

## **Normative *Gay* Male Sexual Socialization: Harmless Fun or Sexual Trauma?**

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In keeping with Gary Brooks' topic of male sexual socialization not being just "harmless fun," I would like to describe some of the dangers of gay socialization that can be destructive to gay men's lives as well as to their loved ones.

My interest in this topic began during a trip to Dallas a few years ago. Each Christmas some friends and I spend the money we would use to buy Christmas gifts for one another and take a trip together. Two years ago we spent a weekend in Dallas and on one of the nights we went to a gay club to dance. Whether or not there will be dancing at a straight club may up in the air, but you can always count on dancing at a gay club. I have been to several clubs for gay men in larger cities, but I had never experienced anything quite like this. Although it was the largest, most popular bar in the Oak Lawn area, I was surprised by the seedy and extremely sexual atmosphere. For example, my female friends could not get into the women's restroom because of the number of men having sex in the stalls. My partner and I were continually propositioned in the bathrooms by male prostitutes. As some of my friends' only close gay friend, I felt somehow like an ambassador for a culture and I was embarrassed. I felt like the father of children laughing uncontrollably in church.

Some weeks later, I by chance met a man who facilitates a Sexaholics Anonymous meeting in Dallas for gay men. Although he has been running this group for over 15 years, there are only on average four-to-six members at each group meeting. At Sexaholics Anonymous meetings for predominantly heterosexual men in Dallas, he said that membership at any one meeting is anywhere from 20 to 40 participants. I told him that based on my own experience I suspected that there were more than six gay men in Dallas that may demonstrate compulsive sexual behavior. We then discussed why gay men often do not recognize that their sexual habits are problematic.

When I asked him why this might be so, he said, "The consequences of sex addiction come a lot faster for straight people. Typically their family problems are enough to get them to recognize they have a problem—their wife gets very upset, for example, or they feel guilty for spending too much time away from their kids, or lying to family members. Gay people are just used to having their lives be out-of-control. Gay men have to hit a harder bottom to realize that something is wrong, and this often involves the law. Gay men's partners are usually more understanding when their partner is in trouble. And there are also a lot more open relationships making frequent sex outside the relationship okay."

As I started to read on my own into gay men and sexual addiction, I found a 2001 study by Reece, Plate, and Daughtry that reported that the mean compulsivity score (on the Sexual Compulsivity Scale) of self-identified gay or bisexual men is higher than heterosexual men (Reece, Plate, and Daughtry; 2001).

But before I dive further into this topic, I would like to take a moment to step back with a caveat. In my experience, sexual addiction in the gay community is a touchy subject that's not often discussed. While all men—gay, bi, and straight—can suffer from this behavior, gay men may be more sensitive to perceiving criticism of their sexual behavior as another attempt to pathologize their sexuality and to judge it by heterosexual standards. Historically, the literature on homosexuality has been more focused on its etiology as if the end result was pathological, as in heterosexuality gone bad. I also understand that researchers who work on topics of this nature assume a unique responsibility, as it is possible that the findings of study could be used for initiatives that are not supportive of gay and bisexual men's health or the gay and bisexual communities in general.

I understand this concern, but it's also critical to identify when extreme sexual behavior is damaging both to physical and mental health. To me, it's not a matter of being negative about the gay community. It's that *when we see something is not working, we need to stop*.

In assessing the issues at play in compulsive sexuality in gay men, it is important first to understand that the gay community is a highly sexualized one. As the stereotype goes, straight men *want* sex all the time, while gay men actually *have* sex all the time. But the effects of being part of a highly sexualized community are often ambiguous. A treatment provider hearing about a client's visit to a gay bathhouse and the sexual contacts he has there might be shocked and immediately think "addiction." On the other hand, this same client's peers might hear this news and view it as no more shocking than a trip to a bar for happy hour drinks. Saying that the peer must also be an addict is too simplistic. In order to assess addiction, one must consider the nature of the client's personal values as they relate to his community's norms. Helping a client find a balance between the gay community and the community at large will strengthen a client's recovery.

When the singer George Michael was asked to comment on a set of paparazzi photographs showing him engaged in a London park public-sex romp, Michael challenged, "Are you gay? No? Well then, fuck off! Because this is my culture." George Michael seemed to convey that anonymous sex is just part of the culture.

One college-aged gay-identified male in a study by Reece and Dodge from 2004 on college men who look for sexual encounters on campus said this about his sexual behavior "It seems like everyone does this at some point. And not everyone can be sexually compulsive, can they? It is really confusing to me because I think that I am normal and am in control, but it seems like everyone wants to label these types of behavior as compulsive, but I think its just what gay men do when that are young and in college."

So at what point does sexual behavior become a problem for gay men? Making this line a blurry one is the fact that gay men tend to report levels of sexual activity that are significantly higher than in the dominant heterosexual culture (Ross & Kauth, 2002). Another confounding factor in identifying sexual addiction in gay men is that many consequences to sexual addiction are also the consequences of simply being gay. The Gay and Bi-Sexual Addiction Screening Test was created in 1997 to help assess sexually compulsive or "addictive" behaviors. As I read the measure, I was struck with how difficult it is for gay and bisexual men to distinguish the effects of compulsive sexuality with the effects of being gay in a heterosexual world. Many of the questions specifically ask men to try to separate the effects of the two. For example, "do significant others, friends, or family ever worry aloud or complain about my sexual behavior—as opposed to my sexual orientation?" "Has any partner or friend of mine ever been hurt emotionally as a result of my sexual behavior (again, not my sexual orientation)?" "Does my sexual activity (again, not my sexual orientation) interfere with professional or personal goals I've set for myself?"

For many gay men, honestly assessing the consequences of their sexual behavior as differentiated from the consequences of simply being gay is difficult. Being gay often means that those close to you complain about your sexual behavior. Those close to you can be hurt emotionally as a result of your orientation, and it can interfere with professional goals.

Because of these consequences, including covert abuse from others, many gay men experience "feeling different" or "like an outsider" within their childhood and adolescent peer groups and family (Braun-Harvey, 2003). A common coping mechanism to manage this outsider status is for gay men to develop a false-self/real-self continuum. The false self is presented to peers and family to reduce risk of being perceived as not heterosexual or conforming to traditional male gender role behavior. The real self is carefully protected thoughts, emotions, and desires that remain private, secretive, or unconscious. As a result, a gay man will often develop a gut feeling regarding where he presents himself in an artificial manner (as a heterosexual man, or at least not as an "out" gay man). If a gay male believes that presenting his real-self may threaten a significant attachment, he may choose to preserve the attachment by presenting a false-self.

Men who have sex with men and admitted to "cruising for sex" reported a need for secrecy. Not only did cruisers report that they found themselves in situations where cruising challenged their romantic relationships, but some also reported that their cruising had challenged their friendship and other social networks because of the need for secrecy. One young man stated "I keep this (cruising) a secret totally...both from my gay friends and my straight friends... I can remember that they always seem to say to each other that I am secretive, it is sort of how people think of me...but the only thing that I am secretive about is that I like jacking off with other dudes in the restroom...maybe that says something that my secrecy about my sex life has become so much a part of my life."

Another consequence of keeping the real self compartmentalized is that there is also a tendency on the part of many gay men to split sex and love. This split has to do with the way that men who have sex with men have learned to view sexual passion as sick or bad. Societal attitudes and oppression may cause gay men to feel their entire identity is centered on their sexuality, encouraging them to focus exclusively on the sexual component of their relationships, interfering with the capacity to become emotionally intimate (Barows & Halgin, 1988). It may be that the more sexually repressed and/or homophobic a culture is, the stronger the tendency for gay men to engage in anonymous sex as a substitute for denied emotional intimacy. There seems to be a direct relationship between repression and the choice of anonymous sex (Pincu, 1989, p.83).

Another potential cause for this split in the way gay men perceive sex and love is that gay men don't often meet just to get to know each other in a casual way. In contemporary American society, there are still inequities among the opportunities for heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual individuals to have non-sexual interactions with potential relationship or sexual partners. It may be the case that gay, bisexual, and questioning men still begin to explore their identity through early sexual experiences, while many of their heterosexual peers are able to do so in the context of routine and often culturally normed, non-sexual social interactions.

Although sexual experimentation can be useful in helping a gay man move towards resolving questions about his orientation, for others, sexual experimentation can be the beginning of a sexual addiction. Many younger gay men in college, for example, suggested that they would only be cruising while they were in school and that they would stop as soon as they left the campus. Therefore, it may be difficult for them to personally make a valid assessment of whether their sexual behaviors are in fact compulsive. As a result, they may not seek assistance, and, if they do, may consider the therapy or social support processes with which they become engaged to be inappropriate or without benefit.

Besides the opportunity to explore their sexual identity through sex, there are also many places within the gay community that can help in this process that are not overly sexualized. Getting out and finding them is a necessary step of gay identity development. In a longitudinal study of homosexually active men in Chicago, Joseph et al. (1991) measured acculturation to the gay community in terms of amount of time socializing with gay men, the degree to which respondents' homosexuality was known, and how men perceived community homonegative attitudes. The authors found that, in the short term (six months), the interaction between social participation with other gay men and a positive attitude toward their own sexual identity significantly predicted lower sexual risk. Absence of peer support was also associated with relapse to unsafe sex.

### Conclusion

Psychotherapists will be more effective with their gay male clients by conveying interest and curiosity about their client's sexual activity, while encouraging a client to consider connections between his sexual behavior and the presenting concerns and difficulties he brings to psychotherapy. Psychotherapists working with gay men must be able to

differentiate problematic or compulsive sexual activity from a large array of various patterns of gay male sexual behavior that reflect developmental, situations, or culturally normative sexual behaviors. Also knowing that there are community centers, churches, bookstores, film festivals, and support groups specifically targeting the gay community can be a great asset. Not only can referrals be made, but the treatment provider is acknowledging what the client may or may not know—that there are safe places for gay men in an often unsafe world.

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