

Smashing back Doors in: Negative Attitudes toward Bottoms within the Gay Community

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Abstract

In the current study, we examined the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and negative attitudes toward effeminacy with prejudice toward sex-role identities in the gay community. Participants recruited from LGBTQA+ student groups from across the United States, completed measures related to their adherence toward hegemonic masculinity, attitudes toward effeminacy, and opinions about bottoms (men who prefer to be penetrated during anal intercourse). The results showed, first, established evidence that a prejudice toward bottoms does exist. Second, anti-effeminacy attitudes, hostile and benevolent sexism, and male toughness norms predicted prejudice toward bottoms. Taken together, the results illuminate both the importance of sex-role identities within the gay community, and marginalization within the community directed toward men who identify as bottoms.

Keywords

gay, prejudice, sex-roles, bottoms, anal sex, social identity

1. Introduction

Hegemonic masculinity (HM) is a system in which masculinity is a commodity that those in a higher status retain to maintain power (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985). The qualities for being a member of the dominant social group, in the case of HM, involves being a heterosexual man who is dominant, strong, and controlling (Connell, 1995); anything that runs counter to these ideals is considered feminine and subordinate. Emphasis is placed on being heterosexual, meaning gay men (men who identify as being sexually attracted to other men) inhabit the lowest tier of this hierarchy, because their orientation is seen as fundamentally feminine (Connell, 1995; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2016). Heterosexuality is such a critical component to HM, that it is often monitored feverously to the extent that it not only hurts gay men (Greenberg, 1988), but also heterosexual men, as they evade feminized work or hobbies to avoid losing their heterosexual status (Anderson, 2005; Williams, 1995). Additionally, in both heterosexual and gay men, low relationship quality is predicted by an

adherence to traditional masculinity ideology (HM), and a lack of psychological intimacy with other men (Wade & Donis, 2007). Further, in a sample of men who were clinically depressed, adherence to HM was a strong predictor of suicidality, because depression was viewed as a threat to the men's masculine identity (Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006). These examples highlight the perceived importance of maintaining identity alignment with HM, and the negative consequences for doing so.

Theoretically, the concept of HM has been debated feverishly; however, in practicality, no single measure has captured the different facets of this phenomenon (Taywaditep, 2001). One way this problem has been solved has been to combine several measures, which tap into three different aspects of HM, into a single measure (Taywaditep, 2001). First, to measure attitudes towards women, the ambivalent sexism inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996) can be used to rate participants on two different subscales: hostile, holding degrading beliefs about women, and benevolent, which involves holding patronizing views about women. Second, attitudes toward men can be measured using the male role norm scale (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). This scale can be broken up into two different subscales to measure two different phenomena: status norms, the need to gain respect and status, and toughness norms, the belief that men must be self-reliant and strong. Third, to measure attitudes toward gender roles, two measures can be used: the macho scale (Villemez & Touhey, 1977), which measures patriarchal ideology and how people view the power structure of men and women, and the traditional egalitarian sex role scale (Larson & Long, 1988), which measures the traditionalism of a person's sex role. Taken together, these measures give a clearer picture of what HM looks like in an individual, and allows researchers the ability to study the degree that an individual adheres to HM.

While gay men do not profit from HM, oftentimes, in order to elevate their social status, they will adopt as many attributes of HM as they can (excluding heterosexuality), which frequently involves holding negative attitudes toward the effeminacy (NATE) in both women and effeminate gay men (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Sanchez and Vilain (2012) found that gay men rated masculinity as an important quality when assessing the self and potential romantic partners. They also found that gay men had a desire for their behavior to be less feminine and more masculine. Taywaditep (2001) found that within a sample of gay men, adherence to HM predicted participants' NATE. Furthermore, in a study of gay skinheads, researchers showed that one way of negotiating their gay identity with their skinhead identity, participants would engage in aggression towards effeminate gay men (Borgeson & Valeri, 2015).

While much research has been conducted on masculine identities within the gay community, there exists a smaller body of literature investigating the social identities of being a top, bottom, or a versatile, and how they relate to HM. As Carrier (1977) defines it, "sex-role" refers to the sexual performance of gay men, regarding whether they are the inserting partner during anal intercourse, or the receiving partner in anal intercourse; additionally, "sex-role identity" is the term "top" or "bottom" being used to distinguish gay men who prefer a certain sex-role from gay men who prefer the opposite sex-role.

These identities correlate strongly with consequent sexual behavior; tops prefer to be inserters, bottoms prefer to be inserted, and versatiles prefer to engage in both behaviors (Moskowitz, Rieger, & Roloff, 2008). Carrier (1977) argued that sex-role preference was an important aspect to consider when studying the behavior of gay men. He identified that in certain ethnic/national categories, (e.g., Mexican, Greek, Turkish, lower socioeconomic class, White Americans) sex-role identities are ridged and clearly defined in terms of the dominance and submission of the gay men engaging in a sexual encounter: tops are dominate and bottoms are submissive (Carrier, 1977).

The dichotomy of dominance and submission to describe tops and bottoms is revisited frequently within the literature of sex-role identities (Kowalski, 2016), which Hoppe (2011) attributes to the attempt on gay men's part to follow a sexual script, where bottoms are surrendering control for the top's pleasure. This fissure within the gay community in relation to masculinity is speculated to result in the perception of tops being hyper-masculine, while bottoms are viewed as feminine (Kowalski, 2016). However, this is more than speculation, as Moskowitz and Hart (2011) found that tops do identify as more masculine than bottoms, and Tskhay and Rule (2013) found that straight participants were able to correctly identify, in a series of men's faces, which sex-role the men preferred; the results were mediated by the perceived masculinity of the men. In some cases, the association between tops and bottoms is more inflated than just a difference between masculinity and femininity. Johns, Pingel, Eisenberg, Santana, and Bauermeister (2012) found that gay men frequently make the associations of "top" with "male" and "straight," while they associate "bottom" with "female" and "gay." They argued that these associations were derived from the view that tops align more with heteronormative masculinity, and bottoms forfeit their claim of masculinity by their desire to be penetrated (Johns et al., 2012).

Sexism, a quality of HM (Taywaditep, 2001), within the gay community, has also been investigated in terms of sex-role identity. Zheng, Su, and Zheng (2016) found that gay and bisexual men who identified as tops tended to score higher on benevolent sexism, and those that endorsed hostile sexism required their partners to have a complimentary sex-role identity. Further, they found that sex-role prejudice mediated the relationship between sexism and the requirement for a partner with a complimentary sex-role identity (Zheng et al., 2016). Here, sex-role prejudice was operationally defined as attitudes held towards bottoms that reflect the gendered perception of sex-role identities, and their consequent social inequality (Zheng et al., 2016). While, Zheng et al. (2016) were the first to study the association between sexism and sex-role prejudice, there are a limitations. First, Zheng et al. only investigated the relationship of sexism and sex-role prejudice, which may not give a holistic picture of the effects of HM on attitudes towards gay men's sex-roles. Second, they used a Chinese sample of men to test their hypotheses, which may not be generalizable enough to capture a Western phenomenon, particularly in American culture, with multiple intersecting racial identities. Third, the sample was made up of only gay and bisexual men, which also does not give a holistic picture of all of the men who sleep with men,

as it excludes heterosexual, queer (a blanket identifier for someone whose sexual attractions and gender identity do not fit into the conventional social labels), and other sexual orientations.

The purposes of the present study are to examine if prejudice toward bottoms exists in the gay community and to examine whether dimensions of HM and NATE predict prejudice toward bottoms. Participants in the study were asked to complete measures related to HM and NATE, similar to Taywaditep (2001), and novel items to assess participants' prejudice toward bottoms. The notion that prejudice toward bottoms exists will be supported if participants score significantly higher on the bottom prejudice measures than the midpoint of the scale. Based on prior research (Johns et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2016), we predict that dimensions of HM and NATE will predict participants' prejudice toward bottoms.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 156$, 100% men; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.65$, $SD = 8.70$) were recruited from LGBTQA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Asexual, and Other) student groups around the United States, as well as on online, public message boards. Researchers contacted the student presidents from the LGBTQA+ groups and requested that they share the study with their members using an IRB approved recruitment letter. Participants indicated their ethnic/racial category as White (77.6%), Latino/Hispanic (12.2%), Asian (3.8%), Biracial (3.2%), Native American (1.9%), and Black (1.3%). The men identified as gay (75%), bisexual (17.3%), queer (3.8%), other (3.2%), and heterosexual (0.6%). Additionally, they identified as a versatile (66.7%), a bottom (18.6%), or a top (14.7%). Participants completed measures regarding anti-effeminacy attitudes, adherence to HM, negative attitudes toward bottoms, and demographic items. Unless noted otherwise all measures used a 5-point Likert-type response scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

2.2 Measures

Negative attitudes towards effeminacy. 17 items (e.g., “‘Femm’ gay men are ruining the respectability of gay men overall”) were adopted from Taywaditep (2001) to measure the bias of gay men directed toward effeminate, gay men ($\alpha = .94$).

Ambivalent sexism. Ambivalent sexism inventory contained 10 items, developed by Glick and Fiske (1996), and contains two subscales: hostile sexism (e.g., “Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist;” $\alpha = .92$) and benevolent sexism (e.g., “Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess;” $\alpha = .81$).

Hegemonic masculinity ideology. The hegemonic masculinity ideology measure was developed by Taywaditep (2001) to assess the degree to which participants agreed with the ideological alignment of preserving the dominant status of men and the relegation of women. 30 items were used ($\alpha = .93$) and were compiled into four subscales. Male role norm scale contained 10 items, developed by Thompson

and Pleck (1986; $\alpha = .90$), which was also comprised of two subscales, adherence to status norms (e.g., “A man should never back down in the face of trouble;” $\alpha = .85$) and adherence to toughness norms (e.g., “Nobody respects a man if he frequently talks about his worries, fears, and problems;” $\alpha = .82$). Traditional egalitarian sex role scale contained five items (e.g., “Ultimately a woman should submit to her husband’s decision”), developed by Larson and Long (1988; $\alpha = .83$). Lastly, the macho scale contained five items (e.g., “I would prefer a job where I didn’t have to compete with women”), developed by Villemez and Touhey (1977; $\alpha = .62$).

Prejudice toward bottoms. We constructed a 15-item scale to measure negative attitudes toward men who identify as bottoms in the gay community. It was comprised of three subscales. The first four items were altered from the hostile sexism subscale of the ambivalent sexism scale (e.g., “Bottoms are too easily offended;” $\alpha = .88$) to create a hostile bottoms-sexism measure. The next five items were altered from the negative attitudes towards effeminacy scale (e.g., “It bothers me to see a bottom acting like a woman;” $\alpha = .84$) to create a negative attitudes toward bottoms-effeminacy measure. Lastly, the final six items were novel, which dealt with stereotype endorsement (e.g., “Bottoms have smaller penises than tops”, “Bottoms are the ‘woman’ in the relationship;” $\alpha = .89$).

3. Results

First, three single sample, *t*-tests were conducted on the subscales of the prejudice toward bottomsmeasures to examine whether negative attitudes toward bottoms were significantly above the midpoint of the scale. The hostile bottoms-sexism subscale ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.80$), $t(155) = 17.21$, $p < .001$, CI95% [.982, 1.24], $d = 2.77$, the stereotype endorsement subscale ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(155) = 12.07$, $p < .001$, CI95% [.687, .956], $d = 1.94$, and the negative attitudes toward bottoms-effeminacy ($M = 3.92$, $SD = .80$), $t(155) = 14.41$, $p < .001$, CI95% [.798, 1.05], $d = 2.31$, were all rated significantly higher than the midpoint. These results supported the hypothesis, that within the gay community, there were negative attitudes toward bottoms.

Second, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine associations between the three prejudice toward bottoms indicators and NATE, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, status norms, toughness norms, traditional egalitarian sex roles, and macho subscales (see Table 1). The results showed significant positive correlations between all of the measures, with the exceptions of nonsignificant relationships between benevolent sexism and NATE, and benevolent sexism with toughness norms.

Table 1. Partial Correlations between Negative Attitudes towards Effeminacy, Hegemonic Masculinity Subscales, and Bottom Prejudice Subscales

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Negative Attitudes Towards Effeminacy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Hostile Sexism	.58**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Benevolent Sexism	.10	.19*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Status Norms	.38**	.54**	.22**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Toughness Norms	.33**	.46**	.13	.75**	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Traditional Egalitarian Sex Roles	.52**	.67**	.28**	.59**	.47**	-	-	-	-	-
7. Macho	.51**	.62**	.24**	.47**	.48**	.66**	-	-	-	-
8. Hostile Sexism Bottoms-Sexism	.51**	.61**	.35**	.41**	.49**	.45**	.51**	-	-	-
9. Stereotype Endorsement	.45*	.48**	.33**	.34**	.40**	.45**	.45**	.65**	-	-
10. Negative Attitudes Toward Bottoms-Effeminacy	.77**	.54**	.25**	.37**	.41**	.49**	.51**	.71**	.53**	-
Mean	3.71	3.66	3.46	3.67	3.54	4.54	3.72	4.11	3.82	3.92
Standard Deviation	0.77	0.94	0.90	0.89	0.86	0.55	0.70	0.81	0.85	0.80

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Controlling for participant age, gender, and ethnicity.

Lastly, to examine whether HM and NATE would predict prejudice toward bottoms, we conducted regressions with these variables simultaneously predicting each of the three indicators of prejudice toward bottoms. First, NATE, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and toughness norms predicted hostile bottoms-sexism, $F(7, 148) = 24.68$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .54$. Second, NATE, hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, and toughness norms predicted stereotype endorsement, $F(7, 148) = 13.09$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .38$. Third, NATE, benevolent sexism, and toughness norms predicted negative attitudes toward bottoms-effeminacy, $F(7, 148) = 39.91$, $p = .001$, $R^2 = .65$. Interestingly, hostile sexism predicted hostile bottoms-sexism and stereotype endorsement, but not negative attitudes toward bottoms-effeminacy.

Table 2. Regression of Negative Attitudes toward Effeminacy and Hegemonic Masculinity Subscales Predicting Hostile Bottoms-Sexism

Variable	β	t	p
Negative Attitudes Towards Effeminacy	.25	3.37	< .01
Hostile Sexism	.35	4.38	< .01
Benevolent Sexism	.24	4.51	< .01
Status Norms	-.16	-1.88	.06
Toughness Norms	.32	3.95	< .01
Traditional Egalitarian Sex Roles	-.18	-1.39	.17
Macho	.08	.86	.39

Table 3. Regression of Negative Attitudes towards Effeminacy and Hegemonic Masculinity Subscales Predicting Endorsement of Negative Stereotypes of Bottoms

Variable	β	t	p
Negative Attitudes Towards Effeminacy	.25	2.80	< .01
Hostile Sexism	.18	2.0	< .05
Benevolent Sexism	.22	3.49	< .01
Status Norms	-.16	-1.59	.11
Toughness Norms	.27	2.76	< .01
Traditional Egalitarian Sex Roles	.11	.73	.47
Macho	.05	.63	.59

Table 4. Regression of Negative Attitudes towards Effeminacy and Hegemonic Masculinity Subscales Predicting Negative Attitudes toward Bottoms-Effeminacy

Variable	β	t	p
Negative Attitudes Towards Effeminacy	.68	10.84	< .01
Hostile Sexism	.08	1.27	.21
Benevolent Sexism	.14	3.14	< .01
Status Norms	-.13	-1.74	.08
Toughness Norms	.21	2.94	< .01
Traditional Egalitarian Sex Roles	-.01	-.13	.90
Macho	.05	.63	.53

4. Discussion

The purposes of the present study were to examine whether a prejudice toward bottoms in the gay community existed and if HM and NATE were predictors of prejudice toward bottoms. As predicted,

support for prejudice toward bottoms was found, as indicated by means significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale. Further, NATE, toughness norms, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism predicted prejudice toward bottoms (with a minor exception). Together, these results highlight a facet of HM that influences the social climate for bottom identified gay men.

Gay men live in a contentious space of HM, where their sexual identity runs counter to the cultural ideals of masculinity (Connell, 1995). One way that gay men overcome this is by earning what Ravenhill and deVisser (2016) refer to as “masculine capitol,” which sometimes involves the idealization of muscularity and athleticism, and oftentimes holds NATE (Taywaditep, 2001), to mitigate the negative consequences of their identities as being sub-masculine or feminine. Previous literature, investigating gay men and their identities, shows that sex-role identities play an important function in the social behavior of gay men (Carrier, 1977). Oftentimes, people associate words like “masculine,” (Kowalski, 2016) “dominant,” (Carrier, 1977) and “straight,” (Johns et al., 2012) with gay men who identify as tops, and words like “feminine,” (Kowalski, 2016) “submissive,” (Carrier, 1977) and “gay” (Johns et al., 2012) with men who identify as bottoms. Ravenhill and deVisser (2016) note that these identities hold significant amounts of “masculine capitol” for gay men, as tops are seen as much more inline with HM than bottoms, who deviate farther from HM. The current research adds to this conversation in that it shows it is more than just a feminine association bottoms face, but also a prejudice within the gay community.

Previously, Zheng et al. (2016) explored bottom prejudice in a Chinese sample; however, their study focused primarily on romantic partner ideation and ambivalent sexism in various sex-role identified gay and bisexual men. Thus, their study only looked at levels of hostile and benevolent sexism. In the present study, we examined these two measures, as well as measures for status norms, toughness norms, traditional egalitarian sex roles, and the macho scale, similar to Taywaditep (2001), to give a clearer picture of the influence of HM on bottom prejudice. A second difference between the present study and Zheng et al. (2016) is the construction of the bottom prejudice scale. Zheng et al. (2016) altered the Chinese version of Glick and Fiske’s (1996) ambivalent sexism scale (Chen, Fiske, & Lee, 2009) by changing “woman” to “bottom” and “man” to “top.” In the present study we altered Glick and Fiske’s (1996) hostile sexism subscale, added an altered form of Taywaditep’s (2001) NATE scale (by changing “feminine gays” to “bottoms”), and constructed items to tap endorsement of negative stereotypes of bottoms. The inclusion of HM and multiple facets of prejudice toward bottoms measures aids in providing a clearer picture of the various ideological components of bottom prejudice.

An interesting aspect of the results involved the relationships between hostile sexism and the bottom prejudice subscales. Hostile sexism was a predictor of the hostile bottoms-sexism and negative attitudes toward bottoms-effeminacy, but not the stereotype endorsement prejudice subscale. This result could be explained by the nature of the questions for each scale. For example, the hostile sexism scale deals primarily with negative attitudes towards women (e.g., “Women exaggerate problems they have at

work”), while the stereotype endorsement subscale dealt with relationships between gay men (e.g., “Bottoms have smaller penises than tops”). The reason hostile sexism predicted the hostile bottoms-sexism (e.g., “Bottoms exaggerate problems they have at work”) and the negative attitudes toward bottoms-effeminacy (e.g., “It bothers me to see a bottom acting like a woman”) prejudice subscales could be that both of those scales dealt with perceptions of bottoms as female doppelgängers, and not as men themselves, thus making a clearer connection to the original hostile sexism scale. However, further research is needed to examine this notion.

While this study is unique in its investigation of the intragroup processes within the gay community, there are limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First, the present study is correlational, so it cannot be said that HM or anti-effeminacy attitudes cause prejudice toward bottoms, only that there exists a relationship between them. Second, cultural context should be considered. Given that a national sample of men who sleep with men was used for this study, in addition to the information provided by Zheng et al. (2016), it would be reasonable to conclude that within American and Chinese societies there is evidence to support the existence of a prejudice toward bottoms; however, that will need additional investigation, and it may be beneficial to obtain an international perspective of this phenomenon. Third, the current study used primarily academic gays, gay men who attend college, so there may be significant differences between men in school, out of school, or those who never attended school. Collecting a sample of men outside of student groups would aid in generalizing the results.

The present study provides initial evidence for the existence of a bottom prejudice in American, gay culture. Further, that this prejudice is associated with, and predicted by, alignments to certain elements of HM, and anti-effeminate attitudes. Given the effects of minority stress, and being marginalized within one’s own ingroup, an important direction for future research is to investigate the affect of bottom prejudice on men who identify as bottoms, and to explore tactics to reduce bottom prejudice within the gay community itself.

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