


Sexual Self-Schemas of Gay Men: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract

Self-schemas derive from past experience, influence current experiences, and facilitate the processing of sexual information. Using this concept, this study addressed the following question: How do gay men understand their own sexual self-schemas? Perspectives of 20 gay men were drawn together using a grounded theory methodology and member checking. A seven-category model emerged depicting the behaviors and values participants described as the gay male sexual schema (e.g., Avoidance of Emotional Expression; Pornography and Sexual Orientation Identity; Physically Attractive Men; Managing Sex and Social Perception; Competition for Men; Sex, Emotion, and Intimacy; and Commitment and Work in Relationships). In addition, all participants discussed a process of sexual self-schema transition over time. The resulting model may be used in counseling and in social justice and advocacy to produce adaptive changes for gay male clients.

Keywords

gender, LGBT, multiculturalism, qualitative, race/ethnicity

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Cognitive theories suggest that self-schemas, or representations of the self, serve as filters through which people organize information. Schemas are used to interpret one's responses to the world (Markus, 1977), and are therefore relevant to many mental health treatments (e.g., Kihlstrom & Cantor, 1983; Markus & Zajonc, 1985) and to understanding cultural context (Ramírez-Esparza, Chung, Sierra-Otero, & Pennebaker, 2012). Self-schemas are associated with attachment (Mikulincer, 1995) and personality (e.g., Pomerance & Converse, 2014), becoming more complex with experience (Bowlby, 1969, 1980).

The influence of schemas on the organization of information is particularly relevant to a man's view of himself as a sexual person. In this case, the sexual self-schema is a generalization about the sexual aspects of oneself. Sexual self-schemas are manifest in current experience; they guide sexual behavior and influence the processing of sexually relevant information (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994). The sexual schema, or sexual self-view, has been defined as the sum of cognitive scripts and generalizations about one's own sexuality.

There are no models that outline possible components of sexual minority men's sexual self-schemas. For heterosexual men, the first fully developed articulation of the sexual self-schema was a theoretical one, lacking empirical support. In his book, *The Centerfold Syndrome*, Brooks (1995) outlined five heterosexual male sexual self-schemas that he observed over 30 years of counseling men of diverse backgrounds. The premise behind Brooks' thesis was that there are highly dysfunctional aspects of sexual schemas that make it difficult for heterosexual men to establish intimate relationships and sexually gratifying lives. He described a constellation of five interconnected schemas comprising traditional male heterosexuality: Voyeurism, Objectification, Need for Validation, Trophyism, and Fear of True Intimacy and Engulfment.

Gay Masculinities

How might the five components described by Brooks be conceptualized within the context of gay men's masculinity? There is limited understanding of the psychology of gay men and masculinity (Sánchez, Vilain, Westefeld, & Liu, 2010). Most of the research examining masculine gender role socialization has focused on presumably heterosexual men. The common thought process of equating masculinity with heterosexuality, a phenomenon that Pronger (1990) called *heteromascularity*, belies the fact that masculinity is a multidimensional phenomenon.

In the following section, we summarize studies that have described how socialized masculinity may influence gay men's relationships and sexuality.

Topics are organized according to themes of *The Centerfold Syndrome* (Brooks, 1995) to form an initial heuristic of possible components of the sexual self-schemas of gay men. Additional elements unique to gay men's experiences are also described.

Voyeurism

The *Voyeurism* theme of *The Centerfold Syndrome* (Brooks, 1995) underlines that pornography exposure appears normative for men. Seventy-two percent of heterosexual men and 98% of gay men reported having viewed pornography within a 30-day period (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). It seems that gay pornography can be a tool for both learning and validation about sex between men, as well as a source of negative self-image and body image (Corneau & van der Meulen, 2014). Some have asserted that gay pornography destigmatizes gay sex by affirming and validating same-sex affection and helps to break down isolation of sexual minorities (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Ellis & Whitehead, 2004; Kendall, 2004). However, others have found that images of gay manhood are highly exclusionary and focused on youth, muscularity, non-Latino Whiteness, and physical attractiveness (Kendall, 1997; Morrison, 2004).

Objectification

Brooks (1995) described the effects of *Objectification*, or seeing women as sexual objects rather than individuals. However, *The Centerfold Syndrome* did not address men's objectification of their own bodies, which is a significant influence in the lives of gay men. The emphasis on appearance and objectification in gay subculture has elicited a unique focus upon one's body as a marker of masculinity (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009). An example of male self-objectification is the focus on muscularity. Both gay and heterosexual men desire to be leaner and more muscular (Martins, Tiggemann, & Churchett, 2008), but this desire is amplified in gay men, as evidenced by greater discrepancies between their current and ideal levels of body weight and muscularity (Martins et al., 2008).

Need for Validation and Trophyism

Research examining gay men's desire for sexual validation from their sex partners, and the significance of the attractiveness of sex partners, resembles *the Need for Validation and Trophyism* components of Brooks' (1995) model. Within gay masculinities, having sex with physically attractive partners leads

men to experience validation of their manhood (Green, 2008, 2011; Varangis, Lanzieri, Hildebrandt, & Feldman, 2012). The presence of an attractive body is treated as visual indication of the masculinity of the partner (including his financial success, sexual performance, athletic prowess, and courage). In gay masculinities, a man's sexual capital (and sexual attractiveness) may be related to race. Gay men of color may face additional stress from within the gay community in the form of the premium placed on non-Latino White men's bodies as attractive, making it difficult to find other men to date and with whom to form long-term relationships (Green, 2008; Han, 2008).

Fear of True Intimacy and Engulfment

Emotional inexpressiveness and fear of vulnerability resemble the fifth and final component of the model: *Fear of True Intimacy and Engulfment* (Brooks, 1995). An outgrowth of men's basic problems with attachment, power, and competition (Blazina, Eddins, Burrige, & Settle, 2007), this theme is characterized by a fear of becoming too emotionally vulnerable. Avoidance of vulnerability may be compounded by distress related to masculinity socialization, leaving gay men with painful affective states (Blazina, 2004) and deficient coping strategies (Blazina, 2001; Ridge, Plummer, & Peasley, 2006). Avoiding emotional vulnerability also has deleterious effects on gay men's relationship satisfaction and longevity, which have been shown to be predicted by emotional connection and emotional disclosure (Boyd, 1994; Gottman et al., 2003; Jones, 1991; Kurdek, 1998; McCabe, 1999; Savelis & Lamke, 1992).

Internalized Heterosexism

Internalized heterosexism, not a component of *The Centerfold Syndrome*, may uniquely affect gay men's sexual self-schemas. *Heterosexism* has been described as "the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community" (Herek, 1995, p. 321). *Internalized heterosexism*, or internalization of these negative societal messages, often results from living in contexts that promote these attitudes (Allen & Oleson, 1999). For gay men, internalized heterosexism dramatically shapes masculine identity, in part due to the importance of appearing heteromale. For instance, gay men rated masculine gay men as significantly more likeable than feminine gay men (Skidmore, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2006) and, on average, wished to be more masculine than they perceived themselves to be (Sánchez et al., 2010). Within gay culture, the term "straight-acting" is often used to describe gay men who reproduce a version of

masculinity that is more authentically heteromasculine (Clarkson, 2006). In this case, being “straight-acting” is a rejection of the feminine traits so often attributed to gay men.

Changes in Masculinity

Brooks' (1995) model does not include descriptions of how sexual self-schemas shift over the course of the life span. Although men appear relatively fixed in sexual orientation identity over the life span (Mock & Eibach, 2012; Ross, Daneback, & Mansson, 2012), they may express this sexual orientation differently as they experience changes in their masculinity ideologies. It may be that, as men expand their ideas about manhood, their sexual self-schemas within their sexual orientation may also change, including desired partner traits, preferred sexual practices, and valued relationship characteristics. For example, regardless of chronological age, as gay men eventually begin to explore their sexual orientation identity and learn relational skills, they may go through the developmental steps of a “second adolescence” (Michael, 1997). Many gay men eventually learn relationship skills later in life through ongoing identity development (Bertone & Camoletto, 2009; Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2007; LaSala, 2004; Lehmler, 2010).

Current Study

The current study examined the sexual self-schemas of gay men. *Sexual self-schema* was defined as a cognitive generalization of one's own sexual characteristics that derives from past experience, guides current experiences, and facilitates the processing of sexual information (Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994). This study also took into account sexual minority men's constructions of gender and masculinity as related to their sexual orientation identities and unique concepts of what it means to be a man.

To delve into the complexities and processes of male sexuality, a grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was selected to elicit subjective understandings and interpretations. The majority of research on the study of men and masculinity (more than 80%) relies solely on quantitative methods, and nearly 60% of these studies are correlational (Whorley & Addis, 2006). This may lead to a general tendency of placing importance or value only on those phenomena that can be quantified. Qualitative research methods can “more clearly capture the complexity and meaningfulness of human behavior and experience” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 199). The goal of this grounded theory study was to create a model of gay male sexual self-schema grounded in participants' experiences.

Although gay and bisexual men may share experiences of oppression related to sexual prejudice, other privileged or oppressed identities may compound these experiences (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002). Gay and bisexual men of color may experience additional oppressive forces, including racial prejudice, limited economic resources, and limited acceptance within their own cultural community (Battle & Lemelle, 2002; Bridges, Selvidge, & Matthews, 2003; Diaz, 1998). Therefore, it is important to not make generalizations about sexual minority people of color based on research conducted on primarily non-Latino White individuals (Greene, 2000b). Given the negative contextual influences upon racial minority mental health and the potential for such negative forces to lead to variation in research findings (Greene, 2000a; Martinez & Sullivan, 1998), this study equally integrated the life experiences of both racial and ethnic minority gay men.

Method

Researcher Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers acknowledge the benefit and existence of subjectivity and attempt to explore or manage biases through reflexivity (Williams & Morrow, 2009). Grounded theory researchers often disclose how they are uniquely positioned to the subject. This allows the reader to assess how and to what extent the researcher's assumptions have informed the research (Charmaz, 2006; Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2002). All authors identify as non-Latino White individuals who are committed to multiculturalism and social justice. The primary researcher identifies as a gay man whose perspective that gender oppression is inextricably bound with sexual prejudice (Rottnek, 1991; Wood, 2004) was formed in the context of a religious, political, and gendered environment (Rottnek, 1999; Wood, 2004). Throughout the research process, he recorded his reactions and biases in a self-reflective journal. The second author identifies as a radical feminist with prior research examining the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. She is an experienced qualitative researcher and methodologist. The primary investigator chose the third author for his ability to represent an additional viewpoint on this topic. He identifies as a heterosexual, feminist man who is a retired professor in private practice.

The primary investigator was also aided in his self-reflective process by participating in a qualitative research team, whose meetings were distinct from those he held with the two co-authors. This research team met monthly and was composed of approximately six individuals who were also conducting qualitative research. These meetings provided an opportunity for peer

debriefing and examination of the research process, as recommended by LeCompte and Goetz (1982).

Participants

All 20 participants identified as gay. Ten participants identified as non-Latino White (hereafter referred to as White), three as Black, three as Latino, one as Native American, one as Indian, one as Asian, and one as Pacific Islander. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 50, with a mean age of 34 and median of 36. Five of the participants were in a committed nonmarital relationship (two men of color and three White), two were married, one was widowed, one was polyamorous, and 11 were single. Six of the interviewees had obtained a high school diploma, seven had a bachelor's degree, four had a master's degree, two had a PhD, and one had a JD. Nine indicated agnostic as their religious affiliation, whereas four indicated "spiritual," two were Christian, one was Buddhist, one was Catholic, one was Hindu, one was atheist, and one was unsure. The majority of participants (17) were open regarding their sexual orientation to all, and three were open to some (for example, not out to their families or coworkers).

Procedure

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board, research participants were recruited in a midsize city in the western United States with a predominantly non-Latino White population. Advertisements were placed in a wide range of locations, including community centers, civic centers, and recreation centers, as well as electronic postings in gay-oriented online communities for men in the surrounding area. Advertisements called for participants for a study on gay men's romantic relationships. Interested participants called the primary investigator, who described the purpose and scope of the study and scheduled an appointment for an interview. The primary investigator discussed informed consent in detail at the beginning of the interview, with an emphasis on confidentiality. After an interviewee signed the consent form, digital audio recording began. All participants chose their own pseudonyms.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to balance as much as possible age, religious background, race and ethnicity, relationship status, education, and socioeconomic standing. The selection strategy used was maximum variation sampling, in which participants with the most divergent forms of the experience were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990). Maximum variation was achieved by selecting participants from among those who responded to ads to gather data from participants from a wide range of backgrounds (Creswell, 2007). The strength of this approach is that any

common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core, central, shared aspects of a phenomenon. The number of participants was determined by data saturation. Participants were sought until information gathered from interviews no longer deepened or contradicted previous data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data included individual interviews, one focus group, and the primary investigator's self-reflections and memos. The 20 individual interviews were conducted over the span of 3 months. Data were analyzed continually as collected through individual interviews. The focus group was held at the end of the third month. The overall model was revealed to members of the focus group, who approved the authors' conceptualization of the data as representative of their perspectives.

Twenty interviewees each participated in one 60-90 min, in-person individual interview held in a private office space. Interviewees were given \$10 as compensation for their time. The interview followed a semistructured format guided by two open-ended questions: "How do you see other gay men dealing with their relationships with men (emotional, physical, spiritual)?" and "Please tell me about your relationships with men and boys over your lifetime, both friendships and romantic relationships." The primary investigator responded with auxiliary questions to further explore interviewee's experiences, as well as empathic reflection and active listening (for example, "What did you think then?" or "Could you tell me more about your thoughts after that?"). These questions were asked to understand participants' own experiences and the meanings they had made of other men's experiences in relationships. The interviews were digitally audio recorded. Following the verbatim transcription of all interviews by the primary investigator, all interviewees were sent a copy of their interview to check for congruence with their perceptions, to ensure their confidentiality was protected, and to add or omit any information in any part of their interviews.

After individual interviews had been conducted, all interviewees were invited to participate in a 2-hr focus group, which was led by the primary investigator. Six participants (three men of color and three White men) chose to attend and were given \$10 as compensation for their time. The focus group provided for participant feedback and reflection on whether their perceptions were adequately reflected in the emerging analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The group session included a presentation of the emerging analysis. Focus group members unanimously confirmed the model developed from their interviews. Data from the focus group included participants' handwritten notes from the discussion and the primary investigator's memos, which were used to further refine the model. The primary investigator's self-reflections while gathering and analyzing data formed a chronological recounting of the study. Documenting

this process made transparent the interpretive, constructive processes of the data analysis, including evolving ideas, hunches, insights, feelings, and uncertainties, as well as provided a record of the conceptual, procedural, and analytic questions and decisions (Fassinger, 2005).

Data Analysis

The primary investigator consulted continuously with the two secondary authors for ongoing feedback on codes and emerging categories, as well as the final theoretical model. Data analysis was conducted according to a three-step method of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the first level, *open coding*, data sources were divided into segments of text (words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) that contained a single concept. These segments were then gathered into categories and given labels that reflected their underlying meanings. Then, during *axial coding*, categories were examined and combined into more overarching categories. Relationships among categories were evaluated by looking for commonalities between them to determine interrelationships (Fassinger, 2005). In the final stage of analysis, *selective coding*, two central or “core” categories, one that expressed the primary themes and the other that described a process, were chosen; these core categories integrated all of the other categories into a whole. A brief narrative was formed of the most important aspects of the data, subsuming all of the other categories and articulating their relationships to the core model. Credibility of this qualitative study was achieved through a triangulation of data sources, including participant checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Morrow & Smith, 2000). The audit trail included a chronological recounting of the research process, pre-study understandings, interviews, transcription, initial coding notes, and documentation of how the model of gay male sexual self-schema evolved.

Results

Twenty participants (10 White men and 10 men of color) were interviewed to discuss their own romantic and sexual experiences, as well as how they viewed those of other gay men. Following data analysis, seven categories of the model of sexual self-schemas of gay men were indicated. In addition to these seven categories, data analysis also captured a process of sexual self-schema change over time. These seven categories, as well as the process, titled “The Process of Gay Male Sexual Self-schema Transition,” are described in the following paragraphs. Categories are illustrated using quotes from participants, whose pseudonyms and racial/ethnic identities are identified.

Sexual Self-Schemas of Gay Men

Avoidance of emotional expression. Sixteen men discussed avoiding emotional expression or talking about feelings. For example, Jess (White) said, "I'm not a talker, as far as that goes. Talking about feelings. I kind of have a shell when it comes to that kind of stuff." This category emerged in discussing the importance of gay men appearing "straight-acting," or heteromasculine, through being emotionally inexpressive, as well as discomfort with men who were emotionally expressive. Interviewees described emotional expressiveness as closely tied to gender performance, specifically as related to effeminate men. Ned (White) explained,

It's kind of femme-phobic. It has to do with gender and gender identity and gender roles. And I have totally seen masculine, or more straight-acting gay guys, ripping on more emotional types of guys . . . I can't see why there's anything threatening about someone who's expressing himself.

Comfort talking about emotion appeared to vary by participants' cultural backgrounds. Interviewees believed men who were not open about their sexual orientation identity and men from conservative, religious backgrounds were most likely to endorse a higher degree of avoidance of talking about emotion with other men. Latino and Black men described that their cultures endorsed comparatively higher intolerance of emotional talk than White culture, whereas Native American and Pacific Islander interviewees described a greater acceptance of talking about emotions within their own communities than in majority culture.

Pornography and sexual orientation identity. Jess (White) recounted, "Even since I was little, I've been looking at porn, it's just who I've always been. It's kind of part of who I am, I guess." Fifteen interviewees explained that, during adolescence, they initially learned about gay sex through viewing pornography. For example, Joe (Latino) said, "Porn was like a TV school for sex." Interviewees explained that pornography clarified the technicalities of sex while also normalizing the idea of physical intimacy with another man. The partnered interviewees described incorporating activities learned through viewing pornography into their sexual relationship or using pornography as a way to begin discussions with their partners about sexual matters.

Ten interviewees described pornography as an acceptable, frequent part of their lives. However, five participants felt that pornography instilled in them unrealistic expectations about the duration and frequency of sex, and overemphasized the importance of sex in gay relationships. Participants also recounted that gender performance in pornography emphasized that attractive men behave

in traditionally masculine ways. Jayke (White) described gay pornography as “masculinity all the way: bigger, better, longer, taller, wider, stronger.” There were also implications for race, gay culture, and pornography, as most men of color described a lack of representation of actors of color; in fact, the Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Indian interviewees all expressed being troubled by the lack of pornography depicting men of their racial backgrounds.

Physically attractive men. All participants recounted that, in the gay community, being attractive was of utmost importance. Collin (White) explained that being attractive was “a form of currency” that could be traded not only for the attention of other attractive men for sex or relationships, but for a wide range of opportunities, including occupational advantages, social power, and the most desirable sex partner. Twelve of the 20 interviewees stated that the most attractive part of a man was his face, or facial features, such as eyes or smile. Eighteen said they were exclusively attracted to gay men who were “straight-acting,” or heteromuscular, and none said they were attracted to effeminate men. Traits that were considered heteromuscular included a muscular and physically fit body, a deep voice, a self-assured gait, body hair, a traditionally male style of dress, making direct eye contact, and having mannerisms (such as hand movements and holding one’s head steady and forward) that were equated with traditional masculinity.

Seventeen interviewees stated they were primarily attracted to White men. Seven of the men of color stated they were not attracted to other minority men and have exclusively dated White men. For example, Brett (Latino) said, “I’m just not attracted to Hispanic men . . . generally, I’ve only been attracted to Caucasian men. And I don’t know why that is.” Although most did not share an explanation for this primary physical attraction to White men, Jay (Latino) said it may have to do with seeking what is “normal”:

I only generally date White people . . . I think it has to do with race. I can’t seem to be attracted to ethnic people. And I think maybe that has to do with me being ethnic, I guess. I want something that’s sort of the opposite, almost. And dare I say, normal . . . I think here, White is so prevalent that it’s almost normal to be with a White person.

Nine of the 10 men of color stated that it had been difficult finding White men to date because White men most often only dated other White men.

Managing sex and social perception. Interviewees described having used sex to bolster others’ self-confidence and discussed the importance of managing

others' perceptions of how frequently they had sex. First, all interviewees disclosed that they had reluctantly engaged in sex at some point to avoid hurting their sexual partners' feelings. That is, rather than telling someone they were unwilling to have sex or did not find him attractive, interviewees had agreed to sex because it would be a brief, one-time encounter that would avoid a negative emotional reaction. When asked why he had had sex with someone when he did not want to, Ned (White) summed up a very commonly given answer, "I call it 'charity work.' I didn't tell them I didn't want to because I was trying to be sensitive to their feelings."

Fifteen interviewees avoided being perceived as promiscuous by refraining from talking with peers about their sexual activities, except with a few very close friends in a private setting. Most interviewees explained that, if a gay man has had sex with a number of men, regardless of the level of attractiveness of the sexual partners, that man would be considered a "slut." When asked when and with whom gay men share information about sex, Bentley (Black) remarked,

I can't think of a time . . . I just can't think of anyone talking about, "Oh, somebody was so good in bed." Honestly, if it were talked about, everyone would perceive them as being a slut, so it wouldn't necessarily be perceived as a positive thing in the gay world.

Competition for men. Interviewees explained that most gay men find the same physical features to be attractive (e.g., tall, muscular body, White, etc.), leading to a sense of competition for the most attractive potential partners. Having an attractive boyfriend may be the most important way to measure one's own attractiveness, feel a sense of acceptance, and gain social power. Jayke (White) said,

It's a fierce competition . . . Having a hot boyfriend also means you're hot yourself. The attractive men in the gay community would only settle for someone who at least matches that sense of outward appeal. In a way, they're reflecting back what they're worth.

Partnered interviewees and men who had been in long-term relationships described wanting their partners to maintain an attractive appearance. Several men discussed relationship conflict emerging from differing levels of fitness, their partners' expectations of their own exercise, or falling short of their partner's body image ideals. For the majority of participants, the most important audience from whom to gain strokes for having an attractive partner was gay peers.

Sex, emotion, and intimacy. Eighteen participants described emotional intimacy as “risky”—putting one in an exposed, vulnerable position from which he could be exploited. As Joe (Latino) said, “You have to be careful. People can take advantage of that if you express or you open up too much.” Because of this threat, interviewees described the importance of separating emotional connection from sex and a dichotomized ability to have sex without feeling emotionally close. Physical intimacy posed less of a threat of vulnerability than emotional disclosure, and interviewees explained that they had learned that sex could be used in place of verbal and/or emotional expression.

Participants recounted that sex may also serve as a means to build trust with a partner, which would lead to emotional disclosure. For example, 13 interviewees pointed out that gay men often had sex on the first or second date as a way of getting to know one another and to see if the physical connection would lead to an emotional connection or a long-term, romantic relationship. Bentley (Black) said, “Within the gay world, there’s always sex first and get to know you later, versus getting to know one another first . . . actually going out on dates . . . before sex.” Interviewees explained that emotional disclosure, rather than sex, indicated an investment in a future relationship.

Sex could also be used to cope with difficult emotions without having to emotionally disclose. Six participants explained they often had sex to feel comforted, temporarily soothing their lack of self-worth or loneliness, rather than talking about difficult feelings. They feared that being emotionally open about problems would lead to being perceived by others as “unmasculine,” “clingy,” “needy,” “girly,” “pathetic,” or “dependent.”

Commitment and work in relationships. The title of this category came from a phrase used repeatedly by eight participants to describe the most critical factors of long-lasting and satisfying relationships: commitment and work. First, the interviewees described a commitment to continually resolve challenges to remain together. This involved recognizing that difficulties were temporary and did not indicate an end to the relationship. Ben (White) explained,

There are still things that drive you crazy. But the things that drive you crazy, you have perspective on it. In past relationships, if something would drive me crazy, everything they did, I would think, “Is this the time that I decide to leave?” And the difference is, now, when those times come up, I can say, “Oh, this sucks . . . right now.”

Second, making relationships function well involved continual work on one’s personal character development. Jess (White) explained, “I think the work part of the relationship has to do with dealing with your own emotions,

to be perfectly honest.” The most often mentioned element of “work” was learning how to communicate honestly about one’s own emotions.

The Process of Gay Male Sexual Self-Schema Transition

As interviewees described these seven categories, and while maintaining the planned interview protocol, they also discussed how cognitive representations of themselves, sex, and relationships had changed with experience. This process became an adjunct component of the sexual self-schema of gay men. Because this was not a static quality of the sexual self-schema, as the other categories were, the authors coded this data as a *process*. The process of gay male sexual self-schema transition is a sexual-relational, self-identity model theorized in terms of three domains. These included Experiential Factors, Mediating Cultural Influences, and Valued Relationship Characteristics. Each of the domains is described in the following paragraphs.

Experiential factors. Sexual self-schema transition involved an early period of sexual exploration, a first relationship, and for some interviewees, negotiating open relationships.

Period of sexual exploration. All participants explained that, when a gay man begins to openly acknowledge his sexual orientation, independent of his chronological age, he might go through a period of increased sexual activity. Justin (Asian) explained that during this phase, gay men might date and have nonrelational sex frequently:

If you’re a new gay and just trying to figure things out . . . and what kinds of guys you like to date . . . It’s just the hook up phase. But you grow out of it; it’s a phase that everyone goes through. Because [you have been] so sexually repressed.

Gay men may explore a range of potential romantic partners and sexual activities to discover what is most enjoyable. They may also use this experience to form realistic expectations for sexual performance and determine the roles and responsibilities they prefer in a relationship.

The first relationship. Twelve of the men discussed their first relationship as pivotal to learning about themselves as sexual beings and how relationships worked. The first relationship was described as the first moment they were identifiable as gay by other gay men and others in their lives. Stories of gay men’s first relationships included difficult experiences, such as emotional,

physical, and sexual abuse, and learning to recognize inappropriate relationship behavior. Participants recounted that their first relationship symbolized a period of significant personal growth, including becoming less self-focused and more empathic, and discovering what they hoped to find in a partner. In some cases, interviewees mentioned that their first boyfriend remained a friend over time because of the significant developmental experiences they shared.

Negotiating open relationships. All interviewees described a high frequency of open relationships among gay men. They attributed this to the lack of emphasis on monogamy in gay culture, the lack of legal marriage rights, and the importance of sex to gay men. The eight men who were married or in committed, long-term relationships mentioned that one of the most difficult developmental decisions for gay men was the decision whether to have an open relationship. Six participants (ages 38-50, five of the six of whom were White) were in a relationship that was currently nonmonogamous or had been open at some point. Those with open relationships shared that, at a point in their relationship, they had had a candid dialogue about establishing an open relationship, as well as the rules that would surround this agreement. These dialogues were often challenging because, in some cases, one partner wanted the open relationship more than the other, or the couple hoped an open relationship would help them overcome relationship difficulties, such as infidelity, sexual stagnancy, or personality conflict. Men who reported having open relationships for a number of years pointed out that, over time, having extrarelational sex became more rare.

Mediating cultural influences. Two cultural factors influenced gay men's self-schema transition: the growing social acceptance of homosexuality and increased cultural emphasis on muscularity.

Social acceptance of homosexuality. Eleven men discussed how social acceptance of gay men had changed their self-acceptance over time. For example, seven of the men of color described how the eventual acceptance of their sexuality by family members, who were not initially accepting, positively influenced their own self-esteem. Older interviewees pointed out that increased acceptance of homosexuality by mainstream culture changed the way gay men expressed sexuality. Collin explained that whereas gay men had once met one another in covert and overtly gay spaces, as they were integrated into mainstream culture, they began meeting through friends or in nonexclusively gay spaces, such as "straight clubs."

Increased cultural emphasis on muscularity. Participants indicated that the importance of muscularity seemed to be increasing over time, which they attributed to increased media focus on muscularity and the use of men's bodies in advertising. Interviewees said that gay men equated muscularity with being "straight-acting" and attractive, and muscular men were sought as sexual and romantic partners. For example, when asked about what made a sexual encounter "good," 14 of the interviewees stated that sex with an attractive, muscular man is generally considered the best sex. Participants explained they were, for the most part, dissatisfied with their bodies and knew increasing numbers of gay men who used steroids.

Valued relationship characteristics. Interviewees described how, through a process of sexual self-schema transition, they placed increased importance on finding a partner who was developmentally similar to oneself, came out for the sake of their relationship, and placed less emphasis on appearance.

Increasing importance of finding someone developmentally similar. Eight participants underlined that it had become increasingly important to them to find a romantic partner who is developmentally similar in terms of sexual orientation identity. Interviewees explained that being developmentally in step during the initial stages of coming out may be less important because of a strong emphasis on sex and physical attractiveness in relationships. However, when looking for a long-term partner, it became increasingly important to find other gay men who had gone through important developmental milestones, including coming out, resolving religious and family issues, and having prior relationship experiences. Jayke (White) stated,

I went on a date on Saturday. We had dinner, and the whole time we were talking about his relationship with his parents, his relationship with God. Is he ok with who he is? When did he come out? I'm thinking about where they are in, like, their development.

The fact that a potential partner was developmentally behind was often cited as a reason for a relationship's dissolution.

Coming out for the sake of the relationship. All interviewees pointed out that maintaining a healthy romantic relationship necessitated coming out because inconsistent degrees of sexual identity disclosure can interfere with the relationship. Coming out often included establishing self-confidence, building emotional stability, and confronting difficult personal problems. In some cases, a romantic relationship may provide the impetus and social support

necessary for coming out because of the need to explain to others the nature of their relationship with their partner. Brett (Latino) explained,

If this relationship was going to work and I was going to have a committed relationship, I finally had to come out to my family and friends; because I couldn't hide this person from them and lie about who he is.

Decreased emphasis on appearance. Despite a cultural emphasis on muscularity, five interviewees reported that the importance placed on their own and others' appearance diminished with time. They suggested that life experiences, such as being in a long-term, committed relationship, or increased social acceptance, may be accompanied by a decrease in the importance placed on physical attractiveness and less competition for attention. In fact, 13 interviewees expressed that, with time, they began to avoid dating attractive men because attractive men made difficult partners and tended to have more character flaws, such as being "insecure," "arrogant," or unfaithful to their partners.

Discussion

This research provides critical support for the capacity for change in gay men's sexual self-schemas as a result of developmental processes, relationship experiences, and expansion of ideas about masculinity. This process contradicts assumptions about sexual self-schema (e.g., Andersen, Cyranowski, & Espindle, 1999) and masculinity (e.g., Sánchez, Greenberg, Liu, & Vilain, 2009; Van Hyfte & Rabinowitz, 2001) as a stable set of traits that have a consistent effect on a person's behavior. Even among members of the same sexual orientation group, sexual self-schema categories varied by developmental phase, by experience and insight, and by cultural background. Emphasis on physical attractiveness (i.e., facial features and masculine presentation) in oneself and others, which contributed to selecting partners who were similar in attractiveness to oneself and accruing sexual capital, diminished with age for participants in this study. Overall, little has been written describing the factors that contribute to committed gay relationships. This study suggests there is more to examine regarding how men overcome relationship conflict to stay together. Within the context of a romantic relationship, others have found that men are able to somewhat relax masculine norms (Wester, Pionke, & Vogel, 2005), including those surrounding emotional self-disclosure and physical attractiveness.

Participants described a complex set of issues associated with avoiding emotional intimacy, which is distinct from previous research about gay men.

Participants voiced a conflict between a desire for emotional connection and avoidance of vulnerability. Consequently, the results of this study suggested that gay men may have casual sex to have a sense of intimacy without the vulnerability associated with emotional disclosure and may compartmentalize sex and emotion. According to participants in this study, sex may also serve as a bridge to establish the necessary security and trust to facilitate eventual emotional disclosure. Interviewees' comments support research suggesting that gay men may minimize the importance of emotional disclosure because of its association with femininity (Reisen et al., 2012). This is noteworthy because gay men who are extremely conscious about masculinity and inhibit emotional disclosure also report negative self-stigma about their sexual orientation (Haldeman, 2006; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012).

In some cases, our results are consistent with those of previous studies. For instance, the majority of sexual self-schema categories articulated by the participants were similar to those described by heterosexual men (Elder, Brooks, & Morrow, 2012), indicating gay men embody masculinity in a fashion that is structurally similar to their heterosexual counterparts (e.g., Estrada, Rigali-Oiler, Arciniega, & Tracey, 2011; Kozak, Frankenhauser, & Roberts, 2009). However, there were important differences in the situational context in which these categories were enacted. For example, gay men may adopt sexual values and behaviors (e.g., an emphasis on a muscular appearance, or separating emotion from sex) as a strategy to overcome oppressive forces (Estrada et al., 2011). This suggests that the relationship between masculinity and sexual self-schemas for gay men is an interactive process with differing consequences depending on context (Wester & Vogel, 2012). These variations suggest that, contrary to previous conceptualizations, it is not possible to describe a singular male sexual self-schema. Even among members of the same sexual orientation group, sexual self-schema elements varied by developmental phase, experience and insight, and cultural background.

As suggested by participants, pornography is used abundantly by gay men (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). Critics of gay male pornography have associated viewing pornography with altered perceptions of gay men's own sexual desirability (Harris, 1997; Kendall, 2004; Signorile, 1997). However, only drive for muscularity has been found to correlate positively with exposure to pornography (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Morrison, Morrison, & Bradley, 2007). Participants in this study indicated positive effects of pornography, including learning about gay sex, validation, and stimulating conversation between partners. However, gay men of color found pornography to be less relevant because of their inability to identify with all-White actors.

Data from interviewees of color in this study generally were congruent with the White participants, although there were several notable findings.

Gay participants of color struggled to find their place in gay masculinity, which is a culture that often discriminates against them, while also trying to maintain a sense of social support from family and their ethnic/racial community. This experience of visibility and invisibility of sexual orientation identity is illustrated in instances when gay men of color may identify as gay when they are in the context of a gay bar, but not when they are with their families or communities of color (Zea, Reisen, & Diaz, 2003). For gay men of color, a need for connection with their racial/ethnic communities may compete with a desire to align with the values of gay masculinities, resulting in psychological distress (Wade, 1998; Wester & Vogel, 2012). As men of color use White gay men as their reference group, they seem to be especially vulnerable to negative self-schema messages (Woolgar & Tranah, 2010), negative perceptions of their own and other gay men of colors' attractiveness, and negative outcomes, because those skills, perceptions, and values may be racist and exclusionary (Carter, Williams, Juby, & Buckley, 2005; Fragoso & Kashubeck, 2000; Wester, Vogel, Wei, & McLain, 2006). Participants expressed relief and greater self-acceptance when they felt acceptance from their families. This is congruent with research suggesting that, for gay men of color, achieving a positive, integrated identity related to both their ethnicity and sexual orientation resulted in higher self-esteem, stronger social support, greater life satisfaction, and less distress (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002).

Limitations and Implications for Research

A potential shortcoming of this study involved a sample of generally younger men from a specific geographical region. Perspectives from different age groups may have highlighted generational differences. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are also tempered by its sampling strategy. For example, gay men recruited from gay community venues may differ from gay men recruited using probability sampling on relevant variables such as gay community affiliation and internalized homophobia (Meyer & Colten, 1999). Participants were all from the same geographical area, which was a midsized western city that did not contain significant racial/ethnic diversity and was characterized by a conservative political environment. Gay masculinity values and sexual self-schemas may vary contextually depending on geographic location, demographic make-up, and political leanings, including variation in the degree of importance men assign to attractiveness and physical qualities of a potential partner (Sharp, Elliott, & Zvonkovic, 2011) and emphasis on monogamy in long-term relationships.

Another limitation was that the focus group feedback regarding the emerging theoretical model was based on the feedback of only six out of the total 20 participants. It was impossible to determine how this may have affected the final results. However, the unanimity of the participants who were available for follow-up led us to believe that the model was credible. Future research could utilize individual follow-up interviews to maximize participation.

Implications for Clinical and Social Justice Work

These data suggest that discussions about how hegemonic gay masculinity affects clients' current concerns about sex and relationships may be relevant to mental health treatment. Psychotherapy may be an important opportunity to identify behaviors that promote committed, satisfying relationships and promote awareness of those that are harmful to gay men's core identity formation. For example, given the pressure participants reported to appear muscular, clinicians may find it appropriate to discuss the impact of masculine ideals on gay men's self-image and explore how standards of attraction endorsed in gay communities affect them, including assessing for body fat dissatisfaction and muscle dissatisfaction (Parent, 2013). Clients may also find it helpful to discuss gender role conflict, negative feedback from a dominant socioculture (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999), and lack of gender diversity within gay culture (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Sánchez et al., 2010). Concerns based in gay masculinity may contribute to an increased risk for multiple health issues, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and sexual risk behaviors (Meyer, 2003).

Understanding the sexual self-schema of gay men can lead in a variety of social change directions. First, questions and doubts about one's position in relation to hegemonic masculinity may be associated with participation in sexually risky behaviors (Diaz, 1998; Levine, 1998). Unsafe sexual practices may also be linked to male sexual self-schema (Clark, 1992; Halkitis, 2001; Parent, Torrey, & Michaels, 2012). Because of the emphasis on physical rather than emotional intimacy, men may engage in unsafe sex. In addition, safe sex may appear to be feminine, rather than risky, exciting, and masculine. It is important that sexually transmitted infection prevention efforts incorporate issues of masculinity and identity into their interventions.

Second, there is a need for raised awareness of complexities and power inequalities for gay men of color and an integration of these men into political and social agendas. The mainstream gay community organizes itself along racial and ethnic lines, creating what appear to be multiple gay communities with respect to resources and representation rather than one uniform

social entity. Social change efforts must highlight the existence of power imbalances among gay communities that are divided by race and class (Epstein, 1999; Flores, Mansergh, Marks, Guzman, & Colfax, 2009; Han, 2007).

Results presented here illustrate the influence of masculinity norms on gay men's sexual self-concepts and relationship experiences. Although descriptive in nature, these findings suggest further research is needed to understand how gay men's sexual behaviors and self-image are influenced by hegemonic masculinity. Our findings hint at a complex relationship for gay men between identification with heteromascularity and antifemininity. This has implications for gay men in psychotherapy as well as for social justice efforts. Gay men may well benefit from feminist multicultural therapeutic perspectives that challenge hegemonic masculinity and support positive body esteem across cultures (Brown, 2010). Outreach and educational efforts can be developed to help gay men explore the ways masculinity identification may influence their values and fulfillment of life goals.

This study emphasizes the complex balance for gay men between identification with heteromascularity and antifemininity, while managing attraction to other men, public perceptions of themselves, and a desire for emotional connection. Findings suggest further research is needed to understand how gay men of varying ethnic and racial backgrounds are impacted by traditional masculinities. Clinical approaches that encourage gay men to identify harmful masculinity norms may prove central to symptom reduction.

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