

Gay men and sexual adventurousness: where to from here?

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Is sexual adventurousness inherently pathological behaviour? Is it a reaction to the clean living of good gay citizens or is it just a convenient label for celebratory sexual fraternalism among men who have sex with men? And just where does risk fit into the picture?

HIV prevention is often seen through a prismatic lens that seeks to compartmentalise behaviour, networks and practices as a way of framing responses and programs. For example, a peripheral group (young men, party-goers, methamphetamine users, men from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, men with low literacy, bisexuals, etc.) is identified as particularly 'problematic' and in need of 'intervention'. The group is then named, often this naming process serves as the nominal cultural marker that brings the group into being as in the case of 'barebackers'¹, 'bug-chasers', 'gift givers' and 'breeders'². These lonely, troubled outliers make for florid, racy copy, often conforming to covert and overtly homophobic characterisations of gay men and their sexual expression.³

These groups are often characterised in the media as frayed, turbulent and beyond the nurturing reach of what we euphemistically refer to as a homogenised gay community response, making any health-promoting intervention fraught with difficulty and apt to failure. The latest group to be added to this list is sexually adventurous men.

As far back as 1977, John Rechy described what we now refer to as 'sexual adventurousness' in his book of reportage from the front entitled *The Sexual Outlaw*.⁴ This document is interesting in two ways in relation to the current debates around sexual adventurousness. Firstly, as a pre-AIDS record of gay male sexual activity it is exhaustively detailed and secondly, far from characterising this level and variety of activity as pathological, the behaviour of the sexual outlaw as described by Rechy is regarded as a celebration that he sees as clearly linked to gay liberation and human rights. Well, that was 1977.

In 2009, there are a number of competing social and political agendas that make the nature of sexual adventurousness appear at best unhelpful and at worst unhealthy to 'mainstream' gay men generally. Letters columns in the gay press regularly describe men who engage in sexual adventurousness variously as men with 'low self esteem'⁵ or 'dangerous predatory freaks', or 'lost self destructive trash'⁵ and '...sex-obsessed, irresponsible freaks'.⁶

To a mainstream gay community concerning itself with gay marriage, relationship rights, parenting and

adoption, the real situation regarding sexually adventurous men is far more disquieting.⁷ Far from being a bunch of 'sex-obsessed, irresponsible freaks' whose shadowy culture is cloaked in shame, guilt and self-hatred, what we call 'sexual adventurousness' is regularly engaged in by gay men of every stripe who are generally well informed, in control, and operating with a sense of sexual ethics. Further, they are not a discreet, sequestered group but rather gay men who move in and out of these scenes at will, as need and desire dictate.^{8,9}

This is not to suggest that men who engage in sexual adventurousness are not at risk of contracting or passing on HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the environments and contexts in which they have sex — they are.⁸ Proximity to, and sexual engagement with, HIV positive men and men of unknown serostatus, multiple sexual partners, group sex activity, in addition to the application of imperfect risk reduction strategies, and, to a lesser extent concomitant recreational drug use are the constituent elements that make up this risk environment.⁸ What is missing is pathology^{8,9,10}, and herein lies a potentially difficult tension for health promoters looking to work with sexually adventurous men.

The historical model for approaching HIV prevention and sexual health more generally in gay communities is to identify a need (usually a deficit) or a

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problem (in this case let's take sex-pigs, barebackers, and party boys and collapse this definition into the generically *sexually adventurous*) and devise a strategy or 'intervention' in the hope of impacting on these 'difficult' behaviors. The problem with this approach is threefold. Firstly, gay communal life has changed since the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic when community-based organisations and issues related to HIV/AIDS prevention sat at the forefront of gay men's lives. Secondly, it doesn't take into account the dynamism of gay-community life where entrance into various sexual networks is fluid⁹. Thirdly, this approach cannot accommodate environments where there is no deficit or apparent need to be addressed.

The research work of Prestage and others clearly demonstrates that men who engage in sexually adventurous scenes and networks have a high knowledge of sexual health and strategies to avoid transmission and acquisition of HIV, they are aware of post-exposure prophylaxis and they are generally heavily connected to the gay community⁸. It would appear that the most significant deficit with regard to sexual adventurousness therefore lies in the understandings of those scenes and networks within community-based organisations themselves. In addition, we need to understand them as not merely environments where transmission of HIV and other STIs might occur but rather as sites of sexual fraternalism, transgression and pleasure⁹. What this suggests is perhaps a more diffuse form of engagement with sexual adventurousness rather than a developmental approach which is framed

in the traditional paternalism of benign intervention.

By perusing the work plans of AIDS Councils throughout Australia it is apparent that every state and territory has some peripheral contact with sexual adventurous networks. Either through safe-sex resource distribution, outreach to beats and SOPVs or the resourcing of private sex parties with free condoms and lube. Our principal and immediate challenge is to find ways of engaging with men who engage in sexual adventurousness and the contexts in which that activity occurs that are more mutually beneficial and meaningful for us.

This might be difficult for at least three reasons. Firstly, as pointed out elsewhere in this essay, sexually adventurous men are not an homogenised hermetically sealed, troubled sub-population of gay citizenry desperately in need of 'help'. Secondly, many of the men who regularly engage in sexually adventurous scenes may be, at best, ambivalent about the intervention of health promotion from community-based organisations and, at worst, hostile and mistrustful. Thirdly, the so-called mainstream gay community may have established an unworkable binary opposition to men who engage in what they would consider irresponsible, aberrant behaviours antagonistic to societal acceptance of the GLBTI communities' broader social and political agendas. Negotiating this terrain with guidance from men whose sexual expression moves outside monogamy will be essential if we, as health promoters, want our engagement with these men in these scenes to be relevant and enduring.

References

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- 3 Rofes, E. (1998). *Dry bones breathe: gay men creating post-AIDS identities and cultures*. New York: The Haworth Press.
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- 5 Shock tactics [Letter to the editor]. *Melbourne Community Voice* (2007, August 30).
- 6 BNews, letters column January 17, 2008.
- 7 Halperin, D. M., (2009). *What Do Gay Men Want?* University of Michigan Press, p. 5
- 8 Prestage, G., Hudson, J., Bradley, J., Down, I., Sutherland, R., Corrigan, N., Gray, B., Chalmers, B., Batrouney, C., Martin, P., McInnes, D., Grierson, J., & Grulich, A. (2008). *TOMS: Three Or More Study*. Sydney: National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, The University of New South Wales.
- 9 Smith, G., Worth, H., & Kippax, S. (2004). *Sexual adventurousness among Sydney gay men* (Monograph 3/2004). Sydney: National Centre in HIV Social Research, The University of New South Wales.
- 10 Duffin, R., (2009). HIV is pathological, having sex isn't. Some thoughts about the current moment in HIV health promotion. Discussion paper commissioned by Positive Life NSW.



ARTICLE SUMMARY 1 Why the best laid plans go awry in group sex

This study by Prestage et al. examines the risk behaviors, risk reduction strategies and condom negotiation between 994 men who had engaged in group sex and is the first study of its kind in Australia.

The cross-sectional sample of gay men was drawn from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. The contexts in which group sex happened was varied; sex-on-premises-venues, commercial sex events, beats and private parties. This important study found that whilst generally men who engage in group sex encounters are committed to safe sex and practices that reduce their risk, nonetheless the possibility of transmission and acquisition of HIV by these men is increased in this context. The study attributes a variety of factors to this finding, including ineffective risk-reduction strategies such as withdrawal,

strategic positioning and serosorting in situations where the serostatus of sexual partners is unknown or discordant. The authors discuss the conflict between the intention of these men to engage in safe sex and the shifts in behaviour due to their desires and the behaviour of other men around them during group sex. The findings in this study do not point to easy or clear points of intervention for health promotion but rather provides a number of important insights into gaining a better understanding of gay men in the context(s) of group sex activity.

 Prestage, G., Hudson, J., Bradley, J., Down, I., Sutherland, R., Corrigan, N., Gray, B., Chalmers, B., Batrouney, C., Martin, P., McInnes, D., Grierson, J., & Grulich, A. (2008). *TOMS: Three Or More Study*. Sydney: National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, The University of New South Wales.

2 The legacy of gay liberation

John Rechy's book *The Sexual Outlaw* is like a white-hot polemic directed to society in general, that describes, 'The promiscuous homosexual [as] a sexual revolutionary.' These revolutionaries, in Rechy's reading of them, have been bought into being as a reaction against homophobia at every level of society. The exhaustive (and exhausting) descriptions of every possible convulsion and practice of homosexual activity are peppered throughout the book with a highly emotive essay on homophobia, human rights, equal rights and injustice that invokes the Bible (of course), Shakespeare, Proust, Da Vinci, Socrates, Tchaikovsky, Kerouac the holocaust and even Norman Mailer. I think the slightly hysterical tone can be forgiven when viewed through the prism of sexual politics generally in the seventies and the heady atmosphere gay liberation before the pronouncements on the discovery of HIV in the early eighties. As a cultural document the book argues strongly in favour of a sexual politics that is informed by mutual care, inclusivity, ethics and fraternalism infused with unambiguous, unfettered celebratory hedonism and desire.

Rechy, J. (1978). *The Sexual Outlaw*. London: W. H. Allen.

3 Considered risk and pleasure

Hurley and Prestage explore the notion of context, both behavioral and sociocultural, in this paper that examines pleasure and risk as connective, as elements that contribute to the experience of intensive sex partying (ISP) rather than viewing them through the lens of pathology. This paper interrogates data from the Australian Gay Periodic Surveys from three states (Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales) as well as the Health In Men and Positive Health studies in a process that included other relevant research and a selective critical literature search that looked at HIV, risk, sexual behavior and gay men. The authors examine the tensions inherent in balancing intensive sex play, drug taking and risk reduction and convincingly describe the management of these tensions as critical in the experience of (ISP). The paper articulates pleasure as poorly understood in health research generally and, by implication, health promotion. In this sense, it offers not only avenues for further research but novel and creative approaches to health promotion and community engagement.

Hurley, M., & Prestage, G. (2009). Intensive sex partying amongst gay men in Sydney, *Culture Health & Sexuality*, 11(6), 597-610.

4 Describing sexual adventurism

This qualitative study of 31 gay men in Sydney (sixteen HIV negative from the HIM cohort and thirteen from the Positive health Health cohort) looked at three aspects of sexual adventurism; (1) sexual adventurism and subculture, (2) sexual practice and risk, and (3) drug use. Although the authors are justifiably wary of affixing a 'subcultural' label to practices and contexts of sexual adventurism, they point out that men engaged in practices associated with sexual adventurism themselves refer to a cultural divide between their sexual expression and that of 'vanilla' gay men. In fact the study is useful

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in that it provides a definition of sexual adventurism that is based in sexual practice (rather than context) that includes, fisting, water sports, sadomasochism, bondage and discipline and fetish sex often enhanced for the practitioners with poly drug use. Consistent with the findings of Prestage et al (2008) drug use is employed to intensify and extend sexual episodes rather than as a means to lose control and does not appear to be a significant factor in unsafe sex. However the paper describes the pre-conditions for seroconversion in sexually adventurous spaces. They include: a predominance of HIV positive men in sexually adventurous scenes and networks, multiple sexual partners and the greater likelihood of unprotected anal intercourse in those settings.

Smith, G., Worth, H., & Kippax, S. (2004). *Sexual Adventurism among Sydney gay men* (Monograph 3/2004). Sydney: National Centre in HIV Social Research, The University of New South Wales.

5 The value of sexual diversity

Although published in 1998, just two years after the 'protease moment', Eric Rofes book is strikingly prescient about the impacts on gay male sex cultures of the advent of combination antiretroviral therapy. Rofes argues that the widespread implementation of combination antiretroviral therapy with protease inhibitors signaled a watershed in the HIV/AIDS epidemic that would lead to a diffusion of the medical, political and social issues that were at the forefront of gay community life up until that time. He also documents the re-emergence of and tension between a more openly celebratory hedonistic gay sexual culture and a more mainstream political and social agenda concerned with human rights, gay rights, gay marriage and parenting.

Two chapters in particular are of interest with regard to current debates around sexual adventurism.

1. Chapter 5, Don't Fuck with Gay Culture, in which Rofes envisions a 'post AIDS' gay culture as one that moves away from the extreme narrative polemics of gay social critics such as Larry Kramer, Michelangelo Signorile and Gabrielle Rotello: "Here I consider coming to terms with the AIDS epidemic, not in the way Larry Kramer suggests ('We must stop murdering each other'), but in a manner by which we truly face history and ourselves, and come to understand gay men as neither heroes-without-precedent nor villains-without-comparison, but as ordinary humans confronting a catastrophic event and getting on with their lives." He argues that gay commentators that see gay sexual practice in black and white terms of sexual responsibility versus hedonism and abandon are failing to recognise the depth and diversity in gay culture.
2. Chapter 6, Scapegoating Circuit Boys, where Rofes describes: "Queers who structure their social and sexual relations in patterns approximating heterosexual family life and those who do not [as being] increasingly at odds over the organization of communal life and priorities for political action. How wide can the gap get without shattering our illusion of a unified community?" He dissects the phenomenon of demonising 'Circuit Boys' (gay men who habitually attend gay circuit parties) and scapegoating them as one way of separating them from the 'mainstream' of gay life and the legitimate social agendas of "gays in the military and gay marriage" as in the following quote: "Those standing up for sexual freedom are neither lost in a romanticized vision of the golden age of the 1970s, nor the dick-hungry men who are selfishly seeking more power and more privilege as our critics have claimed. We have been condescendingly characterized as immature children who haven't grown up who need to get with the times, put our pricks back in our pants, and apply our energies to the real challenges facing our communities, like gays in the military or gay marriage." This chapter argues that resistance to this narrative is essential if the vitality of our community is to be preserved.

Rofes, E. (1998). *Dry bones breathe: Gay men creating post-AIDS identities and cultures*. New York: The Haworth Press.

Summary points

- Far from being a bunch of 'sex-obsessed, irresponsible freaks' whose shadowy culture is cloaked in shame, guilt and self-hatred, what we call 'sexual adventurism' is regularly engaged in by gay men of every stripe who are generally well informed, generally in control, and operating with a sense of sexual ethics. Further, they are not a discreet, sequestered group but rather gay men who move in and out of these scenes at will as need and desire dictate.
- It would appear that the most significant deficit with regard to sexual adventurism lies in the understandings of those scenes and networks within community-based organizations themselves. In addition, we need to understand them as not merely environments where transmission of HIV and other STIs might occur but rather as sites of sexual fraternalism, transgression and pleasure.
- Sexually adventurous men are not an homogenized hermetically sealed, troubled sub-population of gay citizenry desperately in need of 'help'.
- Many of the men who regularly engage in sexually adventurous scenes may be, at best, ambivalent about the intervention of health promotion from community-based organisations and at worst hostile and mistrustful.
- The so-called mainstream gay community may have established an unworkable binary opposition to men who engage in what they would consider irresponsible, aberrant behaviours antagonistic to societal acceptance of the LGBTI communities' broader social and political agendas.