

Masculinity and the passive experience

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Abstract

In this paper the (supposed) relation is examined between femininity and male homosexuality. According to the inversion theory gay men are predestined to the receptive role in anal sex. The paper is part of a study on the meaning and structure of anal sex among gay and bisexual men, conducted in the Netherlands. Two issues are discussed: the first one regards the problem of gender identity of gay men; the second one concerns the meaning of the so-called passive experience and its implications for the understanding of the concept of masculinity. Findings from the study suggest that the experience of being penetrated by a man offers gay men the possibility to transgress the culture of masculinity.

Keywords: anal sex, receptive role, gay men, gender identity, masculinity.

Masculinity and the passive experience

The traditional interpretation of same-sex relations that until recently prevailed in the public discourse was one whereby male homosexuality was strongly linked to femininity (Chauncey, 1982/83; Marshall, 1981; Martin & Hetrick, 1987). According to this theory, homosexuality was, in the words of Foucault (1978:43), conceived as ‘a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul’; and gay men were regarded as ‘virtual women’ (Chauncey, 1994:48), and, consequently, predestined to assume the passive, i.e. receptive, role in sexual intercourse.¹

This kind of reasoning had its roots in the dominant theories of the 19th century, according to which sexuality was almost exclusively concerned with procreation (Herdt, 1994:25) and, above all, defined in terms of gender. With this conception of sexuality, sexual intercourse between men (or women) was out of the question, unless the gender-role did not match the biological sex: A man could only have sex with a man, but only if that man was in some way a woman. This thinking was given its most famous expression in the formula of the German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs: ‘*anima muliebris in corpore virili inclusa*’, a woman’s soul enclosed in a man’s body.² This so-called ‘inversion model’ was not only incorporated, with some modifications, in the sexology of the time, but it was also strongly compatible with the way homosexual men of the time saw themselves (Müller, 1991). After Ulrichs - the pioneer of the modern gay movement - the German physician Magnus Hirschfeld, among others, elaborated the inversion model. According to Hirschfeld, homosexuals

¹ In this paper, commonly used terminology (“passive”, “active”, “fuck”, or “be fucked”) will be used whenever a respondent’s own words are cited, or when the neutral medical terminology would be cumbersome.

² In a way the results of Le Vay’s study corroborate this idea of a woman’s soul enclosed in a man’s body as he stated that ‘INAH 3 was more than twice as large in the heterosexual men as in the women. It was also, however, more than twice as large in the heterosexual men as in the homosexual men’ (1991:1034). In contrast with the 19th century sexology Le Vay, however, didn’t give an interpretation of his data in terms of gender. In accordance with our modern conception of sexuality (Sedgwick, 1990:8) he rather considered his findings in line with a dimorphic sexual orientation: ‘This finding indicates that INAH is dimorphic with sexual orientation, at least in men, and suggests that sexual orientation has a biological substrate’ (1991:1034).

constituted a biologically based hybrid form ('Zwischenstufe') between the male and female sexes, which he called the 'third sex' (Haeberle, 1994:9).³

On the face of it, it would seem as though the inversion model has lost much ground during the second half of this century (Altman, 1980, 1982; Marshall, 1981; Nardi, 1992). A transformation took place in the representation of homosexuality from the 'pansy' or 'fairy' to the gay man, whose 'highest expression' is, according to Halperin (1990:9), 'the straight-acting and -appearing gay male, a man distinct from other men in absolutely no other respect besides that of his "sexuality"'. Before 1960 it was, for example, not unusual in American gay porno movies for one of the actors to be performing in drag while getting laid by a virile-looking partner. According to Waugh (1983), the drag film was built on 'role-playing, on a sense of play with disguise and gender contradictions', in which the supposed 'straightness' functioned 'as a turn-on for the gay consumer'. Afterwards the drag element disappeared from the screen, and the actors could indulge in role reversal. Gay sex turned out to be an all-male affair.

As part of a qualitative study examining the opinions regarding and the structure of anal intercourse among a sample of gay men in the Netherlands (Kerkhof et al, 1995)⁴, the issues of gender identity, gender role and role performances were explored. In this paper I want to focus attention on two related questions. Firstly, I will discuss the ways in which gay men who themselves practice anal intercourse experience their gender identity. I asked the question: Do gay men indeed consider themselves men, independent of their sexual role during intercourse, or is the inversion model still at work and reflected in their sexual practices?

³ Recently the concept of a biologically based third sex has got a fresh start by neurological studies of Allen & Gorski (1992) and Swaab & Hofman (1995). According to the latter "the observations in the DDN-POA, the SCN and the anterior commissure, (...) support the idea of a 'third sex', that is, a 'different' hypothalamus in homosexual men that is neither similar to that in females, nor to that in male heterosexuals" (1995:269).

⁴ I performed this study at the University Utrecht together with my colleague Onno de Zwart, and under supervision of dr. Theo Sandfort. I thank them both for their comments on this paper.

Secondly, I will examine the implications of such an perception of gender identity on what in Hocquenghem's vision (1978) was signified as the essence of homosexuality: the passive experience, i.e. the experience of being penetrated by a man. Weinrich et al. (1992) concluded in a paper on gay men who demonstrated 'sissy boy' behaviour in their childhood (according to the Freund Feminine Gender Identity Scale) that there is 'at least a statistical association' between the 'childhood gender role' of these gay men and their adult preference for the receptive role during anal intercourse. They speculated that 'these are the men for whom receptive anal intercourse is presumably especially fulfilling emotionally because it reflects an aspect of what they have always wanted to do or be: namely, to be or act in a more feminine way than society ordinarily allows men to be or act' (1992:583). From this paper it can be deduced that in the lives of some gay men at least the receptive role has a special meaning. I wondered if it was common practice among gay men to attach special significance to the experience of being receptive during anal intercourse and, if so, what importance would this have for the understanding of the concept of masculinity?

Method

Participants

To cover the research object as broad as possible the aim has been to ensure a diversity of gay (and bisexual) men in our study. To contact men ad's were put in a variety of gay magazines and in newspapers, and the snowball technique was also used. In the ad's men were asked who wanted to talk about having sex with men in this era. The respondents didn't receive any financial compensation.

The age range in the research population (N=71) varied from 18 to 63, the mean age is 36,4 (median 33), and 37,2% were younger than 30 year. Most of the men called themselves gay, and 5 man regarded themselves bisexual. Thirty men had already experience with fucking before the outbreak of the HIV-epidemic, 31 had their first experience with anal sex after 1982. Of the remaining men, 5 had stopped with anal intercourse and 5 had no experience at all. For 31 respondents fucking was (very) important; also 31 regarded it as not that important, and 9 men gave it no affectional

value at all. Twenty-seven respondents preferred the receptive role, 23 the insertive role and 14 men liked both roles equally. The majority, 73%, of the interviewees had, however, experience with receptive as well as insertive role behavior.

Almost a third was living in Amsterdam, almost 30% in the greater cities and around 40% came from the remaining parts of the Netherlands. The respondents were more highly educated than the general population, with over 50% having some education beyond secondary school (university or non-university professional training).

Twenty-nine of them had at the moment of the interview a steady relationship of whom nine men were engaged in a monogamous relationship; 31 men had regular contacts as well as casual ones, and 11 men had only casual contacts. Forty-three men were at least once tested on HIV, and seven men were HIV-positive.

Measures

Methodologically the grounded theory approach is followed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Central to this method is the cyclic nature of the research process: in this study three cycles of data collection, analysis and reflection took place. A semi-structured protocol was developed which was adapted to the specific questions of each of the three cycles. Each phase was started with a number of general questions regarding the demographic background of the respondents, the kind of relationships they were involved in, the coming out process, serostatus, appreciation of sexual techniques, experience with anal sex, role preference, and the ways they reduced their risk of contracting or transmitting HIV. From the second cycle onwards the emphasis in the data collection was on the concrete proceeding of sexual encounters in which anal sex take place.

In the third cycle a major issue of the interview were questions about gender identity, role performance and the passive experience: among others, the respondents were asked for the meaning of getting fucked, the relation between the passive experience and being homosexual and/or being a man, and the eventual special nature of the

passive experience. Twenty men were interviewed with mixed appreciations of anal sex, and who in majority displayed a (very) positive attitude to condoms. They were asked to describe as precise as possible the actions they had exchanged with their (casual or steady) partner and the feelings they experienced in, among others, the following recent sexual encounters: (1) the last time they were fucked; (2) the last time they were involved in a s and m play (active/passive); (3) the last time they had no problem with condom use (a/p); (4) the last time they fucked unprotected (a/p); (5) an encounter in which a conflict occurred regarding role-preference; and (6) the last time some problem came up regarding condom use (a/p). Descriptions of 101 encounters were reported, of which 22 were unprotected.

Procedures

Each interview was conducted by one of the two main investigators, both of whom were gay men. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and they lasted 2 à 3 hours. The participants were free to choose the place where the interview was conducted; usually they took place at their home. Prior to the interview participants were given an oral description of the purpose and the procedure of the study, and were asked to read and sign a consent form. No one refused to do so. They were assured that all the responses were confidential; their name are for example changed. In addition, the respondents were informed that they could refrain from answering any question which made them uncomfortable.

The first phase of the data collection was in the autumn of 1993; the second in the summer of 1994, and the third in the winter of 1994.

Results

The male identity

One finding borne out by the statements made by the respondents was that they felt hardly any affinity with the thoughts represented by the inversion model. Two-thirds

of the respondents who participated in the third cycle of the study did not experience a connection between their gender identity and the role they performed during anal intercourse. Many respondents reported that they felt really masculine when making love to a man, and that it did not matter, as one of them, Malcolm (30), stated, if he was being fucked or fucking himself: 'It may sound odd, but just when I'm making love I'm very conscious of my manliness.' The same is true for Jeroen (27), who asserted to feeling masculine regardless of the sexual position: 'It doesn't matter if I'm fucking or being fucked by a guy, I just feel like a man. I don't have the feeling that I'm no longer a man and have become a woman when I'm getting laid and being screwed by a guy.'

Some referred to the notion of equality to substantiate their position. 'I'm of the opinion', said Serge (52), 'that there has to be equality when you're making love. And thinking in terms of femininity and masculinity gives the idea of inequality.' Joram (36) applied the same reasoning: 'I don't have the feeling that because I'm active and he is passive that there is no equality between us. Neither do I agree with what people sometimes tend to do by talking in terms of so-called male and female roles.'

Others also referred negatively to those kinds of conventional ideas: 'In the gay scene it isn't uncommon,' Ralf (28) stated, 'to ask who is "butch" and who is "fem"'. And some indeed say, I get screwed so I am fem. But in my opinion that's bullshit. It is just a saying. Personally, I feel masculine, and not a woman, although I like getting fucked a lot.' And in the eyes of Roel (34), they are just stereotypes. 'I don't feel I have to take that kind of reasoning into real consideration.' These statements express clearly how the majority of the respondents regarded the relationship between sexual role performance and their gender identity: Whatever their sexual practice they considered themselves to be real males.

Nevertheless, remnants of the inversion model appear to have survived in the consciousness of some respondents. Even in Malcolm's statement, an echo of those conceptions could be heard as he continued: 'When I was a teenager, I sometimes wondered how gay men in a relationship got along with the traditional male-female

role pattern. Although on a rational level those kinds of prejudice do not have any value for me, I know they always play a part at the back of my head'. Some respondents expressed, for example, the belief that the penetrative partner had to be really masculine. Melchior (48) said he never could have sex 'with a feminine type'. In his view, his partner had to be 'a real guy'. Although he did not think about himself in terms of masculinity or femininity, he was aware that during sexual encounters he never referred to his ass, but always to his 'pussy'. Adrian (56) thought about his sexual practice along similar lines; he said he felt 'outstandingly feminine' when his 'bloke' fucked him.

A few others thought it quite 'natural' that the 'effeminate' partner always performed the receptive role during sex. Gordon (20) did not have any doubts about this way of thinking. He mentioned an occasion when he, as a transvestite, was picked up by a straight guy. 'He played the game, as it had to be played. He was the guy and I his lady with a blond wig and make-up. I really enjoyed the feeling that he only wanted to fuck me. That he only had the "hots" for my ass and not for my cock.'

Other respondents, however, reported that a so-called feminine disposition did not automatically imply a passive role-preference and a corresponding role-behaviour. In the eyes of the world, Everhard's appearance (37) did not square at all with his wishes in the sexual sphere. 'I often notice that people think that I'm easy to fuck. And I'm aware that I'm rather effeminate and behave a lot more feminine than other gay men. But in sex I'm really active. More than anything it turns me on to fuck big guys, real machos.' Vincent (41) gave a similar account: 'Although I tend to react more like a woman in a social context,' he said, 'when I'm sexually involved I feel really masculine, not like a woman. It's the same when I get fucked.'

A fortiori applied to Everhard as well as to Vincent, which is stated earlier with respect to the majority of the respondents. The way they created their gender identity and gave shape to their manhood, in their case with a feminine tint, did not have anything to do with their sexual role-behaviour. An additional argument for this refusal to accept pattern is made by the high extent of role flexibility the respondents

displayed. Whereas 40% preferred the receptive role and 35% the penetrative position, more than 70% had at least some experience with both role-behaviours. Although the inversion model has not disappeared quite yet, it appears that its validity nowadays is limited to a small minority of the research sample.

The passive experience

Having established that the respondents' sexual conduct did not have much to do with their gender identity and the interpretation of their gender-role does not, however, mean the end of the story. During the course of the study, it became clear that a striking proportion of the respondents valued highly the so-called passive experience. Is this not where masculinity and gay men's gender identity, just as Weinrich, et al. (1992) had suggested, is at issue?

It appeared from this study that a majority of the respondents associated the passive experience with several specific meanings which – based partly on physical sensations – had above all a highly emotional and symbolic significance. The first indication of the special meaning of the passive experience could be deduced from the statement made by some respondents that the passive role is something typically homosexual.

Some interpreted the experience of being fucked as an affirmation of their gay identity. Ten years ago Ralf (28) was initiated, and so realised he was gay. 'Because at that time both of us still lived with our parents, we went to a barn. It had to happen there. It was the first time I got screwed and I knew right away that I was gay. I enjoyed it so much that I was convinced I would never change any more.' The same can be said of Jeroen (27), though for him the experience appeared to be more painful. 'The first time I was fucked it was awful. I really suffered and had a lot of pain. But I thought, if I truly choose to feel homosexual, I have to develop the things I did with that guy.'

The passive experience also helped some respondents in dealing with their 'androgynous' feelings. Ruben (36), for example, did not feel any contradiction between his gender identity and his role-behaviour. 'Of course I just remain a man,' he said. 'When I get fucked, however, I feel rather feminine.' And Daniel (25) was convinced he had a male and female side, and that getting fucked appealed to the female part inside him.

The special feelings accompanying the passive experience were especially manifested in two clusters of meanings, which were associated with the experience of being fucked by a significant number of respondents. The first cluster revolved around the idea that one is opening oneself to the partner, that one is abandoning control and letting it happen. The other was characterised by the concept of power with submission as its central term.⁵

The first cluster of meanings had many distinctions and nuances, and each respondent gave a highly personal interpretation. For Howard (44) the term abandonment expressed his feelings. 'Getting fucked is all about abandonment. At such a moment I'm not doing much anymore and I let it happen. I physically relax, and I take a different position so that I'm very receptive. I no longer have any resistance. If it works well, it is a very nice feeling. That's what abandonment means for me.' Ruben, who felt 'feminine' when being fucked, experienced his partner as a 'force' to which he is subjected. 'I simply let it happen.' Subjection to the partner is also the key word for Alphons (38) when he described the experience of being fucked. 'Especially when I'm being fucked by a very attractive guy, I like to be completely passive. It's up to him to decide what will happen, and I surrender myself to romantic fantasies. And when I'm fucked by someone I'm not particular attracted to, I delight in a kind of narcissistic feeling that the other is horny for me and longs for me.' Although he was not active in the S/M scene, Alphons' desire to let the partner

⁵ Connotations from the first cluster of meanings were formulated by 16 respondents, whereas the second cluster was mentioned by 19 respondents; 4 respondents expressed a combination of the two clusters.

decide what happened seemed related to the wish to be dominated. The same was true for Alain (24). Fucking and getting fucked was a different experience for him because in the latter case, as he said, 'you abandon yourself. You surrender and in one or another way you're feeling submissive to someone else.'

Like the cluster of meanings about abandonment, the symbolism of the second – submission – is ramified among the respondents. Semantically, this cluster covered a multi-coloured vocabulary which varies from feeling submissive to being overpowered, from humiliation to being used, from being objectified to being victimised, from being subordinated to being possessed. This terminology seemed to reflect the variation in the experience. Jonathan (44), for example, preferred getting fucked above anything else in sex. In particular, because someone else took possession of him. 'Being receptive is for me, I guess, the hottest thing. Physically I really enjoy it, but the most important part of the feeling is the psychological one. It feels as if someone is taking possession of me, and that's what counts the most for me.'

A prominent fantasy of Abel (26) was being overpowered, which in his view had a lot to do with excluding eye contact. 'When you get fucked', he told, 'you're in a way very vulnerable. You can increase that feeling by using certain positions. When your partner can see you, when you have eye contact so to speak, the difference in power is undone. But when he is taking you from behind, you get more belittled than if you're laying on your back.' Wijnand (18), however, preferred to feel the weight of his partner 's body on top of him. 'We tried anything, all kind of positions. Me on top, him on top, diagonally in bed, partly out of the bed, standing, and every possible position you can imagine. It turned out that for me the most enjoyable position is being the bottom. That way I feel the weight of his body, his penis in my anus, a body that moves and shakes. And he's doing just what he wants. Giving me the feeling of submission.'

Some experienced the feeling of submission by being fucked through slight coercion. Other respondents needed a sophisticated or even kinky mise-en-scene to produce

that sort of feeling. Roy (33) described an encounter in which he functioned as a kind of bridge between two leather guys. One of them was fucking him, while he gave the other a blow job. 'It was a very humiliating experience. I was being fucked and giving the other guy a blow job at the same time, and they were kissing each other. For me kissing means that you're equal, that you're having a relationship between peers. So they were acting as if they were brothers, and I was simply an object. A kind of slut. An absolute nobody. And to me that was the most attractive part of the whole situation.'

To varying degrees, these respondents expressed the desire to experience the feeling of submitting to their partner during a sexual encounter. In their view the passive experience was exceptionally suitable for this purpose.

Discussion

In the first part of this paper I concluded that the inversion model that dated back to the nineteenth century had lost a great deal of its appeal. Since the sixties, the pansy of the old days has irrevocably yielded his place to the 'straight-acting and -appearing gay male'. Schnabel (1990) related this development to what he called 'the sexualisation of the self-representation', i.e. the 'significance for men and women to represent themselves as sexually attractive in their own eyes and in those of others'. In his view the best example of this process could be observed in gay culture, 'where the earlier feminisation - the staging of sexual attractiveness was after all traditionally a typical female prerogative - made way almost entirely for a sometimes rather exaggerated masculinisation'.⁶ In that perspective it was no surprise that the majority of the respondents stated that whatever their sexual behaviour and their

⁶ A study of Harry (1985) gives some clues about the direction in which an explanation could be found of this change of representation in the homosexual world. His data, gathered in 1969, suggest a close correlation between social class and effeminacy. Homosexuals with a working class background were more likely to reinforce 'cross-gender propensities' and accordingly to behave effeminate than those from white-collar origin. In this perspective the loss of the effeminate homosexual could be a consequence of the taking over of the homosexual world by middle class gay men at that time.

role-preference were, they felt masculine when having sex with a man (see also Davies et al, 1993:140).

At the same time it became clear that certain traces of the traditional inversion model could be found in the remarks of some respondents: they attributed themselves with a feminine gender identity that was in line with their sexual role-behaviour. Mindsets do not usually disappear by proclamation alone. Often, they live on for a long time in one form or other along with newer interpretations of reality. As Sedgwick (1990:47) stated, 'Structured, not by supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalised coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist'.

Later on in this paper, I established, however, that the masculinisation of the gay world was not quite as unequivocal as it seemed at first. The meanings given by the respondents on the passive experience indicated that the masculinisation as observed by Schnabel and other authors (Altman, 1982; Halperin, 1990; Waugh, 1983) did not prevent them from putting into perspective so-called typical masculine values during sexual intercourse. This applied in particular for the two clusters of meanings on abandonment and submission. In both cases we are dealing with meanings and emotions that, in our culture, are not exactly classified as masculine values. In particular, the attitudes attributed to males whereby they 'get a grip' on a situation, control events and exercise power (Vennix, 1989) were counterbalanced in the meanings where the feeling of abandonment and submission was evoked among the respondents. This is in line with Silverman's analysis (1992:363) in which she stated that 'insofar as gay sexuality foregrounds receptivity, spectacle, narcissism and masochism, it might be said not so much to embrace "the feminine as to refuse the defensive manoeuvres through which sexual difference is constituted'. In other words, the significance attached by gay men to the passive experience does not indicate, in the view of Silverman, a revival of Ulrich's ideas, i.e. the inversion model, but they rather express a criticism of the prevailing system of gender differentiation and sexual orientation.

Weinrich et al. (1992:560) concluded their paper with the suggestion that 'in sex research involving homosexual men, the correct genitoerotic role distinction is not penetrative vs. receptive behaviours, or even penetrative vs. receptive anal intercourse, but receptive anal intercourse vs. all other behaviours'. They were not able to corroborate this speculation, and neither could I - nor did I want to - on the basis of this study. However, their hypothesis is affirmed that the passive experience was very special to and highly valued by a majority of the respondents of this study. First of all, they derived satisfying and sometimes even overwhelming physical pleasure from it. But above all, the experience of being penetrated by a man had a great impact at an emotional and symbolic level. In its capacity of 'losing sight of the self', as Bersani (1987:222) put it, the passive experience offered the respondents an opportunity to develop a 'differently structured masculinity' (Corbett, 1993). It offered them, in other words, the possibility to leave behind typical male values and to transgress, as long as it (sexually) took, the limitations of the culture of masculinity, as we know it.

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