



Masculinities on the Side: An Exploration of the Function of Homosexism in Maintaining Hegemonic Masculinities and Sexualities

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Abstract

Following the work of Hellman, this paper examines homosexuality (the stigmatisation of non-penetrative sexual activities of men who have sex with men as non-sexual practices) in relation to hegemony, masculinity, and sexuality theories. In doing so, it discusses the function of sides, men who have sex with men but do not engage in penetrative sexual practices, in relation to the maintenance of established, normative, and damaging notions of masculinities. The central question this paper addresses is what the significance of the stigmatisation of sides is. In addressing this question, the potential of sides to facilitate and inhibit normative hegemonic structures is considered while more in-depth research is deemed necessary. The aim of this paper is to extend the discussion on homosexuality, acknowledge non-penetrative sexual practices as legitimate forms of sexual expression, and encourage further scholarly research that focuses on the potential of sides to challenge and subvert established normative understandings of genders and sexualities, as well as the power structures that are involved in the construction of such understandings.

Keyword Homosexism · Hegemonic masculinities · Dominant masculinities · Sexual hegemony · Masculinity

Introduction

In a recent article, Hellman (2021) argues that cultural representations of sexual activity present penetration as the only way in which sex is performed. He uses Lehne's (1976) term 'homosexism' and redefines it to explain the inconsistency between research findings about and cultural representation of sexual activities of men who have sex with men (MSM). Indeed, research suggests that penetration is the least

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frequent sexual activity among MSM (Hellman, 2019; Blumstein & Schwartz 1983). Hellman (2021) states that "'homosexism' [...] is redefined as a prejudice based on same-sexual *erotic activity* preference. [...] it does not refer to the obverse of 'heterosexism,' meaning a prejudice favouring same gender sexuality as superior to heterosexuality. [It] involves attitudes and valuations of *specific categories of sexual behaviour* that are associated with MSM" (p. 338, emphasis in original). In essence, homosexuality is meant to identify and explain the stigmatisation of non-penetrative sexual activities of MSM as non-sexual practices. That is, regarding practices such as mutual masturbation or oral sex—among others—as foreplay instead of legitimate sexual activities on their own rights, and by extension, stigmatising those who enjoy and perform such practices *in lieu* of anal sex. Hellman (*ibid.*) wonders whether "the mutuality of partnered, manual sex [can] undermine foundational associations with stereotyped gender-linked eroticism" (p. 343). This paper aims to argue that 'sides' create a sexual ecology the otherwise inflexible sexual constructs of 'tops' and 'bottoms' are placed in a position of relativity.

Hegemonic Relations

Cultural productions which present anal sex as the predominant form of sexual activity among MSM, thus marginalising non-penetrative sexual activities, range from online gay male sex videos (Downing et al., 2014) to mainstream films (e.g. *Rocketman* (2019), *Boy Erased* (2018)), TV series (e.g. *The Politician* (2019), *Cucumber* (2015)), and magazine articles and advertisements (Out 2019a; Out 2019b). Hellman's (2021) paper offers some possible explanations for homosexuality. Among others, he notes the criminalisation of anal penetration as sodomy, by conservative societies as both a cause and an effect of homosexuality; thus, the stronger the link between anal penetration and MSM sexual activity, the more likely it is for society to resist the decriminalisation of homosexuality. However, stigmatisation of non-penetrative sexual practices is not only common in conservative heterosexual contexts. It is also observed among MSM, possibly because erotic activity is based on heteronormative paradigms. Lack of erotic identity literature and education discourages people from not imitating and reproducing penile-vaginal intercourse as a prototype for all sexual practices. Thus, homosexuality might emerge from heteronormative assumptions, as Hellman (*ibid.*) suggests, but it has evolved into a homonormative practice whereby certain practices within non-heterosexual communities are to be associated with shame while others are celebrated as the norm.

With regards to MSM, it can be argued that such a distinction serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it enables those men who do not want to be stigmatised as homosexuals but enjoy having sex with men to continue pursuing their sexual desires without having to bear social stigma. Hellman (2021) observes that a penetrating 'top' who performs a sexual act that is perceived as a proxy for heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse is not considered to be gay. That is, one is perceived as not-gay based on being a dominant penetrator regardless of the object of penetration. In this paper, I wish to further Hellman's (2021) observation by arguing that homosexuality does not define one's perception as not-gay based on the

penetrating-penetrated binary. Since 'sides' are not perceived as sexually active individuals, one can argue that they are not viewed as gay or straight or having any other sexual identity for that matter. If there is no penetration, there is no sex, and if there is no sex, they cannot be gay. Stigmatising non-penetrative sexual practices can also be a means of confirming one's own masculinity. In particular, among gay groups of men, homophobia can be used as a means of marginalising those with no interest in anal intercourse as less competent, or less masculine, thus, enabling those who do enjoy penetrative sexual practices achieve a dominant status among their group. Kort (2013) terms 'sides' those who "[...] prefer to kiss, hug and engage in oral sex, rimming, mutual masturbation and rubbing up and down on each other. These men enjoy practically every sexual practice aside from anal penetration of any kind." The term 'sides', therefore, is used in this paper to refer to MSM but do not identify as either tops or bottoms. This paper aims to situate homophobia within (gay) masculinities literature and to explore the function of sides in masculine identity formation of gay men.

With regards to the establishment of masculinity, Bourdieu (2001) confirms that one's manliness is not an innate characteristic, thus a priori established, but he observes that it has to be continuously confirmed by other men. "Like honour [...] manliness must be validated by other men [...] and certified by recognition of membership of the group of 'real men'" (p. 52, emphasis in original). Because of the relational nature of gender, with masculinity being defined as non-femininity, one way to confirm one's manliness is through the exertion of violence against the feminine. Here, the feminine is not used to refer solely to women; rather, non-heterosexual men should also be considered since they have for long been regarded as feminine by structures of masculine domination. Yet, male domination is not observed exclusively in heteronormative regimes, but also in homonormative ones whereby non-heterosexual men, including MSM, subscribe to heteronormative sociodicy of masculine domination. Understanding how this happens is significant in understanding the role of homophobia as a means of confirming one's dominant masculinity by belittling those who do not engage in penetrative sexual activities. To do so, the discussion turns to examining the process of gay male domination.

Due to the relational nature of gender, non-heterosexuals are not seen as part of the "[...] group of 'real men'" (p. 52, emphasis in original) that Bourdieu refers to. Arguably, one—if not the only—way for them to be allowed to join this club and reclaim their masculinity is by endorsing and enacting masculine domination which includes the assertion of one's "[...] sexual or social reproductive capacity, but also [...] the capacity to fight and to exercise violence" (p. 50). Presenting non-heterosexuals as feminine or weak has been common practice by other non-heterosexuals in their attempt to assert their domination and be perceived as more masculine since weakness enables domination. Weakness, typically associated with the feminine, has been seen as a threat to what western societies perceive as real masculinity (Kimmel, 1996; Nardi, 2000). Considering non-heterosexual men's upbringing in over-masculinised environments might account for their approval and internalisation of what Kimmel (1994) defined as hegemonic masculinity, "[...] a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power. We equate manhood with being strong, successful, capable, reliable, and in control" (p. 125). Therefore, it is not surprising how

internalised homophobia (Ward, 2000) and the need to assert one's dominant masculinity over others emerge.

The ways in which gay men, and MSM for that matter, achieve their domination over other gay men has been discussed by various scholars. Among others, Cruz (2000) illustrates behavioural outcomes such as violent behaviour and extension of homophobic attitudes, while Linneman (2000) and Messner (1997) discuss fem shaming, the exclusion of those gay men whose behaviours are viewed as more feminine. It becomes clear that in gay cultures, the need to assert one's dominance as a means of affirming one's masculinity over others results in the stigmatisation of less masculine gay men and the hypermasculinisation (Nardi, 2000) of others. With regards to the latter, Halkitis (2000) identifies hypermasculinisation in "[...] physical beauty, [...] the body perfect, and [...] sexual prowess [...]" (p. 146). There has been a lot of discussion with regards to the gay body as an instrument of affirming masculinity, both in terms of the Marlboro man and the emergence of the 'buff' body (Harris 1997; Tran et al., 2020). The role of sexual prowess in affirming one's masculinity in queer cultures has recently been drawn attention to mainly by focusing on sexual subculture practices such as barebacking, chem sex, and others. This is an area that will be discussed in detail later on in the paper. Before doing so, though, it is important to also discuss the role of neoliberalism in the rise of hegemonic homonormativity and, in particular, the rise of discrimination and stigmatisation among gay men.

In gay men's cultures, there appears to be a divide that affects all aspects of life. In activism and politics, there are assimilationist and queer activist groups (Grzanka, 2019; Sullivan, 2003). The former fight for the benefits that heteronormativity has to offer, while the latter focus on challenging established norms of oppression. Duggan (2003) explains the shift toward assimilationist tendencies in light of neoliberal sexual politics, and Grzakna (2019) notes that "[...] homonormativity—not unlike heteronormativity—only affords privilege to those who can exhibit and embody its idealised standards" (p. 4). Messner (1997) views the mainstreaming of gay culture as both a means to escape the adverse effects of homophobia and, at the same time, the only way for gay people to enjoy the perks of heterosexuals. No matter the reasons, though, it becomes apparent that such politics affect people's everyday life. One of the effects of this shift, as it has been discussed above, is the ascription to the stereotypical idea of the heterosexual masculine in terms of appearances and behaviours by some and the subsequent stigmatisation of those who do not. Given the relational aspect of gender—and erotic identity development—it emerges that the two are intricately linked: for one to claim—or prove—their ascription to mainstream ideals, they need to confirm their power over one who does not. As such, through the stigmatisation and discrimination of men who engage in non-penetrative sexual acts, homosexism enables the dominance of those who ascribe to traditional heterosexual paradigms which, in turn, allows them to benefit the perks of being part of mainstream culture.

What this leads to is a cultural and identity shift. Neoliberal homonormative politics enable those masculinities which Messerschmidt (2018) identifies as "subordinate masculinities" (p. 127) to evolve into "dominant/dominating masculinities" (p. 126), the dominant aspect of which is socially accepted and reproduced through

consensus. An example of how this reproduction occurs can be identified in subcultural practices of sub-dominant groups. The dominant group reproduces their domination so that they enjoy the benefits that are attached to dominating others. The dominated group often reproduces this relationship of domination which is seemingly unfavourable for them; however, by reproducing this relationship, they also enjoy benefits associated with the subcultural group they are members of. This can be seen in the discussion about bareback subcultures below whereby within the particular subculture, those who bottom are not viewed as effeminate; rather, they are perceived to be confirming their masculinity through bottoming, by enduring pain without complaints. Here, it is important to acknowledge that the brief discussion on the reproduction of hegemonic power relationships is an oversimplification that only serves to illustrate the point. A more thorough discussion has been offered by Lears (1985).

Reproducing stigmatisation against those who do not fit mainstream notions of masculinity becomes a system through which hegemonic homonormative masculinities maintain their position of benefit and power. An example of such a reproductive strategy is the well-documented divide between good gays and bad queers in relation to representations of non-heterosexual male sexualities in popular culture (Dyer 1997; Kagan, 2018). This paper suggests that homosexism is another means through which hegemonic homonormative masculinities assert their dominance over others who do not wish to conform to sociocultural directives about their sexuality. An effect of the latter is the fact that behaviours that aim at ascertaining one's masculinity over others are often discussed in relation to in-group and internalised homophobia, HIV stigma, discrimination against sexual practices that involve drug use, and an array of sex negative narratives such as the stigmatisation of PrEP users, bareback sex, and other sexual subcultures (Varghese & Dean, 2019). What has not been discussed, though, is homosexism as an enabling—and damaging—behaviour that contributes to the perpetuation of homonormative dominance.

Since establishing a dominant and/or dominating gay—or non-heterosexual, for that matter—masculinity assumes adopting not only certain looks but also certain behaviours, and due to the fact that men who prefer the position of the side, engaging in non-penetrative sexual practices, are being discriminated against based on their sexual or erotic behaviour, it is significant to explore which sexual behaviour(s) are celebrated as legitimate and accepted by non-heterosexual cultures and which are marginalised as not manly enough. Within penetrative sexual practices, the one being penetrated has often been reported to be perceived as more feminine and is often discriminated against, this is what is known as bottom shaming (Moore, 2014). Multiple hegemonic masculinities theory (Arxer, 2011) and hegemonic sexuality theory (Chitty, 2020; Speice, 2016) explain this form of discrimination as a replication of hegemonic masculinity whereby, as it was discussed earlier, gay men need to assert their masculinity by degrading men who exhibit feminine characteristics. Considering that the bottom position in MSM sex is similar to the female position in penetrative heterosexual sex equates the bottom with the feminine. Albeit common, such practice does not even account for "side shaming", one facet of homosexism, the discrimination against people who do not engage in penetrative actions by choice.

In subcultures of gay men and, in particular the barebacking subculture, Dean (2009) observes a queering of social expectations and norms with regards to the performative aspect of masculinity. Rather than identifying topping—assuming the role of the one who penetrates during the sexual act—as masculine and bottoming—being penetrated—as feminine, and thus downgrading for those who bottom, it appears that bottoming is transformed into a means through which one confirms, rather than disproves, his masculinity. "Hypermasculinity accrues to the man who assumes what used to be thought of as the female role in homosexual relations. The more men by whom one is penetrated, the more of a man he becomes" (Dean, 2009, p. 50). Masculinising a sexual behaviour that in heterosexual culture is associated with the feminine appears to have been a way for gay men to reclaim their masculinity. Dean (*ibid.*) notes that "[...] in bareback subculture being sexually penetrated is a matter of "taking it like a man," enduring without complaint any discomfort or temporary loss of status, in order to prove one's masculinity" (p. 51, emphasis in original). Therefore, bottoming no longer signifies feminine-like behaviour; rather, it stands for endurance of bodily pain, and unreserved disavowal of socially constructed normative behaviours, characteristics that validate, rather than challenge, one's masculinity among their peers.

Discussing barebacking and bug-chasing, the practise of intentionally not using condoms while having sex with people who are HIV positive, Dean (*ibid.*) further explains that such practises enable gay men to feel empowered and not assume the position of the victim with regards to a possible HIV transmission. That is, rather than experiencing fear for the possibility of contracting HIV while having sex, barebacking, and bottoming in particular, permit those who practise it to take charge of their destiny. He observes that following the introduction of antiretroviral therapy that allows people who test HIV positive to live a healthy life, some gay men consider living in terror to be unhealthier than living with HIV. For some, behaving in a manner that defies this terror and facing the possibility of seroconversion becomes an opportunity for agency. He further notes that "[...] rather than as an index of vulnerability, HIV infection is imagined as the opposite—as the ultimate sign of strength" (p. 55). Therefore, subjecting oneself to another man's domination—bottoming—confirms, rather than challenges, one's masculinity. Masculine domination as well as confirmation of masculinity appear to be an objective of such subcultural practices, which in turn suggests the emergence of a type of normative culture which renders certain sexual practices legitimate, celebrated, and sought-after and invalidates others.

By reviewing well-established theories of masculinities, and gay masculinities in particular, this paper has attempted to provide an understanding as to why sides are often victims of discrimination and stigma. The aim of the paper has been to extend Hellman's (2021) observation of the erotic activity being based on a heteronormative paradigm by examining the role of homonormativity in the process of legitimising sexual behaviours and practices. In doing so, the formation processes of hegemonic and dominant/dominating masculinities have been presented as an attempt to account for the function of sides in gay men's gender, erotic identity development, and erotic hierarchy formation. The discussion also moved on to examine a sexual subculture of MSM, barebacking, and it analysed the relationship between sexual

behaviours and practices in affirming, if not reclaiming, one's masculinity. One can argue that the literature that has been presented so far indicates that among MSM, masculinity is affirmed by either 'giving or taking it like a man'. Established theoretical works from the areas of mainly gender and masculinity studies and, to a lesser extent, sexuality studies have failed to account for non-penetrative practices. Exceptions to this are studies that focus on lesbian stigma in relation to penetration (Watson et al. 2017). To further account for homosexuality and the stigmatisation of sides, I activate the concept of sexual hegemony in the hopes of providing a further understanding of the role of sexuality in establishing and maintaining hegemonic constructs.

The benefit of introducing the concept hegemony in the present discussion about the stigmatisation and, arguably, oppression of sides is that it enables the discussion to contribute to the provision of a meaningful sociology which, in Morgan and Wilkinson's (2001) terms can account for the "[...] glaring discrepancy between modernity's ideal expectations of the social world and the lived experience of its history" (p. 201). Such an approach acknowledges homonormative discourses as illusionary whereby a *faux* promise for social equality was never realised; rather, stigmatising and discriminatory behaviours continue to hover over gender and sexual behaviours, expressions, and practices. Sides, being a case in point, are being made to feel ashamed for admitting not to enjoy, let alone practice, anal penetration to the point that they experience stress and anxiety when they express and/or pursue their sexual desires. Rohrer (2013) shares his personal story about identifying as a side and explains that he had to conceal it for years in fear of not being accepted by his peers. "I've been punishing myself for years for not being what I've been convinced that I'm supposed to be, when in reality all I need to be was content with being who I am." Rohrer's comment illustrates the "glaring discrepancy" between ideal expectations and lived experience that became the source of his suffering.

With regards to relationships of sexual hegemony, Chitty (2020) argues that they emerge "[...] wherever sexual norms benefitting a dominant social group shape the sexual conduct and self-understandings of other groups, whether or not they also stand to benefit from such norms and whether or not they can achieve them" (p. 25). As it was seen earlier, both tops and bottoms engage in penetrative sexual practices as a means of proving or validating their masculinity. In addition, placing such an overt emphasis on confirming their masculinity further contributes to the perpetuation of the hegemonic nature of masculinity. Rather than challenging the social norms and structures that indicate particular gendered and sexual behaviours as dominant, continuous acknowledgement of penetrative sexual practices as the only possible form of sex results in the conservation of hegemonic notions of acceptable forms of masculinities. Perhaps one of the most poignant remarks on the matter of labelling people based on their sexual preferences is offered by Levine (2019) who reports on a comment by his interviewee, Jon. Jon says that "[...] it [being asked 'top or bottom?'] describes acts more than people, and it doesn't leave a lot of space for gay guys who are vers, or gay guys like me who don't really ever have anal sex."

The reduction of people into their preferences with regards to sex has contributed to their being assigned certain social positions. Chitty (2020) reports that "[...] sexual norms operate at the level of aspirational fantasy and as a form of social

status. Habituation to such norms has sometimes secured wealth and prestige for socially dominant groups and a wider sphere of influence for those in subaltern groups" (p. 25). This further illustrates what has been discussed so far. The emergence of homonormativity as a neoliberal practice of capitalising on gay culture has transformed sex positions into discourses of social acceptance. Tops validate their masculinity by performing the traditional masculine role of penetrating their sexual partners, and bottoms confirm their masculinity by enduring penetration with no complaints and 'taking it like a man'.

This continuous struggle for affirmation of the dominant status of masculinity evident by the discussion about tops and bottoms echoes Messerschmidt's (2018) argument with regards to hegemony and gender dominance. He suggests that "[...] because of the ubiquity of hegemonic masculinities, gender inequality often is broadly accepted and unquestioned. Gender hegemony functions to obscure unequal gender relations while effectively permeating public and private life, encouraging all to endorse, unite around, and embody such unequal gender relations" (p. 106). In an era where gender has been put under public scrutiny, regardless the success of such an attempt, the fabrication of hegemonic relations has shifted from gender to sexuality. As such, it is not the reclaiming of bottoming as an ultimate expression of one's masculinity that subverts normative roles and expectations, as Dean (2009) suggests. Rather, gay cultures and MSM might need to reconsider the discursive emphasis attached to sexual behaviour and practices.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to extend Hellman's (2021) conceptualisation of male homosexuality by considering the position of the side not only in the sexual act itself, but in the confirmation of hegemonic relations among sexualities that render some practices dominant and Other the rest. The central question of the paper has been the purpose of stigmatising sides. By situating the discussion within scholarship of masculinity, sexuality, and hegemony, the paper provides two reasons, one emerging from the other, as tentative answers to the central question: Sides are being denied recognition as an accepted sexual behaviour so that they do not disrupt the relatively new state of being whereby both tops and bottoms claim their share of established and dominant forms of masculinity. For this to happen, situating non-penetrative practises in a foreplay-but-not-real-sex narrative enables tops and bottoms to confirm and validate their masculinity by emphasising sexual prowess as the primary, if not sole, indicator of one's masculinity, and by framing it singularly around penetration. It emerges, though, that sides can challenge the process whereby manhood is defined in terms of fucking, hence liberating sexual behaviours and practises from hegemonic relations of power and domination. There is need for further work to be done in terms of providing in-depth analyses of the significance of sides to the theories that have been presented in this paper, in terms of the subverting possibilities of the sides, and in terms of the processes that can enable such possibilities.

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