MSMs as a phenomenon.

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